

'Too many scientists working on the Benelux experiment' from the Corriere della Sera (4 January 1950)

Caption: On 4 January 1950, the Italian newspaper Corriere della Sera comments on the practical problems resulting from the implementation of the customs union between Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands.

Source: Corriere della Sera. 04.01.1950, n° 3; anno 75. Milano: Corriere della Sera. "Troppi scienziati alle prese con l'esperimento Benelux", auteur:Baldacci, Gaetano , p. 3.

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Too many scientists working on the Benelux experiment

Economic union between Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg should have been concluded on 1 January, but has been deferred for six months

From our special correspondent

Rotterdam, 3 January, evening.

Benelux is the notepad on which European politicians are writing up their observations; it is the guinea pig of a united Europe, the physiology laboratory that is testing the possibility of a wider organisation that could, unfortunately for us, be called Fritalux or Finbenel. These horrible composite words, which bring to mind nothing more than the repertoire of Galen's rudimentary pharmacy, which are gratuitous because they are uninspired and yet unavoidable in that they include all the components, all the ingredients of the medicine, prove that we are talking not about a fusion but about a rough and ready concoction. It may well be that, one day, once all these countries have been brought into close contact, Belgium will take effect on the Netherlands, and the Netherlands on Belgium, and both countries on Italy and France; on that day we shall have a kind of 'economic penicillin' that will cure Europe of all its ills. Let us hope so.

Beer and wine

Until that day comes, we are being flooded with 'experimental protocols' by the 'scientists'. I have received so many that I have lost count. This, I feel, is a phenomenon common to Europe as a whole, both east and west. Illustrative brochures, reports, elucidations, long treatises and explanations, plans, etc. Running counter to this flood of bureaucratic rationalism is the simple and very human approach of the Belgian housewife who finds it cheaper, if she lives not too far from the border, to do her shopping in the Netherlands, where she can buy meat at half the price, or the Luxembourg housewife who pops over to Thionville in France for the same reasons.

The fact is that the contradictions of a system such as Benelux cannot just be resolved on paper. It is all very well, for instance, to be full of resentment, however justified, against Germany, but how would the port of Rotterdam survive if its hinterland, Germany, were to be forever depressed, as those who are right — and very right! — to fear cut-throat German competition would like to see? The Nazis destroyed seven and a half kilometres of Rotterdam's quays but, as well as rebuilding the whole of the city centre, which was also completely destroyed, the proficient Dutch have restored their main port to full working order. Imagine: out of eighteen million working hours, only three thousand have been lost as a result of strikes; the Dutch, who are rebuilding their country with fearsome energy, hardly ever strike. The port of Rotterdam, however, has a large, neighbouring and direct rival in the port of Antwerp, which is no less impressive in terms of its size and array of plant.

After travelling throughout the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg, visiting the Limburg mines, the major iron and steel works of the ARBED Group, the shipyards, the docks and the shipping agents' gigantic warehouses in the major ports of Rotterdam and Antwerp, coasting down the Rhine and the Moselle, sailing small boats along the waterways of the Scheldt, seeing boats and railway carriages converted into neat and comfortable homes by homeless Dutch people (with the inevitable spotless curtains at the windows), I discover an observation among my notes (and it is only natural for a journalist to take notes) that I feel summarises the situation: 'The Benelux situation is rather like that of the Luxembourg wine producers who, if their wine production is to prosper, need to convert the beer-drinking Dutch into wine drinkers, drinkers of their Riesling, which is drier, more flavoursome and less intoxicating than its counterparts ...'

While this means many things, one in particular stands out: the problem of finding sufficient capacity to absorb production within the system, and of striking a balance between the economies of the participating countries. This is for a whole range of reasons, although this is not the place to analyse them. The Netherlands and Belgium are trying, like other European countries, to increase production, but who is the buyer going to be? Trade, especially for the Netherlands, was kept alive chiefly by the German market.

Flows of traffic cannot be arbitrarily diverted, and it is for this fundamental reason that the European economy needs to be returned as soon as possible to a wider and more natural, possibly even 'historic', space so that its own general balance can be restored. The Americans would like production to expand in the European countries, largely, perhaps, for political reasons: one way of fighting Communism is to increase the number of goods produced, reduce their price and so make it possible for the largest number of people to enjoy them. Certainly; but, to do this, different economies, up to now independent and competing, need to be coordinated and the claws removed from a competition which, beyond certain limits, could have the contrary effect of increasing unemployment and poverty.

As matters stand, we clearly cannot reason just according to our own ideas or in relation only to our own interests. In the Netherlands, for instance, industrialisation is very necessary because of the sharp rise in that country's workforce. The effect of this, however, will be to make the predominantly agricultural economy of the Netherlands less complementary to the predominantly industrial economy of Belgium and, in parallel, it could well fuel conflicts between the two countries. The reply from the Benelux 'scientists' is then: 'Industrialisation is of vital importance for the Netherlands; the industrialisation of the Netherlands and, generally, of the three Benelux countries, will be organised so that it does not run counter to the requirements of economic unity. One of the best ways of achieving this aim is to adapt their respective industrial investment policies.' The result: some branches of industry, which were taking root in the Netherlands, have been strangled at birth 'by mutual agreement'. I leave you to imagine what this 'mutual agreement' could be in such cases.

Is all this no more than economic 'dirigisme'? 'Dirigisme' not just by one country but by a system of countries and, in particular, implemented by bodies that do not as yet have the authority and force to impose it? The more 'dirigisme' seems to be an inevitable turning point for those countries intending to reorganise and, at the same time, to integrate and coordinate their own economies, the more unpopular the term becomes, since — as has been said — economic 'dirigisme' also engulfs man's other freedoms. A new term has therefore been coined: the 'guided economy'. The need to 'guide' the economy of the respective countries runs through talk about Benelux in Belgium and the Netherlands.

Spaak's idea

There is no doubt that one of Benelux's main problems lies in the current disparities between the economies of its two largest countries. After the war, their different economic circumstances dictated two differing policies: laissez-faire in Belgium, dirigiste in the Netherlands. In a speech referring to Great Britain but just as applicable to the links between Belgium and the Netherlands, Paul-Henri Spaak considered that this opposition had to be resolved: 'It is not true that there is a conflict between the advocates of austerity policy and the advocates of a policy of plenty. Nobody is an advocate of austerity, but there are those who are forced to impose restrictions in the light of immediate and urgent economic problems ... If we want to rebuild Europe, we need a "plan" and this plan means a degree of organisation and therefore some restrictions.' It is these words of the Belgian Socialist Spaak that the Dutch are using to reject the charge of programmed 'dirigisme'; what they are following is rather a policy of austerity, of planning of their economy by strict resolve.

If economic union was to be achieved by the deadline, it was necessary, following the initial customs agreements, for all control measures to be repealed, rationing ended (whereas in the Netherlands, coffee is still rationed today), State interference cut back and the monetary policy of the three countries coordinated and, lastly, for the free movement of capital to be restored. These, and other necessary measures, are yet to come. Indeed, the imbalance of the Belgo-Dutch balance of payments represents an obstacle to union: imports from Belgium to the Netherlands are much greater than Dutch exports to Belgium and it will be no easy task to strike a balance. The sterling crisis, government changes in Belgium and problems with the distribution of Marshall aid, added to the other problems mentioned above, have played and are still playing their part in delaying the full union, which the promoters of Benelux, at their first meeting at *Château d'Ardenne* in June 1948, decided should be concluded by the day before yesterday, 1 January 1950. Officially, the 'justified delay' has been set at 'six months' and no more; what is impossible today must therefore be possible by 1 July 1950. We shall see. But success is important, as the failure of this experiment

could compromise any future edifice.

These are the notes that European politicians are writing up on their Benelux notepads, as this experiment on the guinea pig of united Europe continues. The good doctors know, however, that an experiment is doomed to failure when too many 'scientists', using different methods and techniques, are working on the same guinea pig in the same laboratory. Therein lies the danger: in such cases it is the guinea pig that dies.

Gaetano Baldacci