

**The first symposium organized by the l'Institut d'histoire Moderne et Contemporaine of the CNRS (IHMC) and the Comité pour l'histoire de La Poste (CHP) was held in Paris at the Ecole Normale Supérieure on 10 February 1998. It was chaired by Muriel Le Roux ((IHMC / CNRS) and Benoit Ogier (CHP), with the support of Daniel Roche (director of the IHMC) and Pascal Griset (Bordeaux 3).**

The honorary president of La Poste, André Darrigaud, has reminded us that a company with 350,000 postal employees should have a sense of its history as it embarks into a new era of competitive business practices. D. Barjot has emphasized the important contribution of postal history to business and administrative history in itself and as a complement to the study of economic and social history.

The first gamble that this group of historians has attempted to address is the attempt to do research based on primary sources without a connection to postal history. In his discussion of trade and the circulation of information, Jacque Bottin uses German, Italian, and Spanish examples to show the significance of postal ventures and the mail as elements of information in the economics of business. Jean-Marc Roy (representing the Ecomusée de La Courneuve) stresses the role of postal centers in the network of Parisian accommodations, a system that also provided relay stations for supplying provisions to the population of Paris. Using Italian railway archives, Michèle Merger (IHMC) notes that the kingdom of Sardegna and foreign investors had pushed for East Indian steamers to be routed up the Italian peninsula: the stakes, more political than commercial, involved acquiring the railway concession along the Adriatic coast.

In his study of postmasters, Patrick Marchand (Paris 1 /Musée de La Poste), revisits the problematics of that position through his analysis of dynastic archives and underscores the role of the post office as a transporter, representing the politics of the State incorporated into a transportation service for the public.

Odile Join-Lambert (EHESS) studies postmasters as a group in the 1950s. An integral part of the postal body, it fits the traditional work model in the public sector, but the group's peculiarity lies in its *raison d'être* in relation to the internal organization of the post office with no direct reference to the customer. By preserving the variety of postal careers and managerial practices at post offices themselves, the history of French postmasters attests to a staff that was well aware of the significant societal mutations in France during the period of the Trente Glorieuses after WW II. In her study of urban mail carriers between 1946 and 1990, Marie Cartier (ENS) demonstrates the complexities of this occupation. As the guardian of a localized space, the carrier is also a representative of the State and the civil servant of a public business whose integrity lies in its non-commercial aspect. Mail carriers as well as the entire group of public service professionals share a common history; the chronology of their performance is a reduction of the transformations of the urban world as reflected by the mail carrier.

Benoit Oger (Paris 7 / CHP) retraces the history of the Caisse nationale d'Epargne, created in 1881, in order to preserve income and foster the concept of saving. Paired with the postal network, it democratized savings. Willfully instructive and a decisive political force, the CNE gave the Republic another opportunity to assert itself in political campaigns by rekindling the

debate over the necessity of State intervention in public and economic life, further proving that the Post Office and CNE were no “ordinary” administrations.

After the audit of the state of postal archives under the auspices of the CHP in 1996, Anne Burnel, the representative of the National Postal Archive Service, was confronted with the challenge of mastering the postal archives while responding to the requests of both business and research. Although it is hindered by a portion of the general management of the post office, the desire to organize and arrange these archives exhaustively is ongoing.

Pascal Romain presented the Musée de la Poste, a site that preserves historical memory by conserving its collections on behalf of the State. He reminded us of its rich collection of old maps, stamps, and rare books. Referring to the historical context of telecommunications, Patrice Carré (France Télécom), reminded us of the capacity of this field to enhance postal business. Skipping over 100 years of common history between the post office and telecommunications, he limited himself to an appraisal of the strained relations between a group of engineers who monopolized technical progress and a managerial cadre that was supported by postal employees. Muriel Le Roux (IHMC), presented a research guide to contemporary history, written with the help of Benoit Ogier, and offered an assessment of study topics. Not entirely an administration or a business, the Post Office has no doubt been neglected by scholarly research for that very reason. The problematics that should be taken up are at the intersection of those developed by historians of administrations and those who study business history.

The previous day, a group of students working under the auspices of the CHP came together for a seminar. Yves-Marie Bercé from the Ecole nationale des Chartes expressed disappointment over the small number of master’s and DEA theses in modern history, reminding us of the political role of postmasters in the northern provinces. Yves Lequin (Lyon 2) was very pleased with the quality of the thesis work in contemporary history and suggested that regional monographs should be completed and then collected into a broader study, as studies of the history of postal occupations complete the work that is already underway. Lequin reminded us of the extent to which the history of the Post Office is an integral part of the history of France and its people, equally as important as the history of its teachers.

Daniel Roche ended the symposium by presenting the moral and ethical principles that guide the historian’s work, eliciting the trust of the postal employees who were present. With the creation of the CHP, there should be easy access to source material. In defense of the profession of academic historians, he called for the renewal of inquiries and interest in problematizing postal history. Evoking the rhetorical term of *prosopopea* in a historical context, he called for the creations of oral archives for the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Such a history would revisit the split between modern and contemporary history. Claude Bourmaud’s closing address raises our hopes that Daniel Roche was not only heard but also understood.

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The proceedings of the symposium, *Histoire de la Poste. De l'administration à l'entreprise*, Editions de la rue d'Ulm, 2002, 184 p., were edited and published by Muriel Le Roux.