

Conference Report:

Global Gateways. Port Cities as Points of Passage

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Organised by: Agnes Gehbald / Philipp Horn / Matthias Ruoss / Rea Vogt, University of Bern

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Port cities were 'gateway cities'. Unlike the 'classical' city, strategically placed in its agrarian 'province', the source of the surplus on which it depended, gateway cities sprang up on the edge where two different zones met. They were the place to exchange the produce of different economies (and cultures), or where goods were transferred between one mode of transport and another: between ship, rail, wagon, riverboat or (today) aeroplane. [...] Inevitably, too, it became the place where political risks were carefully picked over, since war, rebellion or change of regime in its zone of interest might have damaging (or promising) consequences."¹

In their introduction, **AGNES GEHBALD** (Bern) and **MATTHIAS RUOSS** (Bern/Freiburg CH) presented preliminary observations on the subject of port cities. Firstly, to facilitate a comparison of different case studies across time and place; and secondly, to establish a foundation for a broader theoretical discussion. They argued that port cities can be analysed as points of connection and interaction. Port cities function as dynamic interfaces where urban and maritime histories converge, serving as transit hubs within global networks and as residential spaces characterised by multiethnic populations. These environments are defined by "permanent temporariness", a concept denoting the tension between transient passage and long-term habitation, which gives rise to unique socio-spatial configurations. According to Gehbald and Ruoss, port cities can also be studied as points of disconnection, breaks, and protest characterised by social inequality, volatile labour markets, and political tensions.

As Agnes Gehbald and Matthias Ruoss pointed out, the idea for an international workshop emerged from conversations with team members of the Chair of Modern History about the importance of port cities in their projects. The international workshop, which was funded by the Institute of History, the Walter Benjamin Kolleg and the research cooperation MIKO of the Center for Global Studies at the University of Bern, sought to explore the dual nature of port cities as both physical and symbolic points of passage. In addition, the workshop aimed at examining how these locations facilitated the movement of goods and people, as well as the shifting dynamics of power, culture and identity.

¹ John Darwin, *Unlocking the World. Port Cities and Globalization in the Age of Steam, 1830–1930*, London 2020, S. xxi–xxii.

The two co-organisers Rea Vogt and Philipp Horn presented a chapter of their dissertation thesis as pre-circulated papers. These were then discussed in depth by the plenum. In her chapter, **REA VOGT** (Bern) examines the history of the production, distribution and consumption of yerba mate, focusing specifically on the South-South trade relations between Argentina and Lebanon in the late interwar period. Vogt argues that yerba mate, originally consumed by Native Americans, became a so-called “settler crop” at the beginning of the 20th century, as European – and later Levantine – immigrants cultivated yerba mate plantations on a large scale. In the 1930s the yerba mate trade from Argentina and Brazil to the French Mandate Levant emerged. Rea Vogt hypothesises that it was the Levantine emigrants in South America who later returned to their homeland who introduced yerba mate to the region. In the discussion, the question was raised of whether the trade and consumption of yerba mate should be conceptualised as de-Europeanisation, respectively South-South trade, or could rather be conceived as part of the history of the French Empire.

In the second chapter of his dissertation thesis, **PHILIPP HORN** (Bern) examines how trans-imperial connections between West Africa and the Mediterranean, particularly in print culture, shaped the development of a new status-conscious and gendered social type that began to articulate anti-colonial thought in the early 20th century. Based on an analysis of 34 cases of investigation and censorship measures, Horn argues that the French administration was incapable of impeding the import and circulation of anti-colonial print media in West Africa. The motifs of the circulating print media appealed particularly to young, educated, multilingual, culturally adaptable, fashionable male Muslims – a new social type, the so-called *jeune lettré musulman*. The French administration relied on local translators to enforce censorship in West Africa. As Horn observes, the French placed the interpretation of the investigated print media in the hands of those most likely to be part of the emerging anti-colonial movement. Some commentators stressed the importance of the terminology used to describe the ambivalent relationship between the anti-colonial movement and the French Empire respectively Europe.

As part of the workshop, five internationally renowned historians presented their own projects on port cities in the form of micro-historical case studies. Each presentation focused on a different aspect of port cities, but they shared some similarities in terms of the period or the place studied. **MEGAN MARUSCHKE** (Leipzig) presented a chapter on Philadelphia from the 1790s to the 1810s in which she focuses on the intersection between refugees and settlement colonialism or other imperial projects. Maruschke argues that the period under investigation, known as the “age of revolutions”, can also be described as the “age of refugees”. Her research is centred on institutions in Philadelphia, including the Almshouse, the hospital and the prison. These institutions function as the primary sites of investigation, as it is evident that individuals not involved in (or thrown out of) the imperialist project were systematically categorised based on their perceived deservingness. Maruschke emphasises that, in terms of the intersections between refugees and settlement colonialism, Philadelphia, in its capacity as a port city, was more closely connected to its hinterland than to a global network.

The presentation of **ANNIKA BÄRWALD** (Bremen) was set in a similar period from 1760 to 1840. In her dissertation project, she analyses people of African descent who have travelled through or stayed in Hamburg. As there is some evidence of permanent black communities in Hamburg in the 18th and 19th centuries, Bärwald analyses both transience and permanence. Her findings show that there were enslaved people who travelled through Hamburg and sometimes attempted their escape. She observes that the people of African descent were extremely mobile and often kept their trans-local networks alive. In addition, she argues that popular entertainment allowed for a discussion of race that included racist devaluation alongside an aestheticization of the exotic. Bärwald recognises the transience of port cities as an important factor of black European history and argues that the so-called "court moor" prototype that has dominated historiography needs to be reconsidered.

The second presentation on Hamburg was given by **LASSE HEERTEN** (Bochum), who examined labour conflicts in the port of Hamburg in 1906 and 1907. In the final chapter of his post-doctoral thesis, on which the presentation was based, Heerten examines the recruitment of British labour by the HAPAG, using newspaper articles on "British coolies". In order to show the complexity of the entanglements and antagonisms of Anglo-German relations in the pre-war period, he deliberately focuses not on the conflict within the workforce, but on the conflict between strikers and strike breakers. The Anglo-German relations were shaped by British fears of imperial decline which were increasingly projected on the German Empire. Heerten argues that the German Empire benefited from Hamburg's position as a well-connected and globally integrated port city to become a global economic power.

Two of the presentations were set in the second half of the 20th century. **OMAR GUEYE** (Dakar/Berlin) traced the history of the Université Cheik Anta Diop de Dakar in the *longue durée* to show that the university was a place of activism and youth revolt in the 20th century. As a port city, Dakar occupied a strategic position in transatlantic trade, which is why the city has been a political capital for over 200 years. Gueye argues that most of the students from the francophone Africa study in Dakar. Because of this influential position, the university played a central role in the pan-African and global youth revolts during the Cold War and especially during the 1968 movement. The so-called "Dakarois" were influenced by Marxism, supranational solidarity and Third Worldism and were considered dangerous by the government.

ERIC HÄUSLER (Zürich) presented his current research on New York and Tokyo in the 1960s. The aim of his new book is to illustrate the emergence of the so-called "urban age" through two case studies, with a particular interest in the concept of the Past Urban Future, initiated by bottom-up social movements. In his presentation, he explored the question of how (and whether) the port played an important role in these visions. Häusler's research shows that the port has been relatively absent from the visions of the future in New York and Tokyo. He also argues that port infrastructures were increasingly perceived as both mutable and undesirable. According to Häusler, the concepts of world city or global city best describe the development of Tokyo and New York in retrospect.

In the last section of the workshop, **FRIEDRICH LINGER** (Gießen) presented a commentary comparing the different papers and presentations based on general observations. In the first part of his commentary, Linger pointed out how drastically port cities have changed since the 1760s. In particular, the storage and processing of imported foodstuffs and raw materials, the increasing decoupling of ports from shipbuilding, and the greater geographical distance between the port and the city itself have transformed the economics of port cities. He discussed the relationship between port cities and their hinterland, noting that especially those port cities that re-exported their imports were more likely to become financial centres. In the second part, Linger emphasized that port cities act as gateways not only for goods but also for people, ideas, and cultures. Various mechanisms, such as legal regulations, customs duties, and censorship, control these exchanges and are influenced by underlying power relations. According to Friedrich Linger, port cities are an extraordinarily fruitful access point for analysing such dependencies from a historical perspective, which have rightly encountered renewed interest in our time.

In conclusion, the workshop allowed for a comparative perspective between the case studies presented, although the micro-historical studies focused on different aspects of port cities. However, the discussion revealed that Asian ports were under-represented and that the case studies analysed commercial rather than naval ports. Further research is needed to expand the period and places studied, and to better understand the importance of port cities as global gateways from a global and macro-historical perspective. As the workshop showed, the historical development of port cities in the *longue durée* makes it possible to assess and contextualise the importance of port cities in the 21st century.

Amélie Jaggi

Conference overview:

Agnes Gehbald (Universität Bern) / Matthias Ruoss (Universität Bern / Universität Freiburg CH):
Welcome and Introduction

Presentations

Megan Maruschke (Universität Leipzig): Philadelphia as an Imperial Port City (circa 1790-1810):
Points of Passage or a Safety Net for the Hinterlands?

Annika Bärwald (Universität Bremen): Transient Sojourners: People of Color Travelling through
Hamburg 1760-1840

Lasse Heerten (Ruhr-Universität Bochum): English “Coolies” in Germany? Labour Conflict in the Port of Hamburg, Anglo-German Competition, and Fears of British Decline, 1906-1907

Pre-Circulated Papers

Rea Vogt (Universität Bern): “A Good Market for Yerba Mate”: South-South Trade Relations from Argentina to Lebanon in the late Interwar Period

Philipp Horn (Universität Bern): The Passage of a King’s Portrait: Anti-Colonial Entanglements between the Mediterranean and West Africa, c. 1911-1915

Presentations

Omar Gueye (Université Cheik Anta Diop de Dakar / Wissenschaftskolleg Berlin): Dakar the Rebel: Revisiting the Worldwide Social Movement

Eric Häusler (ETH Zürich): From Port to World City: New York and Tokyo in the Long 1960s

Final Discussion

Friedrich Lenger (Justus-Liebig Universität Gießen): Commentary

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Online: <<https://www.infoclio.ch/de/node/189994/>>