ANR AGENCE NATIONALE DE LA RECHERCHE

SciencesPo

Workshop
Classifying international trade before 1945
Classifier le commerce international avant 1945
September 16th 2016
Salle Goguel
SciencesPo, 27 rue Saint Guillaume[1]
75007 Paris

The long history of globalization is blessed with a comparative abundance of data. Foreign trade has long been a sizable source of income for states and the latter have been careful in collecting information on it: series on international trade starting in the eighteenth century exist for several countries and regions such as England, France, Sweden, the Austrian Netherlands, Venice, Portugal, Spain. (Charles et Daudin 2015). The Sound records go back even further. Hence, much information on past economies may be gained through the systematic collection of these data. This calls for the creation of large databases and there are a number of active projects, under different states of readiness: Ireland, Norway, UK, World, France, Germany, the Sound... The identification and classification of commodities is at the core of any project that want to use these databases for comparative analysis or even to simply use the information collected to its potential.

For example, in the French case, there are more than 45,000 different merchandises mentioned in the 18ᵗʰ century sources (for 400,000 trade flows). Correcting for mistakes made by the original scribes and the person in charge of the transcription brings that number down to 20,000. Further identifying synonyms brings it down to 16,000. It is however necessary to devise some sort of aggregation process to be able to use the data collected to answer a wider set of economic history issues such as those linked to the question of trade diversification, intra-industry trade and revealed comparative advantages.

An additional difficulty is international comparison. There are more problems linked to it than the sole issue of translation. The creation of internationally comparable merchandise classification was a long process starting only in the late 19ᵗʰ century (Kolesnikoff 1953) and it is still a work in progress. Yet, it is central to any comparison process.

Choosing a classification to categorize commodities should meet several criteria: it has to be informed by past practices of recording flows (which are different from one place and one

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[1] **Through the garden, elevators to the left.**

time to another), the characteristics of the past society/economy where trade took place, convenience (as classifying goods is hard work), and the research issue. Among the possible options are: 1. the adaptation of modern nomenclatures, which have a great level of detail, accuracy and comparability, but hardly relates to the economic issues of past societies; or 2. the creation of a tailor-made historical nomenclature, which takes into account the historical context of commercial exchange but begs the issue of intertemporal (and often geographical) comparisons. Moreover, creating a nomenclature takes a lot of time in particular if one wants to produce disaggregated categories. A flexible system of classification that can be integrated in data exploration in order to be able to create detailed categorization for specific purposes within a reasonable amount of time and resources would be ideal. But that requires to invest a substantial amount of work in the creation of sophisticated digital tools, as endeavored by the project TOFLIT18 (http://toflit18.hypotheses.org/).

Program

9.00-10.45   What can classifications of goods teach us ?

Wolf-Fabian Hungerland (Humboldt) «Making historical international trade data useful: German product-level data from 1880 to 1913 and the Standard International Trade Classification (SITC)» .Co-author: Chris Altmeppen

Ana Carreras Marin (Barcelona) «Standardization of Latin American trade statistics. Sources and methodology for a study on the diversification of export baskets» Co-authors: M. Badia-Miró and A. Rayes

Michael Huberman (Montréal) «Domestic and International Trade in Interwar Brazil: Complements or Substitutes? »

11.00-12.00   Early stages of data collection

Aidan Kane (Galway) "Customs 15: constructing a database of Ireland's international trade 1698-1784"

David Jacks (Simon Fraser) "British Trade Statistics, 1700-1899"

1.30-3.00   Struggling with the classification of goods (1)

Bertrand Blancheton (Bordeaux) "Choosing a product nomenclature: the French case 1836-1938"

Ragnhild Hutchinson (University of Oslo and Norwegian Institute of Local history) "The Norwegian customs project- classification and standardization- a practical solution?"

3.15-4.45   Struggling with the classification of goods (2)

Jan Willem Veluwenkamp   (Groningen) "Sound Toll Registers Online, 1497-1857. Standardisation and classification issues."

Pierre Gervais (Paris-3) "your 'goods' are not my 'products'; a preliminary methodological discussion of our instinctive belief in the permanence of things over time and of its unintended consequence."

5.00-6.00   Wrapping up

Loïc Charles (Paris-8) and Guillaume Daudin (Dauphine) : «Multi dimensional classification of goods in a datascape : the TOFLIT18 project»

General discussion and wrapping up

This event is open to all. It is funded by the ANR TOFLIT18 (http://toflit18.hypotheses.org/)

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References :

Charles, Loïc, et Guillaume Daudin, éd. 2015. « Eighteenth Century International Trade Statistics: Sources and Methods ». Revue de l'OFCE (Special Issue), **n° 140: 7–377.**

Kolesnikoff, Vladimir S. 1953. « Commodity classification ». In International Trade Statistics, **par R. G. D. Allen et J. Edwards Ely. New-York and London: John Wiley & Sons Inc. and Chapman & Hall, Limited.**