

## **Wrap-up of the ‘European external trade statistics, 1700-1830’-workshop Lille, 11-12 March 2001**

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This was the kind of workshop – I didn’t need to present a paper – where you think you can sit down in the room, quite confident of yourself, your research, your sources, your methodology, what you achieved with them and what you are bound to discover in the future. You look at the others and wait for them to tell a story, and if you are in the mood, ask some questions.

It was quite clear from the beginning that it wasn’t going to be a workshop like this at all. The complexity of the questions, the difficulties of combining what should be coherent results, the complicated structure of databases, and above all of trade patterns (Bordeaux wine transiting through the US and Haiti to get to Denmark), showed that it concerned everyone working with eighteenth century trade statistics. It was without doubt a high quality workshop with excellent papers.

The sheer size of this project, that is to combine and compare trade data across Europe, is enough to make every researcher think twice before embarking on a journey like this. There are numerous difficulties and obstacles ahead, and several authors had to use terms as ghost ships, ghost cargo, and even ... ghost sources, to describe hidden trade patterns. It was indeed one of those opportunities when one could wonder if we were not chasing ghosts?

Perhaps, but it remained nevertheless a workshop with a lot of interesting questions, which made us think and discuss. It brought us closer to answers, but nearly all of these answers were followed by many more unanswered questions. But it made us think, and this is definitely worth something!

So, what do the paper-givers have in common? And in what way does their papers differ from the other papers? I think all papers had in common that their authors collected data on external trade. But it was quite clear from the beginning that not all authors did this for the same reason.

It depends a lot on where a paper-giver was from. Our Polish colleague, Szymon Kazusek, is quite clear about it: “Foreign trade [...] has not been a subject of a distinct and thorough study in Polish historiography so far”. Javier Cuenca-Esteban, on the other hand, could look on an already well-established theme. But he noticed something awkward, an overlooked and intriguing gap. Apparently large numbers of ships leaving Britain for the US did not arrive there. These ghost ships did not disappear in the Atlantic, but were furnishing Latin America with all kinds of British products. Guillaume Daudin, Loïc Charles and Ann Coenen have stressed the importance of comparing the data of two neighbouring countries, France and the Austrian Netherlands (nowadays Belgium) to see if the exports of one country matched the imports of the other. In their research, the balance of trade played an important role. Can it surprise us when – quoting an eighteenth century letter – the French were known to have both Colbert and protectionism in their veins. The Belgian customs department immensely admired this French statesman and modelled its administration according to his principles. British historians, or those studying Britain, like David Jacks, are indeed spoiled. The British have had great trade data available for decades, and after solving price issues recently, they can move forward and reflect on issues like the dominance of British trade, Allen’s ‘high wage – cheap energy’-gradient, or the Great Divergence between Europe – or should we say – Britain and the rest of the world, etc.

So everybody is doing something different. Does it matter? I don't think so, it is the logic of historical sciences. What is however important, is that we cooperate with each other, that we connect our research with that of others. It is in everyone's interest, since sooner or later somebody will want to connect Christina Moreira's Portuguese data with the Walachian tariffs discovered by Cristian Luca.

I'm quite confident it is possible, although the task is certainly not an easy one. But we have to admit, and recognise that we probably are the first generation of historians capable of achieving such a project. Today we have tools that former generations could only dream of. I'm thinking for instance of easy-to-use databases accessible to all by internet. Internet itself, making it possible to communicate very quickly and cheaply with everybody else, is of tremendous help for international projects today. There is no excuse today not to cooperate internationally.

The above-mentioned possibilities of the British case have also created expectations for other scientists. French economists and econometrists are clearly looking for help from historians to find suitable data for their complicated calculations (even if they insist these are quite easy). Jérôme Héricourt's, Jean-Jacques Nowak's and Michel Fourquin's call for assistance, not only shows that cooperation can be multi-disciplinary, but also that historians can make a difference.

This brings us to the actual problems researchers face when interlinking data of several trade statistics. The external trade statistics are different for each country, they might even differ from one region to another in the same country. For instance, in Austrian Netherlands' statistics the destinations were not specified; in France, historians have to deal with partial records, both chronologically and geographically, and in the core areas of the Habsburg Empire there are immense difficulties with the prices, as Klemens Kaps pointed out.

The number of relevant questions is impressing. Do we use local prices, or central prices? What about smuggling, as Giovanna Tonelli asked? Which currency, measures, etc. do we use? Even those things which might look similar to all of us, might be different for each country, or even each region. This is for instance the case with the nomenclature of products. A product with a similar name in Venice and in the Dutch Republic, might be something totally different as both Andrea Caracausi and Werner Scheltjens pointed out. The creation of a more general and especially standardised dictionary of products is a must for the success of this project. In any way choices will have to be made. These choices will have to be sound, reasonable, rational and understandable, since they will never please all of us at the same time. I'm not going to insist on these issues. We know they exist, and if we want to work together, we will have to deal with them in a coherent and consistent way.

I would also like to make some general comments on the different papers and on a few things I noticed.

A first issue, is what I have called a scale of sources. One of the main themes of this workshop was to compare the external trade data of for instance two countries. The presentation on the comparison of France and the Austrian Netherlands – a work in progress – is a good example. Nevertheless, the existing comparisons between Britain and the US, as Javier Cuenca-Esteban pointed out, showed that gaps exist and that other sources are needed. Ship movements are essential in this case, according to Silvia Marzagalli. In this sense, her invitation to link the 'European external trade statistics'-project with other projects, like the 'Navigocorpus'-project and the 'Sont toll'-project is well worth considering, since it brings in new independent sources. I welcome this, well aware that new methodological problems will arise when including these sources.

A second issue, is that although we mostly look at Europe, we must not forget that this continent does not stand alone. Several conjunctures and trade patterns which affect European trade patterns find their solution on the other side of our planet, as Alejandra Irigoin rightly pointed out.

The third and final issue arises from my own research. I'm speaking of the duality which exists between, what I have termed: maritime and continental nations. I wonder if this duality is the result of national historical traditions, historiography, or if it really played a role in the development of European trade reflected in the external trade statistics. Of the papers given, I would call Britain, the US, Portugal, the Dutch Republic and Venice maritime states. In the continental group we find the Habsburg Empire (which includes independent cases as the Austrian Netherlands and Lombardy), Poland and perhaps France (although much less clear).

It is not a black/white outline. Some continental nations have harbours, for instance the Austrian Netherlands with Ostend, and the Habsburg Empire with Trieste, while maritime nations have land borders, for instance Portugal. The divide is certainly not always clear, but it struck me that Christina Moreira called the Portuguese customs stations with Spain, dry ports. Is this duality – as I said previously – based on historical and historiographical traditions, or is it more deep-rooted? In any way, I noticed that few papers connected maritime and continental trade, and the few that did, did not pursue this aspect. I have some difficulties in believing that both maritime and continental trade were unconnected to this point. The preponderance of maritime trade in Britain can be easily understood, in Portugal to some point, but not for cities as Amsterdam and Gdansk. Both cities were gateways giving access to Central Europe respectively by way of the river Rhine and the Vistula. Simon Kazusek made this clear for Gdansk. Werner Scheltjens pointed out that the few existing Dutch sources more or less viewed Amsterdam's trade as that of the whole Dutch Republic. This in turn clearly showed that Dutch historians turn their back on continental trade. The German sources regarding the trade on the river Rhine show this is a too unilateral approach. In any case this is a good place to raise the issue of transshipment (maritime trade?) and transit (continental trade?).

This maritime/continental duality continues in the different papers. Again I was struck by the fact that maritime states Britain, Portugal and the Dutch Republic (although problematically as explained above) gave a much more national overview of their external trade, than their continental counterparts. These last countries gave a much more fractured and regional analysis of their international trade, for instance France and the Habsburg Empire. Does it have to do with the state's degree of centralisation and state power? It is certainly not always clear.

There is also a clear difference between the way authors look at the role of the state. Continental authors have looked much more and with much more detail at the institutional role of the state, the bureaucracy that organised the external trade statistics and even at the politicians who steered their administration towards data collecting. Why is this missing in the papers on maritime countries? Again, does this have to do with historical and historiographical traditions, or is there something else going on?

In any way, continental authors focussed much more on the state's international trade policy than did authors from what I have called the maritime states. Is it because less quantitative data was available in continental states that the authors focussed on other aspects? It might be true for Lombardy and Walachia, but the amount of quantitative data – even if gaps exist – in France, the Habsburg Empire and Poland seems to contradict this. Neither is it possible to say that maritime states did not have an international trade policy. The ruling economic paradigm in the eighteenth century, that is mercantilism and protectionism,

prevailed – in various degrees – all over Europe. Wasn't the English Act of Navigation a masterpiece of protectionism?

In a continent where such economic paradigms ruled, I have to side with Silvia Marzagalli that there was no such thing as peace in trade in the eighteenth century. When states did not shoot and stab at each other, they waged a ruthless economic war through their international trade policies. This must also have had an impact on the data.

The work-shop and the wrap-up alike are full of questions and remarks. Without any doubt many more questions and remarks can be made. It shows that huge problems, both methodological and logistical (and surely also financial), still lie ahead. The project that our French colleagues have put in motion is enormously ambitious, for one thing, because it is mainly *terra incognita*. But this is what research and our work is about. Together we can succeed.