

Interurban knowledge exchange Emerging Cities in Southern and Eastern Europe, 1870-1945. Herder-Institute, Marburg, 03.04.2017.

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Much of the historical work in recent years, decades really, has been devoted to “decentring”. Historians have shifted their attention to regions and people that are supposedly located at the “margins”, be it geographically, culturally or epistemologically. This has less to do with doing “historical justice” but rather with questioning often tacitly assumed centre-periphery relationships and the teleological narratives that constitute it. Decentring has become a common feature in a variety of historical disciplines such as cultural history, urban history and history of STM (science, technology and medicine).

These three approaches were present at the interdisciplinary conference on “Interurban knowledge exchange. Emerging Cities in Southern and Eastern Europe, 1870-1945” that took place at Herder Institute for Historical Research on East Central Europe in Marburg in early May, funded by the Fritz-Thyssen-Stiftung (Germany). This conference was the second part of a double conference. In September 2016 the participants had gathered for the first time in Barcelona at a conference entitled “Urban Peripheries? Emerging Cities in Europe’s South and East, 1850-1945”. Tagungsbericht: “Urban Peripheries? Emerging Cities in Europe’s South and East, 1850-1945, 26.09.2016 – 27.09.2016 Barcelona, in: H-Soz-Kult, 25.01.2017, <www.hsozkult.de/conferencereport/id/tagungsberichte-6945>.

To indicate the conceptual evolution of the research topic the main title was changed for the second part. “Urban Peripheries?” was replaced by “Interurban knowledge exchange”. What remained in the title was the concept of “emerging cities” as suggested by Eszter Gantner and Heidi Hein-Kircher Gantner, Eszter and Heidi Hein-Kircher (2017). ““Emerging Cities” – Knowledge and rbanisation in Europe’s Borderlands 1880-1945.” Special Issue Journal of Urban History . Their intention is to avoid inherently hierarchical (and therefore normative) terms such as “periphery”, “second city” and the like, carrying connotations such as “backward” and “delayed”. Supposedly these cities had no alternative but to follow the “role model” of the metropolis, be it London, Paris or Berlin. The Marburg conference wanted to question that assumption.

It focused thus on a number of cities in Eastern and Southern Europe in the last third of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century addressing the following questions: In their quest to modernize themselves in the areas of public health and urban planning: Which models did these cities try to follow? How did they inform themselves about the newest advances in say sewage systems or tuberculosis treatment? And how did they implement these new ideas in their own city? In short: how did this “urban” knowledge circulate? A central concept in this discourse is the idea of “best practice” that cities need to

identify through study trips of specifically appointed commissions, participation in international congresses and other available sources of information – and then adapt them “back home”.

One result of the conference and its tour d’horizon from Barcelona via Zagreb and Budapest to Berdyansk (Southern Ukraine) was the following: city councils and similar bodies were quite eclectic in their choice of best practice models. They were well aware that the metropolis might not always have the proper solution for their urban problems – or one they could afford. Cities of comparable size might have developed concepts that fitted their own predicament much better. This highly pragmatic approach also promised to avoid errors that had been committed elsewhere or models that had proven problematic.

CELIA MIRALLES (Université de Lyon) showed that Catalan physicians and architects purveyed different foreign models while planning a modern tuberculosis dispensary in Barcelona in the early 1930s. Dissatisfied with the “Northern European” model they contemplated the architectural models in both the Soviet Union *and* Mussolini’s Fascist Italy. In the end they built a dispensary according to the “Mediterranean” model, a sort of cultural melting pot. Identity politics, ideologies, avant-garde discourses of innovation (functionalism) and a specific medical position in how to fight tuberculosis where enmeshed – and hard to separate – in this search for a best model.

Choices were shaped by the political constellations of the time as HEIDI HEIN-KIRCHER (Herder Institute, Marburg) demonstrated. She analysed how the city council of Lviv (Lemberg) tried to reform their public health system (including its sewers) around 1900. In their search for technical solutions the councillors were scouting models from all over Europe (but avoided the ones from the Habsburg Empire to which they belonged). Yet when it came to questions of aesthetics they tried to follow Warsaw and other Polish

cities. Even issues of public health were marked by the nationalist agenda of the city council, dominated by ethnic Poles, eager to transform Lviv into a “Polish town”.

Identity politics played an important role in many of the papers. As is well known, cities were focal points, engines really, of national movements in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Difficult questions had to be pondered: In their quest for modernity – spell: hygiene, electrification, public transport, boulevards, cultural institutions (museums, theatres) – many cities aspired to a general “European” ideal. But did this orientation not have a homogenizing effect all over the continent and would thus lead to an irretrievable loss of historic architecture and thus national identity? Two much debated cases of urban planning in Prague, the clearing of the Ghetto in the city centre in the 1890s and the reform of the castle in the interwar period, illustrated these tensions between modernization and preservation very well, as CATHLEEN M. GIUSTINO (Auburn University) showed.

The paper of IGOR LYMAN and VICTORIA KONSTANTINOVA (Berdyansk State Pedagogical University) reminded us that businessmen of different sorts could be crucial actors in the international transfer of “best practices” in industries and technology as well. One intriguing example is the British entrepreneur John Edward Greaves who established in the late nineteenth century a large reaper factory in the port city of Berdyansk (Sea of Azov, then part of the Russian Empire).

In her paper on urban planning in Zagreb in the interwar period TAMARA BJAZIC KLARIN (Institute for Art History, Zagreb) highlighted the importance of international competitions. These competitions served as a platform for knowledge exchange but at the same time raised questions about expertise and authority. Who is qualified to sit on those boards and to take decisions? Does it matter which nationality they have?

BARRY STIEFEL (College of Charleston) reminded us that Barcelona had a flourishing automobile industry until the Spanish Civil War. Producers such as Hispano-Suiza exported their luxury cars to most of Europe and were well known even in the United States. It seems that the term ‘emerging cities’ captures well the inherent dynamic in Turin, Stuttgart, Detroit or Barcelona: the urban space, its physical layout but also its claim to host “progress” (speed, mobility) was significantly shaped by this new industry.

The conference also asked for knowledge exchange *between* allegedly peripheral cities. This question brought to light some rather unexpected interurban connections, for example between Barcelona and Bucharest. LUCILA MALLART (University of Nottingham) presented the intense collaboration between Catalan art historian, architect and politician Josep Puig i Cadafalch and his Romanian interlocutors, Nicolae Iorga and Constantin Marinescu, in the 1920s and early 1930s. In their work on medieval history and the spread of Romanesque architecture they helped each other in laying intellectual foundations in their respective projects of nation building, Catalan and Romanian. Mallart speaks of “transnationally produced national history”, challenging the widespread view that national history is disinterested in this kind of intellectual collaboration with foreign colleagues.

Often the trajectories of some of the historical actors engaged in interurban knowledge exchange went well beyond the geographical frame of the conference, Eastern and Southern Europe. Hungarian artist and interior designer Géza Maróti did not only work in Budapest but also had commissions in Milan, Mexico City and Detroit. He was a truly interurban (and international) player. Yet what made him successful was the use of folkloric elements in his work, creating an invented past for the cities (and nations) he worked for, as ESZTER GANTNER (Herder Institute, Marburg) explained.

The flow of best practice models was by no means unidirectional. French reformer of zoological gardens Gustave Loisel found a number of zoological institutions in Eastern Europe exemplary – and suggested to his French superiors to take notice with respect to the urgent reform of the zoo in Paris. In fact, analyzing Loisel’s voluminous work, zoological gardens may best be understood as an interurban and transnational institution in which “best practices” were intensely discussed and exchanged around 1900 on a global scale, as OLIVER HOCHADEL (Institució Milà i Fontanals - CSIC, Barcelona) argued.

In a chronological perspective the last paper was by ELENA CANADELLI (Politecnico di Torino) on the efforts of industrialist Guido Ucelli to create a Museum of Technology in Milan before and after World War II. In his search for best models and inspiration Ucelli contacted and looked at a large number of technological museums, including several Eastern European ones, even after the iron curtain had cut Europe apart.

Thus a common theme of the conference emerged: Highly diverse historical actors such as Guido Ucelli, Géza Maróti, Josep Puig i Cadafalch and Gustave Loisel acted as cultural brokers between institutions, cities and countries. That might be one possible avenue of further research: to try and profile these “go-betweens” and their specific function in the interurban transfer of knowledge.

The conference showed that urban knowledge and best practices, but also historical actors circulated in a multitude of ways and directions between urban centres in Southern and Eastern Europe – and beyond. It seems that the next step in this research program should be to try and combine the approaches of urban history (with specific attention to knowledge exchange) and global history with its specific focus on interconnectivity and networks (see e.g. globalurbanhistory.com). No need for the terms “centre” and “periphery” any more.

Conference Overview:***Section I: Curing and Controlling: Public Urban Health***

Heidi Hein-Kircher (Herder-Institute, Marburg): Improving Health Conditions: Knowledge Transfer in Urban Planning and Services in Lviv

Celia Miralles Buil (Université de Lyon): “Central” Speech, “Peripheral” Practices: how did Barcelona Health Agents use the European Interurban Network between 1931 and 1936?

Igor Lyman / Victoria Konstantinova (Berdyansk State Pedagogical University): In search for “Best Practices” in Limitations of the Russian Empire: the Port City of Berdyansk on the Path to Modernization

Section II: How to build a Modern City: The Interurban Exchange on Urban Planning

Cathleen M. Giustino (Auburn University): Urban Planning and Historic Prague: Reception of and Resistance to Knowledge. Transfer in East-Central Europe before and after World War I

Tamara Bjazic Klarin (Institute for Art History, Zagreb): Shaping the City – International Competitions as a Platform for Knowledge Exchange

Eszter Gantner (Herder Institute, Marburg): Travelling Architecture: Géza Maróti between Budapest, Milan, Mexico City and Detroit

Cor Wagenaar (Technische Universiteit Delft): Commentary

Section III: Interurban networks

Barry Stiefel (College of Charleston): In the Driver’s Seat of Modern Urbanization: A Case Study of Barcelona and Automotive Industry Development in the Emerging Cities of Southern Europe, c.1900-1950

Lucila Mallart (University of Nottingham): Transnational Research and National History Writing between Barcelona and Bucharest in the Interwar Period

Oliver Hochadel (IMF-CSIC, Barcelona): The interurban zoological matrix. Gustave Loisel and the networks of exchange between zoological gardens before 1914

Elena Canadelli (Politecnico di Torino): Guido Ucelli and the Museum of Science and Technology in Milan before and after the Second World War: Models and exchanges

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