

**Ralf Banken, Ben Wubs (ed.), The Rhine: A Transnational Economic History, Baden-Baden (Nomos) 2017, 383 S. (Wirtschafts- und Sozialgeschichte des modernen Europa/Economic and Social History of Modern Europe, 4), ISBN 978-3-8487-4204-2, EUR 79,00**

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It is a rare and wonderful thing when a book of 383 pages leaves a reader wanting to read more, much more in fact. That is certainly the case with this intriguing collection of thirteen assorted essays on the Rhine economy from 1815 to the present, organized in six broad topical sections: origins, enterprises, sectors and clusters, infrastructures, transport, and environment.

In their introductory essay, editors Ralf Banken (Frankfurt/Main) and Ben Wubs (Rotterdam) explain that these essays emerged from papers presented at one of the first five Transnational Rhine Conferences organised by the RHIN(e) network and held at various sites in Germany and the Netherlands between 2009 and 2014. From the many presentations at those venues, some of which have already been published elsewhere, these essays were selected with two criteria in mind: first, they »demonstrate the fruitfulness of the transnational approach« (p. 14) to which these scholars are committed, and second, they give a »partial impression of the variety of themes« explored at these conferences (p. 26). The editors actively support the sprawling nature of this collection, which they acknowledge »may look somewhat problematic at first sight« (p. 23). Great diversity is the logical result of the RHIN(e) conferences' conscious commitment to transnational approaches, interdisciplinarity, methodological openness, and thematic variety, all of which are essential to building an intellectual community and creating knowledge.

Here we should note that despite long-standing universal acknowledgement of the Rhine's importance for the development of the European economy from at least the Middle Ages to the present (a »grande dorsale capitaliste« in Braudel's words), we do not have a comprehensive, coherent economic history of the river. That giant lacuna highlights the importance of the RHIN(e) conferences, the articles already published therefrom, and work presented here. Although these diverse essays are not »a history« of the river, they are important pieces in what could become a unified history of the river's economy and they arise from the most promising venue for incubating a community of scholars that might produce such a work. These essays combine meticulous empirical research with contemporary analytic and theoretical frameworks from history, economics, and social sciences. Their investigations into the macro- and microeconomic history of this important region are moving us towards a more comprehensive understanding of the Rhine economy suitable to the 21<sup>st</sup> century.



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Most of the essays are loosely tied together at the conceptual level by seeking to address one or more of the »main questions« elaborated by the editors in the Introduction (p. 18): Is there a distinct Rhine economy? What are its spatial dimensions? How have its borders changed over time? Are there identifiable sub-regions of the Rhine economy? How can we explain the enduring economic success of this area? How has the river shaped the surrounding region?

The issues raised by some essays are obviously directly relevant to current events: environmental pollution and remediation (Uwe Lübken, Nil Disco), oil pipelines (Marten Boon), repurposing urban spaces (Antoine Beyer), and economic development strategies (Theo Notteboom). Other investigations might appear far removed from contemporary issues, but in fact offer lessons for ongoing debates: the role of international organizations in promoting economic growth (Hein A. M. Klemann), foreign direct investment and the growth of multinational firms (Ben Wubs), the regulation of dominant industries (Eva-Maria Roelevink/Dieter Ziegler), the formation of sub-national regional economies (Jeroen Euwe), and the interdependency of regional economies across national borders (Boris Gehlen, Mark Jakob/Laura Rischbieter). Not surprisingly, three essays engage the coal industry, which overshadowed the Rhine economy for 150 years from the early nineteenth century to the late twentieth century (Banken, Gehlen, Roevelink/Ziegler).

The editors suggest these essays offer some »general and preliminary observations« about the Rhine economy (p. 26). The clearest and most recurrent theme is »that the manifold problems of the riparian Rhine states could and can only be solved through international and transnational collaboration« and that the river's governing international institution, the Central Commission for the Navigation of the Rhine (CCNR), »might be« one of the principal reasons for the region's long-term economic success (p. 26). Klemann's essay on the CCNR, the world's first permanent international organization, is especially welcome for explicating the role of this little-known body for a wider readership.

One actor with little role throughout the volume is the nation-state. Most authors frame their subjects and issues at the transnational, regional, or micro level and the determinant forces are either very large, like international markets, or much smaller: municipal governments, individual firms, and entrepreneurs. Perhaps the absence of national policy as decisive for the Rhine economy is also an important conclusion to be drawn from this volume, but only Christopher Kobrak's essay on international banking explicitly confronts the inadequacies of the nation-state as a framework of analysis for the Rhine. The editors claim these essays »have added new insights into existing knowledge of national histories« (p. 26), but have these essays added to national histories or bypassed the national narrative entirely? Circumventing the nation may very well be appropriate practice for exploring the economic issues under investigation here, but that choice is a methodological point that could be explicated fruitfully at greater length.



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One could wish for some material on the Rhine's long history before 1815, which is very noticeably missing here. If identifying the sources of long-term economic success for the Rhine economy is one of the central aims of this group, then research will have to extend over a much longer period; across the political changes of 1789 and 1815 and across the technological revolution of steam and iron barges in the 1820s, in order to separate transient from more enduring contributions to Rhenish economic performance. To be fair, the editors themselves identify an expansion of research in the Early Modern period as part of the future agenda (p. 22), a goal many readers would heartily endorse.

A related observation is the overwhelming materiality of the essays here, which results from original, excellent, and indispensable empirical research into business strategies and practices, but which may have crowded out an appropriate evaluation of culture. In view of management theory's current interest in corporate culture in various forms – leadership, succession, mentoring, networking, and so on – it would be important to know if there was a discernible culture of business practices that distinguished the Rhine economy from customs and traditions elsewhere. Because cultural practices tend to be »sticky« over time, these, too, might be better revealed in a longer *durée*.

Fortunately, one has the impression the open-minded editors of this volume would be willing to have future RHIN(e) conferences engage in these large new areas of research. In that way, this group can take another step in their hugely valuable work of building an up-to-date historical understanding of the Rhine economy, something this complex and important region badly needs and richly deserves.



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