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The ‘sailing ship effect’: Reassessing history as a source of insight on technical change

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Highlights

- The so-called ‘sailing ship effect’ is a problematic stylised fact.
- The ‘sailing ship effect’ may generally be an useful conjecture in the field of innovation studies, but it is not a valid representation of what happened in 19th century British shipping.
- Significant innovation in long-haul commercial sail pre-dated the major technological developments in sea-going steam navigation.
- Evidence points to strong complementarities between sail and steam for most of the century, to steamship learning from the older technology of sail, and to the role of new global infrastructures.

Abstract

The so-called ‘sailing ship effect’ has often been stated as though there is no doubt that it really took place in the end of the 19th century. The notion has, moreover, been used as a stylised fact that is in charge of conveying the idea that the substitution threat of new radical technologies may lead to a renewed spurt of innovation in an old and established technology. On the basis of quantitative evidence and a systematic review of the field of maritime history this paper shows that the effect is nowhere to be found in the very case it derives its name from. The modernisation of the sailing trader occurs before, not after, the steamship had become an effective competitor. It is argued that if history is to be used to give credence to explanations of empirical regularities in a variety of settings the original source of the relevant concepts must be carefully revisited and deeply researched.



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Keywords

‘Sailing ship effect’; Innovation; Diffusion; Old technology; Economic history

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