Commentary on the papers of Loyen and Van de Laar

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In his pioneering work on British ports, Gordon Jackson commented that transport systems, though they might appear to have a certain permanence, have nevertheless been in a state of almost continuous evolution for the best part of two centuries (Jackson 1983, 10). One of the most striking examples of this continuous evolution has been the changing configuration of the port provisions of north-west Europe. While the period down to 1914 witnessed the rise to pre-eminence of major UK ports such as London, Liverpool and Hull, these “gateways to Europe and the wider world”, as contemporaries liked to call them, have declined fitfully since 1918. However, even as these gateways were approaching their relative peaks in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the European ports that were soon to eclipse the British trading centres were beginning to develop rapidly. Antwerp and Rotterdam were at the fore of this “continental” development. Located on deep, navigable rivers, with easy access by river, rail and road to an industrial hinterland that was far more extensive and populous than even the “workshop of the world” could offer, Antwerp and Rotterdam possessed many advantages in the changing economic environment of the twentieth century. In this setting, throughput, or transit traffic, to and from the interior emerged as a dynamic sector of the business of both ports.

The papers of Reginald Loyen and Paul van de Laar are essentially concerned with measuring and explaining the extent and significance of the throughput of Antwerp and Rotterdam respectively. The two papers differ in a number of respects. They deal with different time periods, Van de Laar focusing on Rotterdam’s throughput in the 1880-1914 period, while Loyen covers the twentieth century. They cover different topics. In contrast to Loyen, who discusses methodologies and concepts as well as the pattern of transit trade growth, Van de Laar provides a good deal of historical background to his account of the rapid rise of Rotterdam’s throughput in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The two authors adopt different approaches in seeking to explain the development of traffic in their respective ports, Loyen preferring a chronological framework and Van de Laar opting for a commodity by commodity line of enquiry. Moreover, the depth of coverage in the two papers differs, largely because Loyen’s paper is the fruit of a project that has been underway for some years, while Van de Laar’s investigation into Rotterdam’s transit trade is in its early stages.

Due to these differences in parameters, approach and depth of coverage, the two papers do not readily lend themselves to comparative analysis. Rather, they complement each other, and it is therefore more appropriate to discuss them to-
gether. Five aspects of the papers warrant particular comment. First, both authors have produced time series pertaining to the throughputs of their respective ports. To achieve this, they have drawn on national sea-borne trade statistics and local inland trade statistics, as well as data concerned with road, canal and rail traffic. Various contemporary accounts and secondary studies have also been used to yield comprehensive annual figures on the volume and composition of the throughput of Antwerp and Rotterdam. Though the datasets are somewhat understated in the two papers, the production of these time series is a great achievement in itself. More importantly, it would seem that the data has been assembled in a systematic, scientific manner. Accordingly, there are signs in both papers that the authors, in considering their primary evidence, have asked the right questions of their material; thus,

- Why was the information produced initially?
- How was it generated?
- Is it comprehensive, accurate and compatible with data from other ports and other modes of transport?
- Can the data be corroborated?
- If there are gaps and problems, can they be alleviated or overcome by estimation, extrapolation, or a resort to alternative sources?

In other words, both Loyen and Van de Laar have been very professional in the provenance of their primary source material, and in the assembly and presentation of the evidence derived from these sources. While this is an extremely important and admirable facet of their work, I have one slight misgiving about the technical procedures that they have followed. My concern is that neither author has devoted much space in his paper to the data evaluation process that has been employed. This is not because I am an advocate of long, detailed and potentially distracting primary source descriptions and methodological treatises, but because I believe that historians need to be especially careful in their treatment of quantitative data. Our sources need to be assessed thoroughly and our methods need to be rigorous and transparent. We need to learn from our colleagues in the science disciplines that the validation of data is a vital aspect of historical enquiry, and we should not be reticent in writing about it.

A second notable – and notably strong – element of the two papers is the discussion of conceptual approaches and models that have been applied to port development. This features prominently in Loyen’s paper, mainly because the Antwerp project is at a more advanced stage than that pertaining to Rotterdam, but it is also implicit in Van de Laar’s study. Loyen’s discussion of this matter rests on an impressive survey of a broad range of literature which embraces the works of geographers, economists and historians. Having considered and discarded a range of paradigms and models, Loyen devises an integrated functional approach to port development. This combines the functional approach advanced by De Rousier and others with the foreland and hinterland concept championed by Vigarie and Robinson. The product is a framework in which the flow of goods from place of production to place of consumption is in the form of a continuum. This analytical apparatus entails three functional shifts in the ports that form part of the continuum: from primary to commercial; from commercial to industrial; and from industrial to distributational, wherein ports act as “hubs”. Such an approach, it is ar-