

Léonard LABORIE, “La France, l’Europe et l’ordre international des communications (1865-1959)” (“France, Europe, and the international order of communications [1865-1959]”), Ph. D. Thesis in contemporary history directed by Pascal Griset, Paris IV-Sorbonne, 2006, 1 100 pages.

The flow of international postal and telegraphic mail was regulated from the second half of the 19th century onward by international organizations that were specifically created for that purpose: the International Telegraph Union in 1865 (which became the International Telecommunications Union in 1932) and the General Postal Union in 1874 (which became the Universal Postal Union in 1878). These areas of cooperation were where pricing and technical norms were established, guaranteeing the interconnection of national networks. The goal of this thesis is to retrace the history of French politics in relation to these areas, in order to discern how an international order of communications came about and evolved from the middle of one century to the next, involving institutions, regulations and values that were shared by the cooperative partners. Our study begins with the formation of the International Telegraph Union in 1865 followed by its postal equivalent, the General Postal Union in 1874. It ends with the establishment of the European Postal and Telecommunications Administrations Conference in 1959. This new institution did not replace its predecessors but represented from that time onward a privileged area of international technical cooperation for France. The lack of any critical study of the politics of French postal cooperation and the milestones in telecommunications leading up to it open a field of study that is all the more stimulating since it deals with the processes that originated these structures.

We make a traditional presentation of source material. Printed source material was very important to our work, especially official documents, in other words, international agreements and regulations. The legal body of work is accompanied by reports on conventions and conferences published under the aegis of the Unions. Although they are lengthy, these volumes do not give a complete account of the situation. Unlike diplomats, the administrators and engineers who were members of international judicial boards unfortunately did not write their memoirs. Certain periodicals were extremely useful in allowing us to follow the everyday events of the cooperation, especially the journals that the newly formed permanent offices of the telegraph and postal unions were required to publish. We also consulted network maps and statistical collections.

The most important archival sources we consulted were the archives of the postal, telegraph, and telephone administration, mainly deposited at the National Archives and those of the central administration of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Diplomatic dossiers offered the advantage of being very well classified; they were also often a magnet for assembling participants’ varying points of view. We were able to take advantage of the richness of the International Unions series (at the diplomatic archives center in Nantes). We also did research abroad on the most delicate topics in the comparable British archives; we observed that the offices of the Unions are an extremely rich documentation center for printed matter but much poorer on the archival level.

The thesis is divided into three parts. The originality of each part is the result of the importance accorded to international cooperation by participants and the spatial framework of the

organization. This importance changes depending on whether it is directed by a logic of expansion or a logic of closure. Spatial organization combines the continental and the universal scale. The intersection of these two variables characterizes the evolution of what we call the “pact of cooperation.”

Part One – The expansion pact

In 1865 several sub-regional telegraphic associations that appeared in Europe in the 1850s (one of which in France) gathered at a conference organized in Paris (the International Telegraphic Union). Contrastingly, France only unexpectedly joined the General Postal Union that was founded in Bern in 1874. In 1878 this union was renamed the Universal Postal Union. The order that had been built up in Europe became more global, mainly through the integration of colonial territories that were controlled by national empires. The order advanced itself by opening national networks to the international flow of communications: it promoted international correspondence by offering simpler, less expensive services. This process was made possible by normalizing regulatory provisions.

Part Two – The protectionist pact

A set of technical and political forces unleashed a period of instability and rebalancing at the beginning of the 20th century. In its newly globalized form, cooperation reoriented itself in a more continental environment. At the same time it proved itself to be an efficient means of control for national public monopolies faced with destabilizing dynamics. France played an active role in these changes from 1903 to the early 1930s.

France was part of the international reaction to the Marconi project’s endeavor to monopolize telecommunications. Its administrations contributed a new chapter to the international regulation of communications. Until the end of the 1920s its articulation with the previous regulatory principles was an issue that had to be dealt with. The economic and strategic interests that were involved, as well as the evolving technology complicated the choices. The debate saw the emergence of the United States as new player. At the same time the telephone, airmail, and radio broadcast networks joined in at the continental level and new prescriptions were developed. A balance between these different dynamics fell into place at the end of the period, giving rise to the restructuring of the international order around continental poles.

Part Three – Which European pact?

Thus began the final phase, during which the balance between regional and global spheres was subject to enormous tension, mostly political. When international technical cooperation became politicized, the identity of the European pole became an issue. Political projects for unifying Europe were pitted against the forces of the Cold War in a bid for the networks.

Confronted by so many contradictory forces, the period came to an end in 1959 with the creation of a new institution, the CEPT, or European Conference of Post and Telegraph Administrations. Released from the institutional constraints of the European construct, the CEPT did not replace the international Unions but became, at least for the French administration as well as its other European counterparts, the preferred locus of cooperation and preparation for global conferences.

In our conclusion we draw the reader’s attention to three phenomena. International technical cooperation was not determined for an abstract technical reason; it was the product of the

interaction of technical and political variables. International power struggles were subsumed to international technical and commercial consensus. As for international cooperation, it became the responsibility of a group of experts, professionals who valued universality, an apolitical stance, and efficiency but who also took it upon themselves to defend monopolies and international sovereignties. Finally, the international order of communications was confederal by nature. This allowed the question of the articulation between universality and regionalism to be breached as well as the relationship between the 19th-century European order and the European model that was constructed immediately after the end of World War II. As such, it is a topic in European history.