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Seaports and European port policy

UNIVERSITÀ

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Foreword

This book focuses on seaports and European port policy. However, it does not explore port policy in relation to different categories of ports and does not investigate the uneasy relationship between port development and public policies.

Rather, the aim was from the very beginning to explore the evolution of European port policy with due concern for the great transformation in ports and sea transport fueled in the past Century by the globalization of the economy and the containerization of sea traffic. A basic assumption was that it could well be a major feature of EU processes in setting priorities and making decisions on port development.

By exploring the field, the undertaking was influenced by methodological considerations, due to different ways of appraising phenomena, and the framework became more complex. A major problem was how to account for port evolution while avoiding the strictures and difficulties faced by contemporary port studies. Obviously, it was not a matter of crossing the frontier with a different domain of study, but of depicting a course in port evolution, giving sense to

various EU policy initiatives and proposals aimed at promoting a European port system.

Ultimately, the task was slightly less demanding than it could have been because it required a model of port development to which the basic directions of European port policy and the contents of the measures enacted could be brought back to unity. Nonetheless, a more exhaustive examination of the literature on ports and adequate methodological awareness were required.

Practical considerations suggested focusing the research on policy content and policy outputs rather than the interaction of policy makers and organized interests during the EU policy-making process, which stood as my first choice, and taking care of policy integration rather than focusing on the internal dynamics of a single policy.

In essence, a study of policy Europeanization, the volume concentrates at first on heuristic devices to research ports. They are valuable both in illustrating the literature and in defining models of seaports that could act as a canvas for tracking policy initiatives and proposals aimed at promoting the European port system.

The second part of the study scrutinizes progress towards a common port policy. This study presents and analyzes the main developments matching the way the European policy system evolves to promote the competitiveness of the European port industry within the context of a long-term sustainable mobility strategy. A periodization finally attempts to account for the interaction of state members, community institutions, and organized interests during the EU policy-making process to report why, when, and how the EU port policy is developed.

Chapter 1

Setting the scene

Sometimes, vocabulary can help clarify the issue at hand and define the scope of an inquiry. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, harbor refers to “a place of shelter for ships, specifically where they may lie close to and sheltered by the shore or by works extended from it”. Similarly, for an old edition of the *Garzanti* dictionary, a port is “a place on the shore of the sea, a lake or a river”, which can “accommodate ships and allow cargo and passenger embarkation and disembarkation operations because of its natural configuration or man-made works”.

Other textbooks do not deviate significantly and add very little. The *Devoto-Oli* and the *Treccani* also consider activities related to ship repair useful in defining the term. More specialized sources, such as the *Marine Affairs Dictionary* and the *Dictionnaire de droit international public*, do not provide specific definition of the term. They view ports as spaces used for loading and unloading goods and passengers, and emphasize their morphological characteristics based on the activities that take place within them¹.

1. According to the *Marine Affairs Dictionary*, the term “port” broadly designates a space and complex of facilities necessary for loading and unloading

However, there are still uncertainties and limitations because a functional consideration of ports that, by observing the different ways in which traffic is spatially organized, emphasizes activities and services related to ship handling and those complementary to shipping to better understand port functions, remains in the shadows.

1.1. Framing seaports

As trade developed, ports evolved from being used solely for sheltering ships and their crews to becoming infrastructure and trading hubs for loading and storing goods. This transformation, which occurred at different speeds and extents across various ports, resulted in the emergence of dedicated terminals for specific commodities, ultimately leading to the development of third-, fourth-, and fifth-generation ports that shifted their focus from transshipment of goods to transportation-related economic activities.

Ports were transformed into comprehensive logistics hubs that relied heavily on technology to act as intermediaries between land and sea with the primary aim of streamlining the entire supply chain and supporting processes. Such formidable changes have led to remarkable transformations

merchant ships; more circumstantial, with many assonances with what *Garzanti* enunciated, is the definition of the *Dictionnaire de droit international* for whom the port is a place “qui par sa configuration... permet d’abriter les navires de mer ou les bateaux de navigation intérieure, de les entretenir ou de les réparer, de faciliter leurs opérations d’embarquement et de débarquement de passagers, de chargement ou de déchargement des marchandises, etc.”.

in the way ports compete and are managed, as well as in the composition of the port community and the role of its players. The end result was a radical transformation of seaports, requiring reassessment of their role as centers for logistical goods and passenger transport, rather than just a facilitator of intermodality.

The ongoing reassessment of the concept of “port” suggests that it can be useful to contrast different “ideal types” of seaports on the basis of primary dimensions that define their role and functions, such as port activities, and the relationships between ports and their hinterland. It will then be feasible to consider more specific criteria for the analysis, while incorporating additional empirical cases in intermediate positions. In simple terms, a distinction can be made between the polar types of seaports (Lijphart 1984, 1999), whose key characteristics, along with their dimensions and qualifying attributes, remain to be determined.

The profound transformation of ports in recent decades has not been mirrored by equal advancements in port studies that, although well established, rich in hypothesis and empirical research, were clearly overtaken by events which “exceeded the ability of scholars and policy makers to conceptualize and interpret change” (Wang *et al.* 2007).

Much of the literature has been developed by governmental and international agencies and has poor theoretical foundations that make it difficult to frame changes in maritime transport and their assessment. Knowledge adds up, building a large and composite corpus of studies, increasing heterogeneity and fragmentation, and enlightening basic shortcomings reinforced by a scant interest in conceptual

tools useful to frame both the field under investigation and the themes analyzed².

A major weakness, even of academic strands in port studies, is that they often do not properly grasp the research topic due to common problems in typologies leading to poor categorizations. On such a theme, I would suggest more decisive efforts by means of methodological tools widely used in social sciences, but very little in port studies. I will use some of them first to frame port studies and then to account for their unit of analysis, that is, seaports.

No part of this book comprehensively reviews the existing literature on ports, identifies gaps, or discusses the evolution of port development using new criteria. Instead, for a large part, it aims to provide tools for framing both ports and major contributions to port studies using analytical tools commonly used in the social sciences.

This paper does not critically evaluate scholarly work, but aims to provide a fresh perspective on port development within a familiar analytical framework. I aim to contrast two approaches to studying seaports to emphasize the foundational aspects of an important part of the literature. To further clarify, I do not aspire to systematize knowledge but rather to propose a flexible and well-tested tool that can account for the primary research on the topic.

The same aspiration guides the next step of the research, which aims to apply an analytical framework based on polar types to seaports, rather than to the literature devoted to

2. Uncertainty looks widespread since “despite the variety of approaches, no authoritative definition of port missions, functions, institutional and organizational management exists” (Bichou 2014).

them. The thesis I intend to put forward in this regard is that considering the difficulties encountered in the construction of classifications and typologies, it is necessary to adopt a different heuristic tool. Rather than thinking of seaports as naturally falling into one category or another, it would be better to consider a single basic dimension characterizing port activities and functions, namely, seaport integration in distributive logistics, ranging from loose seaport integration in the transport system to full integration in logistic chains.

1.2. Focusing on European port policy

Changes occurring in ports, the evolution of port studies, and methodologies describing tools to be used for analysis are crucial to understanding the context of European port policy. The Union aims to establish a unified framework in the policy field, despite the presence of diverse national systems and changes resulting from significant structural, economic, and institutional transformations that have taken place in recent decades.

The intervention of EU institutions in the port sector dates to the 1990s and complements the increased integration of transport with commercial services that transform seaports into advanced logistics centers, setting the tone for the third and fourth generation of ports.

Changes were set in motion to transform the nature of European ports, moving them away from their traditional role as hubs for the embarkation and disembarkation of goods and passengers and positioning them as a nexus for different modes of transportation. These ports increasingly

resemble logistics terminals with a focus on port activities related to logistics and advanced technology. Ultimately, they integrate into global supply chains.

Community intervention in these circumstances faced issues related to the liberalization and harmonization of national systems, new technologies, changes in the organization of trade as well as port labor, and the reevaluation of hierarchies between ports. The initiatives led to integration with other policies, as they aimed to enhance the efficiency of ports, finance the modernization of facilities, and especially include ports within the transportation network.

The interrelationship between policies plays a significant role in European port policy. As early as the mid-1970s, well before a common policy was established, the Port Working Group of the European Commission adopted a broad definition of seaports that forecasted their transformation from mere cargo and passenger handling facilities to logistics hubs that integrate into global supply chains. According to the Port Working Group, ports should be envisaged in this broader context.

an area [...] which permits, principally, the reception of ships, their loading and unloading, storage, receipt, and delivery of goods by inland transport, and [which] may include the activities of enterprises connected with maritime transport³ (European Commission 1977: 6).

3. The same document stated that “the term ‘port policy’ communicates all measures taken by the authorities in relation to the activities and services carried out in a seaport [...] and affecting the operational and economic activity of the port” (European Commission 1977: 6).