

Issue 51, 28 July, 2017

A Book Made of Steel: Rereading the Technological History of Europe's "Long 20th Century"

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Abstract:

Writing the Rules for Europe. Experts, Cartels, International organizations is the fifth out of six books from the series *Making Europe: Technology and Transformations, 1850-2000*. As such, it offers to the readers a new perspective on our understanding of Europe and challenges many well-established truths in contemporary Western historiography. The work of Johan Schot and Wolfram Kaiser switches the focus from political to technological history. It redirects our attention from the politicians and diplomats to the international experts, engineers, specialists, businessmen, lobbyists, and innovators. Failing to take them into consideration, as the authors argue, risks profoundly limiting our understanding of European integration, European organizations, and even the European Union itself. *Writing the Rules for Europe. Experts, Cartels, International organizations* is a guide to the long-term processes which continue to shape the European presence and its future.

How to cite:

Pozharliev, Lyubomir: "A Book Made of Steel: Rereading the Technological History of Europe's 'Long 20th Century' [Review on: Kaiser, Wolfram and Johan Schot: *Writing the Rules for Europe. Experts, Cartels, International organizations*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.]. In: KULT_online 51 (2017).

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22029/ko.2017.155>



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Kaiser, Wolfram and Johan Schot: *Writing the Rules for Europe. Experts, Cartels, International organizations*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. 416 pages, 90,94 EUR. ISBN 978-0-230-30807-7.

Abstract:

Writing the Rules for Europe. Experts, Cartels, International organizations is the fifth out of six books from the series *Making Europe: Technology and Transformations, 1850-2000*. As such, it offers to the readers a new perspective on our understanding of Europe and challenges many well-established truths in contemporary Western historiography. The work of Johan Schot and Wolfram Kaiser switches the focus from political to technological history. It redirects our attention from the politicians and diplomats to the international experts, engineers, specialists, businessmen, lobbyists, and innovators. Failing to take them into consideration, as the authors argue, risks profoundly limiting our understanding of European integration, European organizations, and even the European Union itself. *Writing the Rules for Europe. Experts, Cartels, International organizations* is a guide to the long-term processes which continue to shape the European presence and its future.

Writing the Rules for Europe. Experts, Cartels, International organizations is a book in a chain of books. It is the fifth out of six books from the series *Making Europe: Technology and Transformations, 1850-2000*. The project has set a high goal – to give a new perspective on our understanding of Europe and to challenge many well-established truths in contemporary Western historiography. First, the very name of the series is a confrontation to one of the most famous definitions given by the British scholar James Scott – the definition of 20th century as the “short century” in opposition to the “long 19th century”.

This work by Johan Schot and Wolfram Kaiser, both renowned historians, presents the “long 20th

century”, which according to them and the other authors of the project starts in 1850. It shows us that by switching the focus from political history to technological history Scott’s definition seems not to be so useful, anymore. Precisely this is one of the challenges of the book – it redirects our attention from the politicians and diplomats to the international experts, engineers, specialists, businessmen, and innovators. A further scientific provocation is the thesis that the processes of European integration, whose start is acknowledged to be in the mid-20th century, had actually begun one century earlier.

The authors successfully manage to explain that neither the European Union (EU), nor the Soviet Union were the first transnational entities who attempted to harmonize, standardize, and ultimately unite the European continent or at least parts of it. On the contrary, the EU was not a long-pursued aim of different politicians. It was rather a consequence, a means to legitimize the interests of particular groups – the growing class of engineers and technical experts, with their cartels and international organizations. These groups were acting and working transnationally, even if the national interest was triggering them to do so – according to Kaiser/Schot.

Unfortunately, the book doesn’t completely keep its promise to offer a history of the experts, cartels, and international organizations. The promise is given right at the start in the introduction (pp. 1-19), in chapter one (pp. 21-44), and in chapter five (pp. 141-178), where it seems that the study will deal with different types of international experts and organizations. The reader is left with the impression that the book will be concerned with the establishment of the European road network (known widely as the E-roads), the internalization of the railways, and the unification of different infrastructural as well as communication standards like the telegraph. In fact the opposite is true; it is a book dedicated to one kind of expert, cartel, and international organization, those who served the interests of one economic sector – the steel and iron industry. In each of its chapters the book seeks to convince the reader how the steel industry defined Europe (meaning Western Europe) as such. Which leads the reader to the question – isn’t that a history of the steel sector in Europe? Furthermore, isn’t that a reference to the historic predecessor of the EU – the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC)? Contrary to the initial criticism towards the EU and its first appearance in the form of the ECSC, Schot’s and Kaiser’s text leaves the impression that this is the history of how the latter became possible but from an international technological perspective. This book was designed as a critique of the establishment of the EU and its own ideological history. Yet, it follows, but in a reversed order, exactly the logic of the very creation of the European Union and its self-legitimatization. All in all, everything started with steel, Schot and Kaiser argue, in line with the EU bureaucrats.

Unlike the other books of the series, this one shows a profound interest in the rest of Europe’s Europe. Understandably, Eastern Europe remains only a reference point, considering the book’s focus on the

steel sector and its transnational Western organizations. As pointed out fairly by the authors, it was not before Khrushchev, when Eastern Europe started to play an important role within the United Nations and other “Western” organizations. Regardless of the fact that Eastern Europe was never the focus – neither of this study, nor of the book series – the authors showed sensibility towards this problem and have managed to articulate it. It is rare to read a Europocentric (meaning focused on Western Europe) history, which offers sources from the Polish and Hungarian state archives. This is a large step forward for contemporary “Western” scholarly work. If you are interested in Eastern Europe, you will not find that many surprises, but if your focus is set more to the West, this book will challenge you in many unexpected and positive ways.

To conclude, the book is a guide to the processes which continue to be the hottest topics regarding Western Europe and the European Union itself. The authors easily but profoundly manage to explain how the EU turned out to be possible or to be threatened today. Unlike the rest of the regular guides of the EU, this one does not simply quote regulations and ideologies. It sets them within a broader context and long term processes defined by multiple international players. It gives an answer to the question why Switzerland, Norway, and Iceland are still not part of the European Union. To the smart and careful reader the book offers even an answer to the question why Brexit was possible, while being written two years before the Brexit itself. This proves how a well-written historical book is more than a paper dealing with the past. It shows how the discipline of history can be convertible and accessible to a range of different audiences living in the present.

If you are a historian of science and technology or a scholar of global and international history, you will be fascinated. If you are teaching or studying cultural history, sociology or political science consider this book as part of your reading list. If you are an engineer, innovator or businessman involved in the European affairs – you might find yourself being described here. If history and European affairs are your hobby, enjoy the book; it has been written for you as well. If you are dealing with Eastern European history though, examine it thoroughly and critically. Briefly stated, it is a book made of steel and worth reading.

German Abstract:

Ein Buch gemacht aus Stahl: Relektüren der Technikgeschichte in Europas “langem 20. Jahrhundert”

Writing the Rules for Europe. Experts, Cartels, International organizations ist das fünfte von sechs Büchern aus der Reihe *Making Europe: Technology and Transformations, 1850-2000*. Als solches bietet es den Lesern eine neue Perspektive auf ihr Europaverständnis und fordert viele etablierte Wahrheiten in der zeitgenössischen westlichen Geschichtsschreibung heraus. Das Buch von Johan Schot und Wolfram Kaiser wechselt den Blickpunkt von der Politik- zur Technikgeschichte. Es richtet unsere Aufmerksamkeit von den Politikern und Diplomaten zu den internationalen Expert_innen, Ingenieur_innen, Spezialist_innen, Geschäftsleuten, Lobbyist_innen und Innovator_innen um. Ohne sie in Betracht zu ziehen, so die Autoren, wird unser Verständnis der europäischen Integration, der europäischen Organisationen und sogar der Europäischen Union selbst zutiefst begrenzt sein. *Writing the Rules for Europe. Experts, Cartels, International organizations* ist ein Leitfaden für die langfristigen Prozesse, die die europäische Gegenwart und Zukunft weiterhin gestalten.

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