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SOMMARIO

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ECONOMICS AND POLITICS IN SUBMARINE TELEGRAPH CABLES (XIXTH AND XXTH CENTURIES).

A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE BETWEEN HISTORY,
HERITAGE AND PRESERVATION

edited by Andrea Giuntini and Ana Paula Silva

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SOME INTRODUCTORY WORDS

It is common knowledge that the electric telegraph accelerated communication in the nineteenth century. Before the introduction of the submarine telegraph and the opening of the Suez Canal, any English merchant that wanted to send a letter to Calcutta or Bombay knew that the operation would take about six months. The time to conduct negotiations and to sign a bargain, in the early decades of the nineteenth century, was incredibly long. Once the telegraph link between the motherland and its main colony was established, after much time and effort, 25-30 words per minute could be transferred along the line.

The abyssal difference in the communication time, as briefly illustrated in the above example, shows very clearly how radically every international economic and trade activity was changed by the new system of submarine telegraphy. Merchants and entrepreneurs, bankers and businessmen engaged in financial transactions, stockbrokers and shipping companies, as well as the first press agencies, benefited from the opportunities offered by cables laid in the deep sea and ocean, which shaped modern economic practices and decisively pushed the world towards a new global economic integration. It was also an extremely dynamic and challenging context for private companies; robust business agents owning relevant capitals, which were generally collected on the British market, came to be created in major countries, but also in smaller ones such as Denmark, thereby writing an extremely interesting page of business history, and finally exciting the international economic community in the second half of the nineteenth century, when submarine telegraphy became a major business which, from the perspective of the British, contributed to the «dissemination of an Essentially British view of world affairs»¹.

¹ R. BOYCE, *Submarine cables as a factor in Britain's ascendancy*, in *Kommunikationsrevolutionen. Die neuen Medien des 16. und 19. Jahrhunderts*, edited by M. North, Köln-Weimar-Wien 1995, p. 91.

The essays collected here in this volume show, from a necessarily international comparative perspective, a very intriguing insight into this story, and offer case studies referring to some geographical areas and topics that are crucial to the reconstruction of the issue of submarine telegraphy, especially in the last decades of the nineteenth century, at the end of which the breadth of the world was crossed by telegraph cables, and thus fully connected.

The comparative argument has not yet been addressed by historians, in either encyclopedic treatises or in the academic and scientific research. This delay has occurred in spite of the several impulses (which are mentioned in several notes of the present work starting from the seminal books by Daniel Headrick, who first realized, from the historiographical viewpoint, the centrality of the question of submarine cables². Only a few scholars, including one of the two editors of the present work³, have dealt with the topic in recent years in Italy. Few Italian books and journals have been interested in publishing major foreign historiographical outputs in this area; one of the few publications, from a few years ago, is a volume of the journal *Memoria e Ricerca*, which was entirely devoted to telecommunications, including submarine cables⁴. Therefore, the major contribution, as well as being written in English, unlike *Memoria e Ricerca*, is that it provides an incentive to encourage new studies in the field. In addition, a basic goal is to enter fully into the debate on the origins of globalization in the nineteenth century with a focus on the role of communications, which we consider to be essential in this context.

Moving from the belief that the development of telecommunication technologies in the nineteenth century represents one of the specific

² *The tools of empire. Technology and European imperialism in the nineteenth century*, New York 1981 (*Al servizio dell'impero. Tecnologia e imperialismo europeo nell'Ottocento*, Bologna 1984); *The tentacles of progress. Technology transfer in the age of imperialism, 1850-1940*, New York 1988 (*I tentacoli del progresso. Il trasferimento tecnologico nell'età dell'imperialismo (1850-1940)*, Bologna 1991); *The invisible weapon. Telecommunications and international politics, 1851-1945*, New York-London 1991. See also P. GRISET-D. HEADRICK, *Submarine Telegraph Cables: Business and Politics, 1838-1939*, «Business History Review», 3 (2001), pp. 543-578; D. HEADRICK, *Strategic and military aspects of submarine telegraph cables, 1851-1945*, in *Communications under the seas. The evolving cable networks and its implications*, edited by B. Finn and D. Yang, Cambridge-London 2009, pp. 185-207.

³ A. GIUNTINI, *Le meraviglie del mondo. Il sistema internazionale delle comunicazioni nell'Ottocento*, Prato 2011.

⁴ *Flussi invisibili. Le telecomunicazioni fra Ottocento e Novecento*, a cura di A. Giuntini, «Memoria e Ricerca», 11 (2000), pp. 5-118.

features of the modernization process on a global scale, and that few other inventions have marked the same span of time as that of the telegraph, we have brought together some outstanding specialists in the field, without imposing a specific direction upon them, but rather trying to focus as a whole on the kaleidoscope of topics and experiences that the history of submarine telegraphy offers.

The idea of gathering authors together on such a variegated project as furthering submarine cables studies was discussed in Lisbon on March 2013, at the congress *Shaping landscapes and building expertise. The role of imperial technology in the making of the 19th and 20th century world*. Here, the session *Networking the Empire* took place. This session was organized upon the idea that telegraphs played a central role in building European empires, as well as in *Europeanizing the world*, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This was not done easily, but via very complex processes at many levels, and gathered the action of a plethora of actors scattered around the world, some of whom were based at the center and others on the peripheries, and whose respective contributions are far from being conclusively studied. The session merely presented some illustrative cases, which not only stimulated reflections on the topic, but also gave birth to the idea of the participants' collaborations for future research projects. These papers intend both to disseminate these ideas, and collect adherence from others who are interested in being part of the *Research Network on the History and Heritage of Submarine Cables* (RNHHSC), which was formed in March 2013 on the initiative of the Interuniversity Center of History of Science and Technology (CIUHCT) of the Faculty of Science and Technology, Universidade Nova de Lisboa, together with the Physics Department of the Colégio D. Pedro II (CPII), Rio de Janeiro, and the Università degli Studi di Modena e Reggio Emilia, Italy, and brought together research units and scholars interested in the history and heritage of submarine cables.

RNHHSC provides the opportunity for reflection, the production of knowledge, and interdisciplinary debate, which aims to further investigation of the history of submarine cables, and acknowledge their legacy. To this end, a group of scholars in several countries have researched the global techno-social reality of submarine cables as determinant in contemporary world history, namely in relation to the world's economic, social and cultural development. In this way, submarine cables hold a value that covers the past, present and future of mankind, and thus constitute a cultural heritage that is both material and immaterial (scientific and technological knowledge, technical

knowhow, social and cultural practices, infrastructures, constructions, equipment and objects, sites and landscapes) of universal dimensions.

RNHHSC develops projects of study and/or territorial intervention at local/regional, national and international level. Structured upon areas of knowledge such as the history of science and technology, economic history, architecture, anthropology, heritage and museology, RNHHSC gathers diverse disciplinary and transdisciplinary contributions from its members, and is open to all who are attracted to its objectives and actions.

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