

Amsterdam as an educator – or: The Rhine as the historic „axis of capitalism“. 5th Transnational Rhine Conference

Veranstalter: Ralf Banken, Frankfurt am Main; Ute Engelen, Mainz; Hein Klemann, Rotterdam; Werner Plumpe, Frankfurt am Main; Ben Wubs, Rotterdam; Erasmus University Rotterdam; Goethe Universität Frankfurt am Main; Institut für Geschichtliche Landeskunde an der Universität Mainz e.V.; Leibnitz-Institut für Europäische Geschichte, Mainz

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The 5th Rhine conference explored the growing interdependence and interconnectedness of centers and hinterlands, which essentially facilitated the expansion of capitalism.¹ It thus focused less on the material process of exchange on and with the Rhine and more on the structural changes linked to it. The conference concentrated on the question of the relationship between the Rhine economy and the expansion of capitalistic economic practices with its multiple dimensions and perspectives.

In his introductory remarks, WERNER PLUMPE (Frankfurt am Main) emphasized the crucial role that Early Modern Amsterdam had played as a hinge that connected the world of the Atlantic with central Europe down to the Black Forest. Not only can it be legitimately called the cradle of capitalism, the city „created the first World Economy“. Within Europe, the Rhineland became, via Amsterdam, the channel of modernization from which new forms and techniques of commerce and industry diffused into other regions. Along the river, diverse laboratories of modernity, each with their peculiar radiance, came into being due to the flourishing of Amsterdam. Yet, the resulting dynamics were often regarded as highly ambiguous by the contemporaries. A diverse range of fears became connected to the new ways of life spreading out from the cities. At the end of his introduction, Plumpe emphasized that many questions on the idea of „Amsterdam as an educator“ are yet to be answered; he pointed

out the aspect of semantics (giving as example the proverbial „cold dutchness“) or the different reception of Amsterdam’s modernizing impulses in Calvinist, Lutheran and Catholic territories.

This was followed by DEIRDRE McCLOSKEY (Chicago/Gothenburg) with her keynote lecture. She asked about the particular origins of economic growth (in her words the „great enrichment“) and stressed the weakness of older concepts of the „transportation economists“. She explicitly denied that „capital accumulation“, as Adam Smith or Karl Marx have claimed, lay at the base of economic growth. In her view, the piling up of innovations and ideas were the source of economic growth. This encompasses more than merely scientific knowledge; this was just a part of this process of innovation accumulation. Too often overlooked are the hidden but powerful processes „off stage“ or „at the margins“ of perception. At the core of growth, she identified a continuous process of „market-tested progress“.

The first section of the conference was then opened by ROBERT M. SPAULDING (Wilmington) with his observations on the *longue durée* developments of up-river and down-river traffic along the Rhine from 1680-1820. Principally he commented on the lack of good statistics up to 1789. Before that one is often forced to make guesstimations. He distinguished three different periods of traffic on the river. The first one began in the late middle ages, lasting until the beginning of the 18th century, and was marked by a preponderance of down-river-trade, roughly 2/3 of the value/volume went downstream. Around 1730 the trend was reversed and up to 1790 the up-river traffic had roughly 60 per cent of the volume and 2/3 went upstream. From 1806-1820 the down-rivertrade once again had a slightly greater share. Spaulding explained these shifts with the boom of colonial imports into central Europe in the 18th century; these stand out as an exception but also as a sign of a structurally growing interconnectedness of the Rhine region with the world. He concluded with some general remarks on the fundamental role that the

¹The conference was sponsored by the Erwin-von-Steinbach-Stiftung (Frankfurt am Main).

Rhine has played from the times of the Romans onwards in its connection of two heterogeneous economic zones, i.e. Northern Italy and Northwestern Europe.

WILFRIED REININGHAUS (Münster) followed with a paper on the connection of Westphalia and Holland. From the point of view of Westphalia, the fall of Antwerp in 1585 marked a decisive shift for the merchants of the region, who now exported their merchandise via Amsterdam to the world markets. These consisted mainly of metal wares and weapons. Especially Westphalian wire was one of the most important products for the wider world. Westphalian linen came second in importance; this merchandise, however, also had significant outlets in Bremen and Hamburg. Coal exports via Amsterdam increased in importance during the 18th century while the grain trade was more strongly centered on the surrounding areas. In general the Dutch-Westphalian connection increased in importance in the 18th century even though the importance of Amsterdam in other sectors waned. Reininghaus summed up that Westphalia became part of the world economy via Amsterdam especially in the 18th century.

MARGRIT SCHULTE-BEERBÜHL (Düsseldorf) opened the second section with a citation from Gustav Schmoller; for him the „history of eighteenth-century trade was actually a history of smuggling“. She distinguished between two types of clandestine trade: 1. Short-distance across the river; 2. Long-distance across national borders and the Atlantic. Also two types of smuggling were classified by her: 1. Fraud (bypassing toll and custom fees), 2. Contraband (trade with forbidden goods). A detailed history of smuggling in centers of the Rhineland up to the North Sea in the years under Napoleonic occupation followed. She concluded that smuggling had been professionally organized, had enjoyed protection from the population (and often even French officers), often had found numerous collaborators among all social classes and had been done even among and by the belligerent parties. Via smuggling, knowledge of the markets was obtained, which allowed the merchants to return to these after the end of the war.

GUILLAUME GARNER (Lyon) followed

with a paper on Mainz during the Napoleonic wars. He started with the basic observation that trade between Germany and France via the Rhine doubled between 1789 and 1806, a sign of a general increase of importance of land-routes in times of intense naval warfare. The French occupation of 1798 put a toll-line on the Rhine and cut against the traditional east-west traffic. However, an upsurge in traffic on the Rhine (that is in North-South direction) can also be seen beginning in 1798. This upsurge was due in part to the measures taken by the French authorities, who reduced the number of customs houses on the Rhine to 12 instead of 32, while simplifying customs duties and making them public. Due to the continental blockade, after 1806 a strong increase in smuggling happened in the area around Mainz. Smuggling was facilitated by the fact that the interests of occupiers and occupied were in many cases rather close. The futile efforts of the merchants and entrepreneurs of Mainz to have the toll-line lifted led after 1806 to a growing dissatisfaction of the occupied with the French regime.

The third section was opened by PAUL VAN DE LAAR (Rotterdam) with a paper on the transformation of Rotterdam from a staple port to a transit harbor in the 19th century. Traditionally the city had been outward-looking but dominated by a very close circle of merchant families. This prevented the city from becoming a „transitopolis“ for a long time, since the dream of these families was to dethrone Amsterdam via a revival of the staple market. Only after 1870 did the pressure exerted on the merchants by the government force them to adapt to the needs of a modern hinterland economy. This led to the marginalization of the traditional merchant elite of Rotterdam while the entrepreneurs with a hinterland network, the transit-capitalists with power in the harbor administration, rose in importance.

The fourth section was opened by RALF BANKEN (Frankfurt am Main) with a paper that was written in collaboration with Wilfried Forstmann. Banken gave an overview of the traditional and centuries-old interconnectedness of Frankfurt with the Netherlands. This connection has been crucial for the development of Frankfurt into a cosmopolitan

and international finance and trade center. An important and underestimated turning point in the history of the Rhine trade was in his view the year 1740, since this inaugurated a decade-long time-span without warfare on the Rhine. The financial revolution that was sparked in Frankfurt with the issuing of partial obligations in 1778 had its origins in Amsterdam as well as the Frankfurt stock exchange, which, however, only became truly important after 1800.

CÁTIA ANTUNES (Leiden) wanted to answer the question why the great harbor cities of Iberia lost out economically during the Early Modern era against the North European harbor cities. She identified the Rhine and the Elbe as principal reasons. These rivers allowed the principal North European coastal cities to integrate complex markets that lay deep down in the hinterland. Another great disadvantage of the Iberian cities was their subjugation to royal, ecclesiastical and feudal demands. Without a dense urban hinterland network, the Iberian cities were bound to fail in their development into self-sufficient systems. Thus, while a symbiotic integration of the Dutch harbor system into the Rhine hinterland, stimulated strongly by important gateways such as Cologne or Frankfurt, took place, the Iberian cities became ever more dependent on the regular supply of primary goods from northern Europe.

The fifth section was opened by DIRK KOPPENOL (Rotterdam) with his account of the debate on the second Maasvlakte, the recent expansion of the port of Rotterdam. He asked why it had been possible to overcome the resistance on the part of the population in the 1990s, while in the 1970s this had been insurmountable. He identified a new strategy of the harbor authorities in the 1990s as a key to success. They had approached the environmental groups and had adapted the expansion plans to their wishes. A changed, much less polarized attitude of the public facilitated these projects in the last years of the 20th century.

JOEP SCHENK (Rotterdam) highlighted in his paper the Rotterdam-Ruhr interdependence from 1870-1914. His point of departure was the paradoxical observation that Rotterdam became truly the harbor of the Ruhr

area only around 1900 and not thirty years before as would seem more logical in retrospect. He presented several trade statistics that point out that the structure of the harbor area from Lübeck to Antwerp was optimized for the export of German coal in the second half of the 19th century. Other products, such as steel or pig iron, were not yet produced in sufficient quantities to serve the world market. Only in 1904 did the German coal cartel acquire enough power to streamline and tighten the infrastructure systems in order to make transport to the North Sea ports cheap enough to compete on the world markets.

ELINE POELMANS (Leuven) followed with a paper that compared Antwerp and Rotterdam since the 1980s up to today. Founding her arguments on a strong empirical base and a refined statistical model, she saw Antwerp as being on the way to specialization as a container port while Rotterdam remains a port that receives a rather diversified range of product types (liquid bulk, dry bulk, roll-on/roll-off freight, containers). Recently she sees a strengthening of intra-port cooperation – not only between these two but many other ports within the range from Hamburg to Le Havre – in order not to be played off against each other too easily by the transport-companies.

MARTEN BOON (Rotterdam) spoke about the construction of oil pipelines in the Rhine region from 1955-1965. The question as to why the development of one coherent pipeline system failed was answered by him with an analytical framework that concentrated on the principal actors of the time and their respective interests. National interests and different companies clashed and thus not the „most efficient solution“ was chosen but up to this day there are different and non-integrated pipeline systems in Western Europe with an „oil-shed“ around Mainz/Frankfurt.

Most of the debates concentrated on the issues in what regard the institutional framework (government, tolls, technology) was important for the respectively described historical developments or whether the role of individuals and their creativity are in that way perhaps underestimated. For the future conferences and research it was remarked that the

hinterland of the Rhine, i.e. the zone from Westphalia to Northern Italy and up to Paris, should be analyzed more closely in its various connections to the Rhine and how the river shaped this vast economic region. It was finally pointed out that historical research has tended to marginalize the 'region', even the 'geographical zone' as an analytical context and that the conference has proven the validity and utility of such entities as objects of research.

Conference Overview:

Introduction

Werner Plumpe (Frankfurt am Main), Amsterdam as an educator – or: The Rhine as the historic „axis of capitalism“

Keynote:

Deirdre McCloskey (Chicago/Gothenburg), Shuffling or Net Gain: A Challenge to Historical Geography

First Section: Before 1800: Early and modern trade relations, supply chains and the Rhine economy

Robert Spaulding (Wilmington), Upstream and Down River: Changing Directions in the Rhine Trade 1680-1820

Wilfried Reininghaus (Münster), The economic relations between Westphalia and Holland before 1800

Comment: Jeroen Euwe (Brussels)

Second Section: The Napoleonic Years: Decline or Advancement

Margrit Schulte-Beerbühl (Düsseldorf), Secret Trading Networks and Innovation during the Napoleonic Wars

Guillaume Garner (Lyon), The Rhine as an economic boundary in the area around Mainz during the French occupation

Comment: Stefan Gorißen (Bielefeld)

Third Section: Rhine port economies in the 19th and 20th centuries

Paul van de Laar (Rotterdam), Changing capitalisms. Rotterdam's transformation from 18th century staple market till 19th century transitpolis.

Comment: Eva-Maria Roelevink (Bochum/Bergen)

Fourth Section: Towns and ports in the Rhine economy

Wilfried Forstmann / Ralf Banken (Frankfurt am Main), A financial Axis along the Rhine: Antwerp-Amsterdam-Frankfurt am Main 1586-1830

Cátia Antunes (Leiden), Early Modern Ports, 1500-1750

Comment: Mark Jakob (Marburg)

Fifth Section: The Rhine as gate to the world I

Dirk Koppenol (Rotterdam), The Extension of the Rhine economy: The History of a Megaproject: The second Maasvlakte 1990-2008

Joep Schenk (Rotterdam), Links in the iron chain. Rotterdam traders versus Ruhr industrialist in the quest for iron ore 1870-1919

Comment: Alfred Reckendrees (Copenhagen)

Fifth Section: The Rhine as gate to the world II

Eline Poelmans (Leuven), The ports of Antwerp and Rotterdam in the period 1980 and 2012: friends or foes?

Marten Boon (Rotterdam), Connecting to global oil. The construction of oil pipelines in the Rhine basin

Comment: Nil Disco (Enschede)

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