

Report  
Final ESF Inventing Europe Conference  
& 4<sup>th</sup> Tensions of Europe Conference  
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The conference in Sofia has been one of those huge happening where the organisers – thanks to the practice of parallel panels – coalesce in a few days topics and initiatives of different nature. If this practice is useful in order to contain in a tolerable amount of time a number of contributions that would otherwise require at least some ten days, it compels the participant to choose among the panels. With such a provision it is clear the reason why I shall limit my considerations to some personal impressions on the strong and soft points of the conference.

Actually the conference included the final proceedings of different research networks: *Inventing Europe: Technology and the Making of Europe, 1985 to the Present*; EUWOL (*European Ways of Life in the American Century*); EUROCRIT (*Europe Goes Critical: The Emergence and Governance of Critical Transnational European Infrastructure*); SOFT-EU (*Software for Europe*); WRR (*The Development of European Waterways, Road and Rail Infrastructure, 1825–2005*); EUROCOMMONS (*Inventing and Governing Transnational Commons in Europe*); the conference as such on the role of technology in East-West relation during the Cold War.

Such an abundance of topics seemed to me rather excessive: if a restaurant displayed a 36-page menu, the clients would quite likely be embarrassed at the choice. In fact, it was most of all an occasion for coexistence of research groups already structured and connected by relations not merely of institutional kind. This configuration tended to strengthen the common leaning in people to take part in those activities with which they had already an ‘organic’ link – with those exceptions motivated by personal curiosity.

In spite of the exuberance in topics, it is possible to draw some general considerations on the conference with special regard to the use of interpretative categories. First of all, if it was far from being a novelty for Cold

War historiography that the Iron Curtain was somewhat a porous septum rather than a watertight partition, it was nonetheless interesting to deal with the issue from a standpoint and with topics unusual for a scholar in history of international relations. Indeed, the methodological choice of considering technology as a political and social process (i.e. not merely as production of artefacts, but both as formation and circulation of knowledge and as assertion of research and manufacturing practices) allows a wider application of the concept and encourages the scholar ‘to translate’ technical arguments into political data.

This effort put a premium basically on two kinds of approach. The first – the one of transnational history – emphasized the couple “alternative processes/parallel histories” in order to stress how the circulation of practices and knowledge, the assertion of organization models etc. point to a ‘net’ beyond the reach of international history (narrowly intended).

The other approach focussed on Europe intended as a ‘laboratory’, where one can consider how the diffusion of technology nurtures integrative dynamics beyond the political and economic purviews that are usual subjects of European studies. From this standpoint – a Europe made of infrastructural networks and transfer of know-how – new interesting data emerged regarding the Eastern Bloc, which appeared less sclerotic than one normally might suppose.

On the East/West dynamics in stricter sense, it was pointed out the urgency of studies that integrate the political, commercial, and technological purviews like in the case of COCOM activities, which can not only be used in order to analyse the lows and ebbs in the relations between the two blocs, but also their internal dynamics and the interrelations among countries pertaining to antagonist camps during détente. On the one hand one assists to Western European countries’ wish to find new commercial outlets in front of American competition, devising new applications for technologies and processes that were becoming obsolete in advanced industrial economies; on the other hand, Eastern European countries seemed determined to acquire know-how not then available to them, especially – but not only – in the purview of consumer goods.

In my opinion the main flaw was out from the cultural formation of the participants to the conference. Indeed, often they took a degree in some of the ‘hard sciences’ and subsequently developed an interest for the history of their own discipline (i.e. history of physics, the most notable but not the only case).

In some other cases people came from social sciences or economics. Just a few among them had really a historical background. Sometimes the result was spine-chilling: I couldn't but feel a chill down to my back hearing of supposedly 'federalist' European aspirations on the part of de Gaulle's France in the attempt of giving the audience an overview of the European context between 1950s and 1960s. One must feel depressed seeing a rapporteur on the circulation of knowledge in the Hapsburg Empire being abruptly questioned why he was not using clear-cut East/West categories, as if the Iron Curtain had been an invariable feature of European history... Apparently smart and cultivated scholars had never had a chance – due to their specific formation – to read a companion of contemporary history.

On the other hand, just this limit seems to point to an effective collaboration between scholars in the history of technology in broader sense and historians of international relations. Since several years we have been assisting to the widening of the subjects of the latter discipline, which is no more limited to the legal and diplomatic purview. Still, if resorting to the help of economic and business history in analysing the political meaning of economic activity in international life does not apparently cause any inconvenience, not so self-evident does the necessity of technical knowledge seem in order to make the same operation in the purview of technology – though the latter does permeate the contemporary world.

I do not believe that the problem can be shortcut. Jumping directly –while addressing primary sources – to the résumé by some official for his/her minister or a government committee would be a mistake: first because it would blur the distinction between historical fact and interpretation (though the latter was originally aimed at being most objective); second, because one might be induced to forget that technical actors are by no means neutral, rather they articulate a 'political' discourse using different keys.

Thereupon international relations historians with a wish to pursue such subjects will be compelled to examine documents often redundant, never very enticing as narrative and whose meaning can be obscure – by necessity, one would say, in that they often require competences beyond the realm of humanities. This does not mean that either the historian should also become a physicist, a chemist or an I.T. expert, or the other way round; rather it would be useful a wider collaboration between the respective disciplines with many more occasions to meet and exchange knowledge.

Unfortunately, the idea of interdisciplinarity has been sacrificed to the altar of what is politically correct, so that mere juxtapositions – maybe out of chance, if not motivated by a sharing-out of available places – are smuggled as interdisciplinary occasions. Interdisciplinarity – intended as a ‘new look’ that is more effective and produces a deeper understanding compared to single disciplines – does not occur everywhere and every time. It seems to me that the conference in Sofia clearly showed the potential of the abovementioned themes (one just recall the contribution by the studies on infrastructural networks to the history of the European construction), so as the timeliness to coordinate at the highest possible degree the activities of the different subjects active in research