Port and politics in Antwerp: a prudent approach

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During the twentieth century, the port of Antwerp was one of the most important ports on the European continent, together with Rotterdam and Hamburg. There was considerable influence of national and international politics on the development of this port. Trade and port are the point where foreign and domestic politics meet. Consequently the development of trade policy and of the ports is fraught with controversy between nations, between the affected interests and policy makers etc.

It is important to reconstruct the ties and relations between the several players in the field. This is the key to understand why Antwerp went the way we know it did, leaving behind it the other ways of (non-)development. By tracing the life and the functions of the political and economic leaders, we managed to determine the important role of port firm managers in the catholic and liberal parties. These parties used to play an important role in Antwerp politics and in the development of the port - e.g.: the alderman in charge of the port always belonged to one of these two parties. Between the political and economic leaders there used to be a very intense circuit of informal contacts in cultural and social organizations.

There are also a second and even a third level of interference between politics and economy, i.e. the national and international level. Antwerp politicians and representatives of port, business and trade took part in the government’s decisions concerning the development of the port. They also had their influence on the international level, sometimes even as participants in the talks between different countries. The Belgian government always had to bear in mind the interests of the port whenever it negotiated the economic and trade relations with other countries.

1. A network analysis of the Antwerp port: a theoretical approach

It is useful to make a network analysis in order to study the possible influence of the port and the trade circles on politics and government. By this you try to learn the actors’ membership of different organizations or groups of interest. Thus you can get an indication of the possible and even the probable contacts between people. The analysis we made is not limited to the economic or port related organizations. We made some researches into judicial and cultural organizations and institutions as well.
The persons, who were the subject of our researches, played an important role in the political and economic - mainly maritime and port related - life in Antwerp. Most of them were member of the committee of the organization concerned. This was not entirely the case as for the cultural organizations: sometimes we included the honorary freedoms.

We admit that we cannot give you a complete survey. Some organizations were not taken into account; the sources are rather poor, indistinct and ambiguous. There has been little or no research on the Antwerp case. We can only give an impulse to it.

1.1. The interest groups

In a network analysis you make researches on the membership of people of different groups of interest. An interest group is an organization of persons having a common interest and trying to influence the political decision making to the advantage of these sectional interests (De Clercq and Naert 1985, 39). The interest group does not aim to obtain any political responsibility, but it tries to exert an influence on the political world. This process is called “lobbying”.

Lobbying always occurs in two directions: to lobby and to be lobbied. This way an intellectual process is created, focusing on two needs. The interest group needs to reach a certain aim; the politician, on the other hand, wants to stay in power. There are different ways of lobbying (De Clercq and Naert 1992, 74-77):

An interest group may bring in votes needed by the politician in times of elections. In exchange for this support, the group expects the politician to defend more or less their interests. Thus the trade unions generally support the politicians having the same political colour. These politicians usually defend the trade unions’ points of view in the political decision making process. An example of the twenties and thirties: Piet Somers was at the same time leader of the Belgische Transportarbeidersbond (Belgian Transport Workers’ Union) and member of the city counsel, an alderman and a senator for the Belgische Werklieden Partij (Belgian Labourers’ Party).

Because of their knowledge of a particular problem, the interest groups may procure some useful information to the politician. Organizations like the Fédération Maritime d’Anvers (Antwerp maritime federation) dispose of businessmen who were at work every day on the maritime problems. These men were able to take in at a glance the needs and interests of the port and the transport industry.

The interest group may contribute financially to the election campaigns of the politician. Often the campaign is paid, entirely or partly, by organizations belonging to the same ideological family.

The interest group may organise a strike in order to exert pressure on politicians to make some concessions or to defend its points of view. Examples: the general strike of 1936 and the Royal Question strikes of 1950.