Second plenary conference of the tensions of Europe Network: Lappeenranta, Finland, 24-28 May 2006

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The package unexpectedly arrived on a sunny day in July. Judging from its size and shape, I wondered whether it was a CD I had ordered and forgotten about. Then I saw “South Karelian Institute” on the address label, and with a big smile on my face I opened the package. In it was a CD-ROM with a short film that brought back pleasant memories of Lappeenranta. This tranquil, provincial town on beautiful Lake Saimaa in Finland served as the venue of the Second Plenary Conference of the Tensions of Europe Network, which I attended back in May. This unusual gesture of distributing a souvenir CD reflects the enthusiasm with which local organizer Karl-Erik Michelsen and his team from the South Karelian Institute of the Lappeenranta University of Technology, assisted by Donna Mehos of the Foundation for the History of Technology, put together this event on “Technology and the Rethinking of European Borders.”

The Lappeenranta conference was linked to important developments in the history of technology in Europe, developments that promise to internationalize the conduct and the content of European techno-historical research. Tensions of Europe was first conceived in 1999, and in 2001–2003 it materialized under the sponsorship of the European Science Foundation (ESF) as a scientific network focused on “Technology and the Making of Europe in the 20th Century.”

1. More information on the Tensions of Europe Network can be found at http://www.histech.nl/tensions.
including the National Science Foundation, co-funded this network. From the start, the Foundation for the History of Technology based at the Technical University of Eindhoven has been a major driving force. Since its inception, the network has made a noble effort to bring about more cooperation in research among partners from all corners of the Continent and beyond, especially North America. It thus is an expression of certain changes in the way research in Europe is organized, particularly the move away from exclusively national settings and toward international collaboration. At the same time, it testifies to an increasing thematic interest in the ways in which technology has crossed borders on the European Continent.

To organize this effort, the original network was subdivided into nine research-theme groups that have worked hard to identify questions that could be researched fruitfully in collaborative projects. The first phase of this effort culminated in March 2004 in the First Plenary Conference of the Tensions of Europe Network in Budapest, Hungary, where Eva Vámos was the host.

It is against this background of expanding and deepening network connections that the conference in Lappeenranta was organized. At the conference, the Tensions of Europe Network launched its second phase, moving beyond network-building and toward actual research cooperation. A major development in this respect is a new ESF European Collaborative Research (EUROCORES) program called “Inventing Europe: Technology and the Making of Europe, 1850 to the Present.” This program aims to form “robust transnational research teams that develop novel perspectives on the mutual shaping of transnational technology developments and the process of European integration.” Projects must involve investigators from at least three European countries who will work together on one of the four research topics in the program: “Building Europe through Infrastructures,” “Constructing European Ways of Knowing,” “Consuming Europe,” and “Europe in the Global World.” The Tensions of Europe Network and the Inventing Europe program are not formally linked, but key actors from the Tensions of Europe Network initially proposed the program to the ESF, and many scholars from the network are involved in the development of new research proposals for Inventing Europe. Hence, close links between the Tensions of Europe Network and Inventing Europe are likely to endure.

The network’s recent focus on collaborative projects had its repercussions for the way the organizers put together the conference program. Apart from the familiar plenary and research sessions, the program also included “round tables” and “research collaboration meetings.” Round-table sessions were dedicated to specific themes relating to the role of technology in twentieth-century Europe. Participating panelists presented brief position papers and debated with the other panelists and the audience. The research collaboration meetings constituted a conscious attempt to formulate a specific collaborative research agenda and to discuss concrete possi-
ibilities for doing collective research, either in the context of Inventing Europe or in alternative settings.

The diversity of the conference participants was reflected in the themes addressed in presentations, which were predistributed on CD-ROM. Research topics ranged from urban ring-roads in Dutch cities to queuing in Polish shops in the 1960s, and from the exchange of expertise in the colonial sugar industry to scientific management in interwar Europe. In a short report such as this, it is impossible to provide a comprehensive review that does justice to all of the papers.\(^2\) Overall, however, the presentations were interesting and of high quality, but too many of them still had explicitly national focuses. At a Tensions of Europe conference, comparative research and the investigation of transnational phenomena should be much more prominent, for only by integrating these elements into our research might we truly benefit from the cross-fertilization that this network provides. With this in mind, it was most appropriate that the opening round table stimulated debate on transnational phenomena and comparative research through the presentation of three visions on how to write a technological history of twentieth-century Europe. This debate resumed two days later in another round table dedicated to the methodological and theoretical challenges of writing a comparative European history of technology.

Given Lappeenranta’s location in the Finno-Russian borderland, the conference’s theme was fitting: “Technology and the Rethinking of European Borders.” Unfortunately, it was not extensively covered in the conference sessions. Felicitously, though, the social program filled this gap with an excursion to Vyborg, a former Finnish harbor that became Russian after World War II (along with other parts of the Karelia region). At the border, hundreds of trucks were waiting in a long queue to enter the Russian Federation, but only a handful of passenger buses were ahead of ours. Nevertheless, due to the antiquated and cumbersome border-crossing procedures in place, it took us four hours to reach Vyborg, which is only fifty-eight kilometers from Lappeenranta! After lunch in Vyborg’s monumental Round Tower, Daniel Alexandrov gave the keynote lecture in the Viipuri Library, a 1935 masterpiece of International Modernism designed by the Finnish architect Alvar Aalto. There was just enough time for another series of round-table sessions before we traveled back by boat through the Saimaa Canal. Other elements of the elaborate social program included the inevitable sauna and a midnight-sun event on an island in the lake.

By way of conclusion, I would like to offer some observations from a junior scholar’s point of view. Tensions of Europe has been a welcoming environment for me ever since I took part in the first plenary conference in Budapest. In fact, the Tensions network has explicitly made the support of

\(^2\) For a revealing overview of the topics presented, please visit the conference’s web site, http://www.lut.fi/eki/toe2006.
junior scholars one of its primary goals. One result of this was the first Tensions of Europe summer school, “Integrating and Fragmenting Europe: The Role of Infrastructures, 1850–2000,” in September 2006. Almost twenty junior scholars from fifteen countries participated in this special event in Bordeaux, which was organized by Christophe Bouneau and Pascal Griset. Such initiatives make the Tensions of Europe Network unique in the European humanities.

Tensions of Europe is now entering a crucial phase in which actual cooperation among partners from many different countries will take shape. Having seen the enthusiasm and dedication of the network in Lappeenranta, I am convinced that this laudable effort to join forces in studying the role of technology in twentieth-century Europe will continue to bear fruit for years to come.