

Sébastien Richez and Muriel Le Roux have attended to **the XIV<sup>th</sup> international Economic history Congress in Helsinki, 21 to 25 August 2006.**

1) Sebastien Richez has presented a paper whose title is: “Of combined postal service: mail and passengers conveyance by « Poste automobile rurale » in France, 1926-1974”

At that time, France still contained a lot of very cutted off country spaces, with very few ways of communication. French Post Office, by the organisation of “Poste automobile rurale”, in French (PAR), which is created in 1926, will participate to the opening up of these areas.

So it constitutes, in a certain kind of way, a going back to the original and main activity of a modern French Post Service. How did it operated?

Directly under the State control or by invitation to tender near enterprises of transport, which took care of the travellers and parcels post or postal sacks transport service by bus.

Several communes settled in a postal district were served by the one round trip a day of a bus between the main city, where was the post office, and those communes: the bus also took care of the few shopping (bread, pharmacy) and made the join between the offices of postal correspondents (in French “correspondants postaux”).

This kind of office used to settled at a ordinary people, a merchant or the town clerk: it provided only few postal services.

This organisation of the PAR succeeded in providing to the rural people a particular kind of “public service”, or, as I could best say, “service to the people”: a physical, commercial and epistolary relationship in order to break the isolation. In 1932, 251 rounds concerning 2 485 communes were functioning.

Later, the Second World War, then the democratization of the individual car, then the improved of the ways of communication (phone for example) and the 1974’ oil crisis will successively slice up and remove the PAR organisation.

2) Muriel Le Roux has spoken about: The History of the Reforms' Management, when the French Post Office became La Poste Group (1990-2006)”

France, because of the French business history researches, has lost its “backwardness”. If our economic performances are what there are, it is because of a new concept “the French specificity”. As my colleague Y. Cassis<sup>1</sup> said, “With the loss of its “backwardness”, France might have lost most of its appeal to foreign, particularly, Americans business historians and analysts.” The notion of specificity does not fit easily to the general categories cherished by social scientists. France has become somewhat marginalized in international business history comparison. May be non speaking French historians could imagine that business history is not a research topic. It is not true; our community is very dynamic even if the topic itself is less fashionable today than 10 years ago.

Yet, I may say the history of the French Post Office is still marginalized for two reasons: Because it's a French case it can be presented as specificity and because the French Post Office was not really a research subject before 1995. But it exists a

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<sup>1</sup> Cassis Y. « Business History in France » in Amatori F. & Jones G ; (eds), (2003), *Business History around the World*, Cambridge, CUP, 192.

slight difference with other topic: a transatlantic business historians' community exists and works on this topic probably because of the business historical approach and particularly the American one<sup>2</sup>.

In France, who want to study a network, this scientist has to read first Thomas Hugues<sup>3</sup> and his followers and second François Caron<sup>4</sup> who was most probably one of the firsts to study network companies in France and then reads his followers too like Pascal Griset<sup>5</sup>.

Thus, the French Post Office and then La Poste group are now like other major French companies. There are research subjects for social scientists. To understand why the French Post Office and La Poste group had allowed historians to study their past, reasons were found in market conditions, managerial attitudes, and institutional factors. Five years after the law that had turned the French Post Office administration into the State-own enterprise named "*La Poste group*" (hereafter LPg), its management staff, employees and workers were losing their identity, their bearings. The Chairman, André Darrigrand created two services that are still working: one is the research mission (in charge of social research except history) and other one is the historical committee. A. Darrigrand's idea was historians could restore a collective identity, giving post office workers their "History" back. At the same time the committee had to find a solution to preserve archival material. In 1997, the same Chairman founded the National Archives Service of La Poste group with an archivist on its head. Today, very good conditions are offered to social scientists and historians to study either French post office or LPg's history.

Talking about the management of the reform and change or talking about the history of corporate governance is not synonymous and is quite difficult if you try to do it with historical methods. There are plenty of books talking about corporate governance, management, teaching how to manage, reform or change a firm. It is a good business for consultancies. There are very few historical researches on this topic. Talking about the history of the French Post office<sup>6</sup> and more precisely of its management of change from the end of the 1980s until today is not easy too, particularly in front of Anglo-Saxon business historians because they are most probably those who study this question. I will try even if this research is in progress.

The main point of this presentation is precisely an attempt to set out what were the reform and the change resulting from the government decision to turn an old State administration to a State-own-enterprise.

This presentation is organized as follow. Section 1, I will remind a short history of distant roots of the Post Office' Reform, section II, I will sum up the "major historical reform" and section III, I will try to analyze the change which is in progress since a little more than four years and try to explain why it could be a question of survival.

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<sup>2</sup> John R., (1995), *Spreading the News, the American Postal System from Franklin to Morse*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press.

<sup>3</sup> Hughes T. P., (1983), *Networks of Power, Electrification in Western Society 1880-1830*, Baltimore John Hopkins University Press.

<sup>4</sup> Caron F., (1973), *Histoire de l'exploitation d'un grand réseau : la Compagnie de chemin de fer du nord, 1846-1937*, Paris, La Haye, Mouton, (1997) *Histoire des chemins de fer en France, 1740-1883*, vol 1 ; (2004) *Histoire des chemins de fer en France, 1883-1937*, vol 2, Paris, Fayard.

<sup>5</sup> Griset P., (1996), *Entreprise, technologie et souveraineté, les Télécommunications transatlantiques en France, XIX-XX siècles*, Paris Éditions Rive droite.

<sup>6</sup> I will use the name "French Post office" until January 1<sup>st</sup> 1991. After this date, I will use La Poste Group (LPG) because that's the name of the enterprise.

