

Creating a Transnational Rhine Economy, 1850-2000. Kick-off Meeting of a Transnational Rhine Network

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Bericht von:

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During the last 150 years, the Rhine River became the foremost commercial inland waterway of Europe. Geographical location and natural conditions enabled the development of Europe's most important economic region. However, it were entrepreneurs and firms that used the given possibilities and created the economic reality, while local and national authorities in some periods gave them the freedom to do so, and in other periods hindered them in their commercial interests. The development of the Ruhr area into the most important industrial centre of Europe since the 1870s, would have been impossible without the Rhine. Simultaneously, the development of Rotterdam into the most important deep sea port of Europe would have been impossible without the German hinterland. As a result, the Rhine region evolved into a cross border centre of economic activity without a rival in Europe.

The Rhine, nonetheless, crossed borders of several states, with various national institutions and conflicting interests, which was a source of co-operation as well as conflict. By viewing regional development as a historical process, two key concepts from evolutionary economics, i.e. path dependence and adaptation, are considered relevant. Regional economies inherited past developments with negative as well as positive effects. On the other hand, a region's lasting success depended on its adaptive capability: i.e. the capacity of firms, clusters, and state institutions to adapt to new market, technological and organizational opportunities.

To explore these and other aspects, the Erasmus University of Rotterdam and Goethe University of Frankfurt initiated a conference, bringing together economic and business historians, economists, as well as historians of technology, from the countries along the Rhine and its delta, including Switzerland, Germany, France, Belgium and the Netherlands. The organisers aim to build a transnational and multidisciplinary network, in order to realise a research programme on these and related issues.

The aim of the kick-off meeting was to explore different aspects of long-term economic development of the Rhine region, which were explored from five different perspectives, i.e. geographical, macro-economical, institutional, business historical, and technological. This Transnational Rhine Conference hypothesized that both firms and markets were engaged with political institutions in a mutually dependent relationships, although conflicts between states and firms arose on multiple occasions.

Key note speaker PATRICIA CLAVIN (Oxford) opened the conference with an exploration of "Routes through transnational history". Clavin provided the participants with a framework for looking at European history and its connection to global processes, resulting in both unity and fragmentation, in other words: 'to provincialize Europe'. Transnational history can serve as an inspiration for the study of the Rhine economy by looking beyond traditional boundaries, stressing the importance of cross-border connectedness.

Clavin's keynote was followed on Friday morning by an introduction of BEN WUBS and HEIN KLEMMANN (Rotterdam), who presented the aims and perspectives of the conference. They formulated a number of preliminary key questions: how and why did the Rhine economy become one of the most competitive economic regions in the world? What were the consequences of this long-lasting successful economic development for the political relations between the diverse Rhine States? How did cross-border economic relations influence the economic development within the diverse countries? What were the effects of shattered political surrounding for the development of firms and groups of firms?

The first session explored geographical perspectives of the Rhine economy. Opening speaker THEO NOTTEBOOM (Antwerp) addressed the organizational history of container barge transport in the Rhine basin and its impact on the spatial dynamics in the European container barge network. In his paper Notteboom described the rise of the Rhine as the most important container barge waterway in Europe since 1968, connecting the Rotterdam and Antwerp ports to the Ruhr area. Accordingly, this connection resulted in the domination of the Rhine-Scheldt delta as the foremost multi-port gateway for container transport in Europe. The second paper

addressed the relationship between the Rotterdam port and its German hinterland. HUGO VAN DRIEL and FERRY DE GOEY (Rotterdam) raised the question whether Rotterdam can be called “a German port”. The speakers demonstrated with an analysis of incoming and outgoing cargo flows that, in a relative sense, because of the post-war boom in oil imports the German hinterland has become significantly less important for generating traffic through Rotterdam after 1950. Discussant MILA DAVIDS (Eindhoven) asked the question to what extent transport modalities cooperate within the Rhine region. Moreover she wondered whether the answer to the question: is Rotterdam a German port?, could differ when looked at from transnational perspectives.

The second session was devoted to macro-economic perspectives. First speaker HEIN KLEMANN (Rotterdam) questioned the usefulness of looking at economic development from a national perspective. Arguing from the fact that the Dutch economy for most of the nineteenth and twentieth century was a very open economy, Klemann urged to study European economic development as a cross-border regional core-periphery problem rather than a national one. The Rhine as a cross-border economic artery was and is a case in point. The second speaker NIKO WOLF (Warwick) further explored the implications of geography by looking at the case of Germany between 1885 and 1933. Based on empirical data on trade flows within and across the borders of Germany, Wolf concluded that the German Empire was a poorly integrated economy before 1914. Third speaker MICHEL HAU (Strasbourg) spoke about the significance of the Rhine for the economic development of the Strasbourg region, stressing the importance of geographical barriers to economic development. Discussant JAN OTMAR HESSE (Göttingen) received the papers with enthusiasm, concluding that geography matters. However, Hesse missed attention to exports, trade of services and currency issues in both the papers by Klemann and Wolf. He also pointed out that migration was missing in the papers presented, as not only goods, but also people cross borders.

A second key note speech was delivered by JOHAN SCHOT (Eindhoven). In his speech, titled “Transnational infrastructures and the rise of modern Europe”, Schot elaborated on the process of negotiating, designing and building transnational infrastructures in Europe. Schot referred to the process of connecting infrastructural networks in Europe as ‘technification’, a process through which diplomatic tensions were diffused by framing them as technical challenges in transnational expert committees. The process of integrating Europe thus brings to the fore that “fragmentation is at the core of shaping Europe”. For future research into the Rhine economy, Schot stressed the importance of transnational institutions as crucial actors in the shaping of Europe.

The third session aimed to take an institutional perspective on the Rhine economy. Using social constructivist theory, first speaker JEFF FEAR (Redlands) examined the ways in which international cartels created a transnational moment. Fear explored how historical actors shared ideas across nation-states, forcing cartel participants to learn to work with one another to build more sophisticated transnational structures over time by examining organizational learning and building cartel capacity. Second speaker HARM SCHRÖTER (Bergen) expanded on the question whether small states may fall victim to large transnational cartels. Using cases selected from the Rhine region in the period between 1919 and 1939, Schröter concluded that small nations and smaller sized partners in a transnational cartel did not become easy prey of the larger cartel members. BEN WUBS (Rotterdam) looked more closely at transnational enterprises as actors in cross-border activity, focusing on the German investments of the four biggest Dutch multinationals during the interwar period. Germany became an extremely important host country for Dutch firms. Discussant JOHN GROENEWEGEN (Delft) called for theoretical and analytical clarity in applying the institutional perspective, referring to the work of Oliver Williamson, among others.

The fourth session discussed the business historical perspective on the Rhine economy. RALF BANKEN and WERNER PLUMPE (Frankfurt) explored the Rhine as a structuring element of business development in Western Europe. Illustrating their story with several examples from the coal, steel and chemical industry, the authors posited that the Rhine was and remained an important structuring element for German business during the nineteenth and twentieth century. However, comprehensive research on the enterprise level is missing, but is deemed important by the speakers for our understanding of the economic development of the Rhine region. The second paper by DIETER ZIEGLER and THOMAS JOVOVIC (Bochum) addressed the organization of the Ruhr coal trade in the early twentieth century. Coal producers, trade and shipping companies established close connections, resulting in the founding of the Rhenish-Westphalian Coal-Syndicate in 1893 to control production and prices as well as the distribution of coal from the Ruhr. Concentrating on the trading activities of the syndicate, the authors showed how it in the early twentieth century struggled both with members seeking to increase their own share in the trade and an increasing dominant national government. The third speaker MONICA DOMMANN (Zürich) used a case study on the history of pallets in search for a methodological outline for the analysis of logistics as a linking tool for modern societies. Dommann explores the travelling of

objects and concepts between the United States and Europe and the rise and limits of global standards in logistics.

Discussant CHRISTIAN KLEINSCHMIDT (Marburg) stressed the importance of spatial aspects in research on the development of the Rhine economy. Furthermore, Kleinschmidt ventured to hypothesise a case of path dependence with regard to the dominance of energy carriers in the Rhine basin trade and transport relations since 1800.

A technological perspective on the Rhine economy was the theme of the fifth and final session of the conference. HANS BUITER and ANDREAS KUNZ focused on the development of the relation between the technological design and the traffic on the river Rhine and the inland waterways and railways laid out as additional parts of this transport artery, and its political-economical governance between 1830 and the year 2000. Kunz showcased the possibilities of 'mapping history' through a GIS based database in which historical data can be connected to geographical visualisations through time. VINCENT LAGENDIJK (Eindhoven) explored the Rhine region's substantial potential to generate electricity by identifying sources like the river itself, the West German coal fields, and the more distant Alps. Industrialisation and energy resources, traversed by national frontiers, led to international electricity cooperation from early on. Third speaker UWE LÜBKEN (Munich) chose a different angle on technology by looking at the complex interplay between society and nature, illustrating this with a comparative analysis of the Rhine and Ohio rivers.

The session's discussant, JEAN FRANÇOIS AUGER (Delft) raised questions on the nature of the concepts of technology, time and the Rhine and urged the participants to be clear in their application of these concepts. Auger challenged future research on the topic to analyse the Rhine at different levels and time-scales and not to step into the "trap of the standard chronology".

The final plenary discussion chaired by RALF BANKEN and WERNER PLUMPE revealed several questions and additions to the program of the network. The larger part of the discussion surveyed the large array of topics and themes connected to the Rhine economy and the possible additions to the ones already covered by the speakers. First the issue was raised whether there should be more attention for the influence of borders and politics in shaping the Rhine economy. Also the importance of looking at transport policy and regulation was stressed. A third issue concerned the attention for small and medium-sized enterprises in future research on the Rhine economy, pointing out that most speakers focused on large enterprises. Several participants suggested looking at sectors and aspects of the Rhine economy related to ecology, such as tourism, wine production, risk management and labour. A second issue in the discussion concerned the definition of the Rhine economy. Should the Rhine economy be understood as part of the broader concept of the Blue Banana and what would this implicate? Should Great Britain or transatlantic relations be included?

A follow-up conference will be organised in Frankfurt am Main in 2010 to strengthen the ties between the members of the network and to bring together concrete ideas for research proposals.

Conference overview:

First key note: Patricia Clavin (Jesus College Oxford): Routes through Transnational History.

First Session: Geographical Perspectives

Theo Notteboom (University of Antwerp): A tale of maritime gateways and barge connectivity: container barge transport on the Rhine between 1968 and 2009.

Hugo van Driel and Ferry de Goey (Erasmus University Rotterdam): The Port of Rotterdam and the German Hinterland.

Discussant: Mila Davids (TU Eindhoven)

Second Session: Macro-economic Perspectives

Hein Klemann (Erasmus University Rotterdam): The Nation, Nationalism and Modern Macro economics.

Niko Wolf (Warwick): Was Germany Ever United? Evidence from intra- and international trade flows, 1885-1933.

Michel Hau (University of Strasbourg): The Rhine and the Economic Development of Strasbourg, XIXth-XXth Centuries.

Discussant: Jan Otmar Hesse (Georg-August-Universität Göttingen)

Second key note: Johan Schot (TU Eindhoven) Transnational Infra structures and the rise of modern Europe.

Third Session: Institutional Perspectives

Jeffrey Fear (University Redlands): Cartels: Transnational, International, or National?

Harm Schröter (University of Bergen): International Cartels and the Sovereignty of Rhine border States, 1919-1939.

Ben Wubs (Erasmus University Rotterdam): The expansion of Dutch multinationals in Germany during the inter-war period, AKU, Royal Dutch Shell, Unilever and Philips.

Discussant: John Groenewegen (TU Delft)

Fourth Session: Business History Perspectives

Ralf Banken and Werner Plumpe (University Frankfurt): The Rhine as a structuring element of business development in Western Europe.

Dieter Ziegler (University Bochum) and Thomas Jovicic (Deutsches Bergbaumuseum Bochum) : The organisation of the Ruhr coal trade in the early twentieth century.

Monica Dommann (University of Zürich): Managing Material Flows. Writing the History of Logistics Cultures.

Discussant: Christian Kleinschmidt (University of Marburg)

Fifth Session: Technological Perspectives

Hans Buijter (TU Eindhoven) and Andreas Kunz (Institute of European History Mainz): Water and Rail Transport in the Rhine Economy.

Vincent Lagendijk (TU Eindhoven) Rhine Power: Connections, Borders, and Flows.

Uwe Lübken (Rachel Carson Center, LMU Munich): Risk Societies? Flooding and the Industrialisation of the Rhine and Ohio River Valleys.

Discussant: Jean François Auger (TU Delft)

Zitierweise

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