This dissertation combines three articles in historical network research. The common theme is that all chapters bring a network perspective to a famous institution in economic history, the medieval Hansa (alternately known as Hanse or Hanseatic League). My dissertation chapters show that network theory and social network analysis can make great contributions in key areas of historical sociology like institutional change. By specifying relational mechanisms and processes in combination with the analysis of primary data, network approaches offer a good alternative to institutional approaches in economics, economic history and sociology.

In the first paper, I give an overview of features and benefits of social network analysis for economic history, summarize best practice studies from historical analytical sociology, illustrate network concepts and methods using the Hansa case, and offer a case study of one of the oldest systematic trade records from Northern Europe. The analysis of publicly registered trade partnerships in 14th century Lübeck, center of the medieval Hansa, shows a high prevalence in kinship ties among traders and potential changes in trade partner selection. Micro-level structures in the economic organization of Northern Europe show surprising similarities to the wealthier Southern European city-states.

Dealing with a coinciding time period, my second paper analyzes the emergence of the medieval Hansa after the Black Death. Using some of the oldest relational datasets from Northern Europe, including elite kinship networks and agency relations established in last wills and testaments, I apply network analyses to show how individuals responded to the most deadly plague in human history and established unprecedented amounts of ties across trade groups and political organizations. Thus, network coping after external shocks may set the stage for organizational innovation by activating preexisting relations and establishing new formalized relations. I hypothesize that institutional entrepreneurs generated a more formalized and persistent collaborative group, the Hansa, resulting from recombinations of practices from politics and the legal domain triggered by participation in overlapping small group rituals.

Jumping to the early 16th century, my third paper investigates how economic and political actors contributed to important religious institutional change, namely the early diffusion of the Protestant Reformation. Using participation data from the Hansa Diets, I find that historical embeddedness of Hansa towns likely reduced some of the uncertainty related to risky collective action and thereby contributed to the success of the early Reformation in Northern Europe. Statistical analyses show that a combination of strong and weak ties fostered complex diffusion in early modern Northern Europe. The history of social networks (e.g. past collaborations, alliances, and the prospect of future interactions) is likely an important feature of social organization with profound implications for economic and institutional development.

People Involved: Bernd Wurpts
Adviser(s): Katherine Stovel, Edgar Kiser, Steve Pfaff
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Department of Sociology · University of Washington · 211 Savery Hall, Box 353340 · Seattle, WA 98195-3340
Main Office: (206) 543-5882 · Student Services: (206) 543-5396 · Fax (206) 543-2516 · Email: uwsoc@uw.edu

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