



Panel report: The International Brokers of the Wealthy II Zurich, June 5, 2019, 5th Swiss Congress of Historical Sciences

Convener: Pierre Eichenberger / Janick Marina Schaufelbuehl

Participants: Thomas David / Pierre Eichenberger / Sabine Pitteloud / Janick Marina Schaufelbuehl

Comments: Neil Rollings

Report by Eva Kocher, University of Basel

Transnational economic and business historians are increasingly looking into networks of advocacy and interest representation as objects of investigation. Moreover, there are a considerable number of efforts to study Swiss and international business elites as well as their entanglements. This panel explored exactly such interest platforms and dynamics of international business networks and institutions. How did competing interests collaborate? What was the impact of specific events, such as wars or revolutions, on these networks?

THOMAS DAVID (Geneva) and **PIERRE EICHENBERGER** (Zürich) presented their work on the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) focusing on the period from 1920 to 1960. Their research not only traced back the history of the organisation, but looked at the different congresses, councils and presidents as well as the executive committees with a prosopographical approach. The analysis of the ICC mirrors very well that the relation between the national scope and internationalism is not of an antagonist nature but rather complementary. For instance, the members of the ICC were national associations, supposedly representing the respective countries' entire business community. When investigating the structure of the institution of the ICC by individual careers, it becomes evident that the ICC was a white men's world. Women were not completely absent but they were in secretary and support functions and not in decision-making positions. The ICC was certainly shaped by hegemonic structures of the West and Europe, the institution would not be imaginable without Imperialism. The examination of its presidents' biographies underlines the great importance of the US, UK and Canada. Also, family ties play a very important role. All in all, the presenters detected a number of typical patterns and features amongst the careers of ICC presidents, such as a career in an important international firm, intense activity in national business



associations, senior political or diplomatic activity and strong cosmopolitan capital (such as experiences abroad, international networks, language skills, and international degrees).

Yet, small, neutral countries, with highly internationalised business associations also played a significant role within the international business networks – and the ICC was not the only important platform for transnational businessmen's encounters: **SABINE PTTLOUD** (Geneva) presented her recently completed dissertation on the Interlaken conferences, which were initiated by the Committee of the Swiss Unions of Commerce and Industry (Vorort) in 1978. Her analysis presents the Interlaken conferences as decisive moments of ideological alignment amongst the industrial federations of the Federal Republic of Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, Denmark and Switzerland. Her research stressed the importance of non-state actors in politics and institutions who acted as "invisible hands" and "quiet politics". There was a strong influence of peak business associations, especially in countries with coordinated capitalism. With rising unemployment and criticism against economic liberalism and a globalised bourgeois order in the 1970s, the Interlaken conferences created an important momentum for promoting alignment and homogeneity. The explicit aim of these conferences was to foster trust and coordination in order to save the liberal order. Pitteloud argued convincingly that this proved awareness of difference within the different capitalist systems. Finally, the conferences were also an important platform for promoting Switzerland as a business location and for advertising Swiss products.

The last presentation by **JANICK MARINA SCHAUFELBUEHL** (Lausanne) changed the scenery back to the US, as it looked at the US Council for International Business. Schaufelbuehl retraced the development of this broker organisation for American international business and its interests since 1945. While during the first post-war years the organisation was not particularly successful in consolidating its role this was about to change after 1958. Immediately after the war the young organisation's activity was mostly focussed on publications, the diffusion of expert knowledge and the council's debates. Yet, in the course of the 1960s, the US Council made the fight against taxation on foreign direct investment and government regulations its priority. It even hired a full-time economist who was specialized in balance of payments issues. Schaufelbuehl shows that these efforts contributed substantially to the organisation's success and attraction for new member companies. While the US Council initially struggled to gain legitimacy for representing global US business interests, the global expansion of US-based multinationals in the 1960s helped it to consolidate its position. In contrast to its predecessors the Nixon administration, shortly after its inau-



guration, watered capital controls down – and as manifestation of its significance within the economic-political establishment the US Council opened an office in Washington in 1974.

NEIL ROLLING's (Glasgow) in his comment acknowledged all of the presentations as important scientific contributions, but also sparked the discussion with some sharp questions regarding different levels of analysis: How do these examples play into the history of neoliberalism? How to differentiate the relative levels of internationalism and nationalism in the terms influence? How does international business play into domestic economic structures?

All of the presentations provided significant examples for the fact that business interests went in hand in hand with larger ideological debates on political-economic questions. It could be of further interests to learn more about the role of individual industries and their transition. Coming back to the relevance of family-ties, questions came up regarding the impact of different generations of entrepreneurs, apparently already a future research question in itself, as mentioned by Eichenberger and David. Finally, all of the contributions represented impressive examples of applied propography which includes actor-centred approaches, yet not as an end in itself, but rather in order to analyse the genesis and comportment of organisations.

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Panel overview

Eichenberger, Pierre / David, Thomas: When Global History Meets Business History. The International Chamber of Commerce as a Business Opportunity (1920-1960)

Sabine, Pitteloud: Let's socialize! The European Business Elite and Their Informal Meetings, 1978-1988

Schaufelbuehl, Janick Marina: Becoming the Advocate for US-based Multinationals: the United States Council of the International Chamber of Commerce, 1945-19810-1970)

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