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## Article

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## Book Analysis :

**Les ports en France : quelle stratégie portuaire pour un développement d'activité ? Sophie Cros et Florence Lerique, ed. Eska, France, 2021**

“Ports in France: what port strategy for business development?”  
Sophie Cros and Florence Lerique, ed. Eska, France, 2021

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**Abstract:** Port strategy remains a topical issue in the 21st Century more than ever. The French ports have been subjected to 40 years of successive reforms with modest achievements compared to other European ports. Beyond the diagnosis, the book “Ports in France: what port strategy for business development?” aims to analyse the key determinants of a successful port strategy, how a dynamic port strategy can foster territorial attractiveness and more globally, how this strategy can be embedded in a comprehensive economic development policy. To do so, different professional experts and academics with complementary backgrounds contemplate the main French ports’ challenges. Divided into four parts, this very interesting book deals with the context of French ports, their key stakes as regards logistic coordination, regulatory framework and economic and societal aspects.

**Keywords:** Free port, Port law, Port governance, Port management, Port safety, Port strategy

**Résumé :** En ce début de 21<sup>ème</sup> siècle, la problématique de la « stratégie » se pose plus que jamais pour les gestionnaires portuaires. Les ports français ont fait l’objet de quarante années de réformes successives avec des résultats pour le moins « modestes » comparés aux autres ports européens. L’ouvrage « Les ports en France : quelle stratégie portuaire pour un développement d’activité ? » propose une analyse approfondie des déterminants d’une stratégie portuaire efficace, comment cette dernière peut favoriser l’attractivité d’un territoire et comment elle peut s’inscrire au travers d’une politique de développement économique plus large. Divisé en quatre parties, cet ouvrage de grande qualité traite du contexte des ports français, de leurs enjeux tant au niveau de la logistique, du cadre juridique ainsi qu’au regard des aspects économiques et sociétaux.

**Mots clés :** Droit portuaire, gestion portuaire, gouvernance portuaire, port franc, sécurité portuaire, stratégie portuaire

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The book is organised in 16 chapters with an introductory part proposed by Annick Girardin, former Minister of the Sea and Michel Vaspert, former Senator. While the latter regrets the untapped potential of French ports, he highlights positive measures such as the reform of labour law on handling operations. Mr. Vaspert confirms that deindustrialisation, restructuration of oil sector and the lack of strategic vision from the State have contributed to the poor performance of our ports. However, the growth prospects for French ports in terms of employment (port and logistic jobs) are extremely auspicious. For her part, Miss Girardin underlines that French ports allow the structuration of our coastal landscapes and play a key role in our economic growth. She calls for the implementation of a French port network, entrepreneur, digitalised, green and innovative. In that way, our ports will become key players of the 21<sup>st</sup> maritime century.

## 2. STRUCTURE AND CONTENT OF THE BOOK

### 2.1 The context

The context of the French ports is introduced by **Frédéric Dagnet** and **Bernard Morel** through the case of the major metropolitan commercial seaport of Marseille-Fos (so-called “Grand Port Maritime de Marseille-Fos” - GPMM) that has set up a new strategy of energy transition and reindustrialisation throughout the last decade. The authors underline the key evolutions of the French leading port notably with the creation of the 2XL container terminal, the development of rail infrastructures and 60 hectares of logistic zone. Further, the authors point out the reconversion of different port areas in allowing the implementation of urban projects such as “Euroméditerranée.” Numerous projects have been launched in close collaboration with local partners and particularly with the city and more globally with the Metropole Aix-Marseille-Provence. The creation of the “French Smart Port in Med” is a relevant example involving the GPMM, the Chamber of Commerce and Aix-Marseille University. To conclude, the GPMM has become a green port planner, committed in environmental

protection and contributing to economic development. In the same vein, **Thibault Tellier** traces back the different phases of the “Neptune project” in Dunkirk who mobilised two billion of investments over 15 years. This common project between the port of Dunkirk and the city aimed to develop in close collaboration the two entities. In a context of deindustrialisation, Mr Tellier observes the progressive affirmation of local power in the management of port facilities and the growing importance of “Urban Community”. The author shows how devolution has worked with the emancipation of local authorities from the central State.

Other examples of successful collaborations between local authorities are illustrated by **Philippe Brest**. The author takes the “Port of Brest” case where an alliance has been set up joining the Region, the Chamber of Commerce and the Metropole with the aim to set up new port development strategies. A new industrial area is under construction in particular for the development of renewable marine energies. French ports are now committed in sustainability, and one observes greater investments in green policies notably circular economy. As **Aya Kan Christiane Kadio** demonstrates for the “Port Atlantique de la Rochelle” (PALR), the circular economy aims to significantly improve efficiency in the use of resources and to mitigate the negative impacts on environment while also enabling the welfare of individuals. Moreover, the Port of la Rochelle has implemented industrial ecological and territorial policy with positive achievements such as rain-water collectors from roofs or firefighting. Indeed, industrial ecology fosters different types of synergies as regards goods, energies, waters, services and equipment. Finally, the author concludes that port areas are capable to develop circular economy through industrial ecology and remain an indisputable force towards circular economy. Additionally, the 2020 Law on fight against waste and circular economy has further encouraged this policy.

**Ronan Kerbiriou** and **Arnaud Serry** notice that while maritime transportation represents more than 80% of international carriage of goods, research on sea carriage, port management and territorial impacts

of these activities are not well-represented in French research labs. This justifies the creation of “DEVPORT” pooling different researchers on these sectors. To summarise, the authors carry out an analysis on the “Port of Le Havre” (GPMH) compared to its neighbouring ports. They recall that European ports are multi-purpose while some exceptions. Port flows are dominated by general cargo followed by liquid and dry bulks. The authors highlight that Northern ports show their leadership as regards containers and whereas the GPMH benefits from a strategic geographical situation, with modern equipment capable to handle the largest containerships, its performances are relatively modest compared to its Northern competitors. Moreover, the leading French port for containers lost around 15% of traffic during the COVID-19 pandemic (Notteboom, 2021; Fedi et al., 2022). On the contrary, the investments on the cruise sector with the modernisation of the cruise terminal show positive results. To conclude, this chapter provides a relevant overview of the maritime transport in Europe.

## 2.2 The coordination stakes as regards logistics and port

The port coordination has been encouraged by the 2008 port reform. **Xavier-Yves Valere** analyses the “North Axis” that represents a reinforced alliance between a maritime facade and economic operators from its hinterland. He demonstrates this axis has failed on the container segment and remains at risk both as regards the launching of the river link Seine-Escaut and the BREXIT with uncertain consequences. However, some ambitious objectives have been targeted especially duplicating the river traffic within the “Hauts de France”, quadrupling combined rail traffic, reducing the road transit by 300 000 trucks and creating 85 000 jobs in transport and logistics. As conclusion, the author underlines the cooperation of the different port and logistic axes through the definition of an ambitious industrial strategy with national and international impacts.

For his part, **Philippe Philizot** presents the “Seine Axis”. Considered as a major logistic corridor, this axis is grounded on three main poles: Le Havre,

Rouen and Paris that are now represented by the “HAROPA port” (Rézenthel, 2021a). Its main ambition is to attract or divert part of the traffic that transits through the Northern ports especially in Belgium and in The Netherlands. Mr Philizot points out the key role of the “planning contract” concluded between “Ile-de-France, Basse and Haute-Normandie” regions as a vector of integration. Concluding the second part, **Jean-Christophe Baudoin** provides a deep analysis on the “Mediterranean-Rhône-Saône Axis” designed on the model of the “Seine Axis”. This axis faces the same difficulties compared to other port axes. Nevertheless, the “Mediterranean-Rhône-Saône Axis” constitutes a privileged gangway in Europe especially in the north-south direction. This axis is characterised by dynamic industrial activities and with a predominance of road carriage whereas it captures only part of flows with Asia that crosses the Suez Canal. Several structural actions have been undertaken in particular as regards intermodal, rail transport, digitalisation (e.g., blockchain) and sustainability.

## 2.3 The legal framework

While seaports are considered as “companies” pursuant to European Law, their management is subjected to the principles of public service and public state-owned domains. **Robert Rézenthel**, who leads the French port law, shows that general interest constitutes the essential foundation of port activities whereas the European competition rules are applicable to seaports. This general or public interest governs all parties at stake notably for the elaboration of urban planning documents and the implementation of environmental measures. Refusing the idea of a single public port regime, Dr Rézenthel pleads in favour of the port managers’ freedom to choose what kind of facilities have to be part of the public domain. The author concludes that pragmatism must govern the general interest and the COVID-19 crisis should allow reshoring of companies which will benefit to our ports. With regard to environmental protection, **Anne Rainaud** affirms the necessity for port authorities and operators to consider sustainability in the daily management notwithstanding the technical and legal complexity. The author further considers the

protection of local population against air and marine pollutions from ships with the aim to transform industrial ports in “green ports” or “clean ports”. As example, this ambition will be satisfied through the “Hub of energy transition” in the “Port-La-Nouvelle” that represents the “Port of the future” combining the energy and climate issues to the realities of maritime economic exchanges.

For her part, **Florence Lerique** takes stock of the 2008 reform of the GPMs and points out the remaining issues (Fedi et al., 2022). She raises the possible evolution of the GPMS as “landlord port” to “entrepreneurial port.” She refers to some recent reports in 2018 and 2020 that recommended the necessity for the government to rapidly define a genuine national port strategy. The GPMs are invited to change their business model to become more competitive considering six main pillars notably: a transformation of their activities, of their energy and environmental model, digitalisation, and taxation paradigm. These changes are important both at functional and institutional levels, and thus, they require the French state’s support. To do so, a clear and cooperative framework must be established with the aim to improve the GPMs’ governance and to enhance their economic performance compared to their foreign competitors.

The third part is ended by **Raphaël Lissillour**, **Francois Fulconis** and **Dominique Bonet Fernandez**. The authors contemplate the topical question on maritime safety beyond ports and provide a critical analysis of the current maritime regulatory framework. They recall the key role of the International Maritime Organization (IMO) in charge of maritime safety, security and environmental protection. This study reveals the growing importance of classification societies not only in the monitoring and certification of vessels but also in the elaboration of maritime rules. Through the International Association of Classification Societies (IACS), a strong lobbying is in place that influences the content of future regulations. The authors highlight the institutionalisation of the IACS with the IMO and how they have become a major player in the management and the global governance of maritime safety.

## 2.4 The economic and societal aspects

**Marie-Laure Baron** addresses the question of financing port facilities and equipment, a topical issue totally ignored by the French code of transports (Rézenthel, 2021b). She underlines how ports are used to self-financing their infrastructure. Port dues and state licence fees constitute the two main sources of funding. Port dues represent 50% of incomes and the management of the port domain contributes to around 30% of their turnover. However, some reports underline the weak part of licence fees in France compared to Northern competitors. In the aftermath of the 2008 reform of the former “autonomous ports”, the French State freely transferred the ownership of port facilities and lands. Consequently, the seven GPMs own 35,000 hectares of hereditament while the available surface is not totally used due to environmental constraints (e.g., protected areas). The author also notices that private companies currently invest more in equipment and infrastructure, and they benefit from rights in rem.

Port governance is raised by **Olivier Desplebin**, **Franck Gerin** et **Antoine Kauffmann** through the lens of “Le Havre” case. They provide a deep analysis on the conflicts within the port community, the difficulties to find compromise and finally, the dual perception between the port users and the port authority. The authors recall that French ports only acquired their autonomy in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Nevertheless, while several regimes have been implemented either for the major or secondary ports, some hesitations remain regarding the choice of appropriate port governance model. “Continuous pendulum movements” between centralisation, devolution and deconcentration have characterized the institutional framework of French ports over the last decades. The related successive changes have not facilitated the cohesion of port communities. To conclude, the authors raise the question of French port governance as a “eternal institutional trial and error” in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**Nicolas Chervy** as harbour master of the “Port of Le Havre”, proposes a relevant study about port safety. He recalls that seaports, whatever their status, do not have extraterritoriality vis-à-vis municipal authority and thus, the mayor is legally entitled to



apply the municipal police to port facilities. The safety expert identifies the key rules governing the prevention and responses to port accidents. Hazardous goods or SEVESO facilities such as oil terminals are subjected to specific regulations imposing appropriate plans in case of risk occurrence. Some events such as accidents aboard ships require the close collaboration between the crew members and port officers. Further, Le Havre has set up an alert and closure plan in case of safety or security incident defining the appropriate operational measures. Moreover, the author underlines how the response to port accidents can be financed (human resources and equipment), especially thanks to bilateral conventions involving the port authority and public safety bodies. Finally, the harbour master insists on the importance of the safety culture as a key condition to prevent disasters in the port arena.

The fourth part is concluded by **Alexandre Lavissière** who carries out a study on port marketing, a topical subject for port managers. The author underlines that ports have been strategic infrastructure for centuries. Currently, with globalisation and the constant growth of maritime transportation, the competition between ports have significantly increased. This raises the question of port markets that concentrate maritime, inland and logistics flows that are more digitalised thanks to IT tools (e.g. port community systems or cargo community systems) involving all port stakeholders in the same network. The new port's role is illustrated through the main evolutions that occurred, notably the liberalisation of port services that led to a movement of port reforms at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Furthermore, two tricky questions are addressed through the lens of port marketing: who is the port's client? Who is the port? The answers are not simple while the author demonstrates the pivotal role of the port's network and the actors' network. According to professor Lavissière, the port marketing appears as "a clever mix of individual actor's strategies and a network strategy or sub-networks strategy." In this approach, "the port authority has to pilot this strategy at the network level with the objective to succeed at global level." Some relevant cases of port marketing are provided such as the Northern

Range with container terminals, the Free ports or free zones cases or the Smart port strategy (e.g., Le Havre, Marseille, etc.). The author insists on the "logistic added value" that port passage must provide to customers.

### 3. CONCLUSION

To conclude, the book "Ports in France: what port strategy for business development?" covers the current topical issues on port governance, port competition, port law, port safety and environmental policies. These different concerns are discussed from a multidisciplinary approach which allows a systemic view on the French port case confronted to global stakes. Finally, as Professor Gilles Paché affirmed (2021), this high-quality book will satisfy both researchers, companies, politicians and students eager to understand the port challenges in the 21st Century.

### 4. SOME REFERENCES RELATED TO THE SAME TOPIC

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