

FRANCE, c.1713-c.1821

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1. Coverage

This questionnaire discusses the trade statistics available for France over the “long” eighteenth-century. The systematic collection of trade data by a specialized institution – the *bureau de la balance du commerce* – began in 1713 and continued throughout the whole period. However, information on trade flows was available before this date, and at least one table of imports for the year 1671 has survived in the French national archives.³ Conversely, there are many *lacunae*. In particular, it seems that several years were never documented in the 1780s and early 1790s (1781, 1783 to 1786, 1790-1791 and 1793-1794).⁴ Yet even for these years, some tables still survive with detailed data on exchanges with French colonies, the United States of America and England, among other trading partners; and they provide a general estimate of the trade value for each partner as well. Hence, it may be possible to draw on multiple sources and reconstruct satisfactory estimates of French external trade for these years.

The geographical unit known as “France” which is covered by the set of data produced by the Bureau changed over time, although marginally. During the *Ancien Régime*, the fiscal frontiers did not correspond to the political borders of the French kingdom. The main differences were:

- Free port trade, such as in Dunkirk, was excluded. Only the general value of exports and imports going through “Dunkerque” was given before 1787.

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- The *provinces réputées étrangères* were also excluded: Alsace, Lorraine and Trois-Évêchés.

At the end of the *Ancien Régime*, efforts were made to reintegrate these areas into the French statistics. They were partly successful, since the significant port of Dunkirk was reintegrated in 1787. Alsace as well was at least partly reintegrated at that time, but the move was still incomplete when the French Revolution broke out. It was therefore only when the balance of trade was taken over by the *ministère de l'Intérieur*, in 1792, that the political and customs frontiers were aligned.

Likewise, the designation of the French trade partners evolved over time. Prior to 1733, the “Nord” was a general category that included all trade with locations situated north of the Low Countries on the European continent. In 1733, the category “Danemark” was created to register trade with an area that encompassed modern Denmark and Norway. In 1734, “Suède” was detached from the “Nord” to form a specific geographical unit in the balance of trade records. This territory corresponded more or less to modern Sweden and Finland, as well as a small piece of land in Western Pomerania; however, it is difficult to say if trade with this region was actually included in Swedish trade by French authorities. In 1744, the “Nord” was further disaggregated when the category “Russie” was created. Finally, when the Bureau of the Balance of Trade was reorganized in the early 1780s, the category disappeared altogether and was replaced by three new geographical units: “Royaume de Prusse”, “Les villes Hanséatiques” and “L’Allemagne et la Pologne”. The same process happened in respect to trade between France and Italy. Up to 1757, Italian trade was subsumed under two categories “Savoie et Piémont” and “Italie”. From 1758 on, the Bureau added three more categories: “Naples and Sicile”, “Gênes” and “Venise”. As in the case of the “Nord” category, “Italie” disappeared in the early 1780s and was disaggregated into “États ecclésiastiques” and “Toscane”. Other significant changes throughout the latter part of the eighteenth-century include the creation of the “Indes orientales” category in the aftermath of the collapse of the French East-India Trading Company (1769) and the creation of the geographical unit “États-Unis d’Amérique” in 1779. The year 1789 is notable as the beginning of a period marked by conflicts and multiple changes in the borders of the French republic (and later in the Empire), that complicate the task of statisticians: the changes are too numerous to be described in detail here. It was only after the Congress of Vienna in 1815 that the list of partners stabilized again to settle on a total number of 21 trade partners.

2. Documents

The Bureau of the Balance of Trade managed or produced several series of documents. At the local level, bureaus of the *Ferme générale* (General Farm), the private company in charge of collecting the customs taxes, sent to the Paris bureau each month a detailed list of the goods that passed through their office, whether they came from or were destined beyond French borders. These documents were usually destroyed after a few months or years, and only a handful of them survived in the French National Archives (such as the one provided in Fig. 1). The Bureau used information provided by the local offices of the Farm to establish documents called *récapitulations*, which listed all the imports and exports for each *Direction de Ferme* over the course of a whole year.⁵ These documents were then forwarded to the Chambers of Commerce, who had to either check the prices given by the General Farm or supply them when none were given.⁶ A large part of these documents were kept in the Archives of the Chambers of Commerce and are still in existence. As soon as the merchants' assemblies had finished their task, they sent a copy of the *récapitulations* to the Bureau of the Balance of Trade. Before 1745, the Bureau did little with them aside from computing the figures for the total balance of trade. From 1745 to 1752, the Bureau added another set of documents that listed exports by partners. They called these exports *Objets* and assigned one *Objet* to each partner. From 1752 on, the Bureau replaced the several *Objets* with an *Objet général du commerce de la France avec l'Étranger*, which synthesized all trade coming from and going to the metropolitan area. The flows were listed in alphabetical order of commodity names. There was little evolution before 1780, when the Bureau was reformed (see section 3 below).

After 1780, the main change was that exchanges were interrupted between the Bureau and the Chambers of Commerce. The General Farm was now in control of the whole process. Until 1788, the form of the main document produced by the Bureau did not change. However, after 1787, it also produced a new synthesis called the *Résumé général*. This new document was a printed double-entry table that replaced the

5. A *Direction de Ferme* corresponds more or less to a *Généralité*, which is the main geographical unit used by the French royal administration. In 1789, there were about 25 Directions.

6. Chambers of commerce (*Chambres de commerce*) were institutions composed of merchants that regulated and represented the interests of merchant communities at the local level. The first chambers were established in free ports such as Marseille and Dunkerque, but they were subsequently created in most of the important commercial cities such as Amiens, Bayonne, Bordeaux, Le Havre, Lille, Lyons, Nantes, Rouen, etc. The only exception was Paris, which had no chamber of commerce before 1803.

manuscript one. It did not list all the individual goods, like the *Objet général* did, but instead bundled goods together under categories such as “Fish of all kinds” (*Poissons de toutes sortes*) or “Various woods” (*Bois divers*). From the mid-1780s on, the Bureau started to produce additional statistical documents on specific locations. For instance, they detailed the flows to and from individual colonies, and they specified types of flows such as specie flows and ship movements. In parallel to the *Objet* and the *Résumé*, the Bureau also created much more detailed documents that disaggregated flows by points of entry and exit on French territory, and they provided further information on the origins of exported goods. During this period, the Bureau also started collecting very precise information on colonial trade and re-exports. After the 1789 statistics, the Bureau cut through most of this. For 1792 and 1793, it printed documents with detailed information on individual goods and ship movements but provided only limited information on partners or the value of goods. It is only in 1797 that it succeeded in resuming the publication of a yearly *Résumé général*. However, the Bureau waited until 1816 to once again provide more precise information on individual goods; although it was unable to produce as much data on trade flows as before 1789. The last *Résumé général* recorded trade for 1821. The publications for the period 1822 to 1826 did not include bilateral trade per product. That information was again provided in the *Tableau Décennal du Commerce de la France*.

3. Institutional setting

The production of information on trade flows was conducted by three different institutions. First, the raw data were collected by 230 local bureaus of the General Farm, a private company to whom the government leased the right to collect duties and taxes. After 1780, the numbers of bureaus went up to 521. By eighteenth-century standards, the Farm was a gigantic organization that employed thousands of men. After 1791 and the suppression of the Farm, the customs administration was taken up by the *ministère de l'Intérieur*.

The second institution that played a role in collecting foreign trade information during the *Ancien Régime* was the Ministry of the Navy. Foreign trade was formerly under the responsibility of the French Navy. In fact, it played only a limited role in collecting data before the opening of French colonial trade in the mid-1780s. After the French colonies were granted the right to trade directly with the other European American colonies as well as the United States of America in 1784, the Navy took over the task of measuring these exchanges. The

reason is simple: the General Farm did not have any office in the colonies and the flows to and from the American colonies that did not go through metropolitan France could only be measured by the port authorities, who fell under the jurisdiction of the Minister of the Navy.

The third institution that played a significant role in the making of the balance of trade was the control-general of finances, which is the central economic administration of the kingdom. Prior to 1777, the Bureau of the Balance of Trade was under the direct stewardship of the Director of Trade. In fact, the director of the Bureau was the first *commis* (secretary) of the Director of Trade, who was also one of the four Intendants of Finance.⁷ During this period, the Bureau was a small unit with two to four employees. Necker was the Controller-General of Finances in all but name, and when he terminated the offices of the Intendants of Finance, it was he who took the Bureau under his administrative arm. From 1781 on, the director of the Bureau was the Intendant of Foreign Trade, again someone under the direct supervision of the Controller-General of Finances. In parallel, the size of the Bureau grew steadily from seven individuals in 1784 to about fifteen in 1789.

The structure changed again in 1788, and the directorship of the Bureau of the Balance of Trade was now an independent function held by an expert in the production of economic and financial data, but with no significant political role. From 1789 to 1795, the human resources of the Bureau were cut drastically, from fifteen to only five persons. In 1792, the Bureau was put under the sole supervision of the *Ministère de l'intérieur*. This situation continued throughout the Empire and the Restauration with little change.

4. Motivations

Creating a bureau for the balance of trade was a product of Louis XIV's mercantilist state. During the negotiations of the Treaty of Utrecht (1713), the French diplomats were impressed by the fact that the English (who had been computing their own balance of trade for about twenty years) had a clearer vision of their trade interests than the French. Hence, it was in the aftermath of the War of Spanish succession that the French royal government decided to compute an exact balance of trade on a yearly basis and to create a specific bureau to deal with this task. The Director of Trade also used the statistics produced

7. Intendants of Finance were second only to the Controller-General of Finances in the French economic administration.

by the Bureau to check the activity of the General Farm, and in particular the prices on which many duties were established.

In the 1780s, the agenda of the Bureau changed. Although, it continued to produce a yearly balance of French trade, it functioned more or less as an expert bureau on foreign trade and duties. In that role, it produced several reports throughout the 1780s, e.g. in order to study the French trade relations with the newborn United States of America. These reports were also intended to help prepare and evaluate important commercial policy reforms, such as the partial liberalization of colonial exchanges in 1785 and the free trade treaty with England in 1786. The widening of its expertise was such that it was able to produce detailed data on French navigation as well as to estimate French national revenue in 1789. Moreover, the wealth of data produced by the Bureau allowed Arnould (Vice-Director and then Director of the Bureau after 1792) to produce an impressive three-volume quantitative analysis of French eighteenth-century trade and economy in 1791. After the Revolution, the Bureau resumed its earlier agenda of concentrating most of its resources on measuring France's external trade balance.

5. Methods

The methods used by the Bureau to compute the balance of trade can be detailed as follows. The local employees of the Farm registered the flow of goods on specific sheets. They itemized: individual names; the quantities and values of the commodities; the destinations and origins of the goods; and the foreign partners who imported or exported the goods. At the end of each month, each local bureau forwarded its sheet(s) to a *bureau principal*, such as Saint-Jean de Luz (which was near the Spanish border and under the *Direction* of Bayonne), where they synthesized the data into a document like the one shown in Figure 1. This document was sent to the Bureau of the Balance of Trade in Paris, who created *Récapitulations*, i.e., a small booklet that listed all the flows coming to and going out of a *Direction* during the course of one year. Up to 1781, the Bureau sent these summaries to the particular Chamber of Commerce pertaining to each *Direction*, so that they could evaluate the prices of the goods. After this operation, which usually took a few months, the *Récapitulations* were sent back to Paris, where the Bureau verified and aggregated the regional data in order to produce national documents. During the first period ending in 1751, the Bureau produced several *objets*, each one of them pertaining to a single country or region. Each *objet* comprised anywhere from a few to several dozen pages, depending on the impor-

tance of the trading partner. After 1751, the Bureau produced a single yearly synthetic document, an *objet général*, which compiled all the information on French external trade flows. We have not found any *objet* that predates those of 1749.

After 1781, a gradual change occurred in the Bureau’s procedures and methods. First, beginning in 1782, the merchants were no longer solicited to provide prices: this task was taken over by the General Farm. In 1785, the implementation of a new tax regime in the colonial trade (the so-called *exclusif mitigé*) resulted in several French Caribbean ports being granted the right to trade directly with other European American colonies as well as with the newborn United States of America. As the General Farm had no bureau in the Caribbean, these flows had to be recorded by the Navy administration.

Figure 1. Sheet for Bureau principal de Saint-Jean de Luz, Direction of Bayonne, July 1790

DIRECTION DE BAYONNE. BALANCE DU

BUREAU de quartier ~~MOIS~~ DE juillet

NOM des MARCHANDISES	DÉSIGNATION de	PAYS ET PAYS de FRANCE	ESTATS des États en dépendance	ETAT de	MARRES de	ÉTAT de	DÉPART de
<i>Sucres.</i>	<i>Sucres.</i>	<i>St. Jean de Luz.</i>	<i>St. Jean de Luz.</i>	<i>St. Jean de Luz.</i>	<i>St. Jean de Luz.</i>		
<i>Indes.</i>	<i>Indes.</i>	<i>Indes.</i>	<i>Indes.</i>	<i>Indes.</i>	<i>Indes.</i>		
<i>Cafés.</i>	<i>Cafés.</i>	<i>Cafés.</i>	<i>Cafés.</i>	<i>Cafés.</i>	<i>Cafés.</i>		
<i>Piments.</i>	<i>Piments.</i>	<i>Piments.</i>	<i>Piments.</i>	<i>Piments.</i>	<i>Piments.</i>		
<i>Huiles.</i>	<i>Huiles.</i>	<i>Huiles.</i>	<i>Huiles.</i>	<i>Huiles.</i>	<i>Huiles.</i>		

Certifié véritable par nous Receveur et Contrôleur des Fermes de St. Jean de Luz le 21 Juillet 1790.

Source: Document from the Archives Nationales de France, F12 1668

6. Information

Except for 1792, all the documents produced by the Bureau of the Balance of Trade convey information regarding: (a) trading partners; (b) the names of the commodities carried; and (c) the total values of the individual flows of goods. The regional *récapitulations* provide three additional pieces of information, which were: (d) the recorded prices of the exported and imported commodities; (e) the quantities of commodities exchanged; and (f) the French region with which the foreign partner traded.

The national *Objets* did not give the same information. Up to 1751, they did indicate (f), and some documents from a later period (1782-1790) also conveyed this information.⁸ However, during the in-between period, they did not specify regions of departure/arrival for the commodities. Likewise, individual prices and quantities are absent from the national *Objets* between the years 1752 and 1770. From the early 1780s on, detailed data on navigation was also put on record, as well as details on re-exports of colonial products. Moreover, some information on monetary flows was also provided. After 1790, the information was much less precise, in that it indicated only categories of commodities rather than individual names. Furthermore, flow values were summarized and neither prices nor quantities were specified.

Exports were valued *free on board*, while imports included the cost of freight, insurance and custom duties for the whole period. Some sort of remuneration for the merchant was probably also included, but this issue warrants further research.

7. Availability

The sources are widely dispersed throughout France and even Europe. During the Revolution, the General Farm was terminated and its archives almost completely destroyed. Hence, many of the sources of information on the French balance of trade are not in the French National Archives, even though it is one of the primary repositories. All the regional sources were kept in the archives of their corresponding chambers of commerce. Some chambers gave several of them to various departmental archives, such as those in Bayonne, Bordeaux, La Rochelle, Montpellier and Nantes; while in a few other cases, the chambers kept their own archives, such as in Marseille, Rouen and Lyon. The national documents are dispersed in four different locations. First, there

8. A few of them even gave more precise information.

are those in the F12 series of the French National Archives. This first set has been known by historians for a long time and contains data from the second half of the 1770s onward, but there is little on the earlier period. However, this lack of sources can be partially overcome by using the other three sets of archives. One is the Gournay papers, where there is data on 1749, 1750 and 1751, although only 1750 is complete. Another is the Fonds Montbret at the municipal library of Rouen, which contains papers for several years from the 1750s and 1760s. The third one is a collection deposited in Amsterdam. It contains some of the papers pertaining to Bruyard and his son, who were, respectively, the Director of the Bureau of the Balance of Trade from the 1750s to 1780 and Inspector General of Manufactures in the 1780s. It contains several years from the 1760s and 1770s. Besides those, there are other smaller collections that fill in some of the gaps just mentioned. For example, the French National Library has a small number of 1749 *Objets* in the Trudaine papers, which complete those found in the Gournay papers. The French National Overseas Archives also has several documents that complete the F12 files.

8. Research questions

The economic conditions that allowed France to enter the modern industrial era arose during the period being studied by the project TOFLIT18 (1716-1821).⁹ Yet we do not know enough about it. For the study of 18th century France, it would be useful to go beyond the strategies employed by ISEA and the *Annales* tradition by using quantitative data that the *Bureau de la Balance du Commerce* has produced. The point of using this series is twofold. On the one hand, these data are of a macroeconomic nature: they can supplement the available quantitative macroeconomic reconstructions and allow us to better understand the transformations of the French economy. For example, we can compare the “revealed relative advantages” of the French economy with those of other European countries (e.g., Britain and Belgium/Austrian Netherlands). On the other hand, a significant part of the local data synthesized by the *Bureau de la Balance du Commerce* are still available in the regional French Archives (e.g., Bayonne, Bordeaux, La Rochelle, Marseille, Nantes, Rouen, etc.), and they can be used to better understand the economic linkage between local/regional economies, international trade and the national economy. The existence of local data opens up the possibility of providing an economic analysis that

9. For an overview of the projet TOFLIT18, see: toflit18.hypotheses.org/

uses a rigorous framework to link different geographical levels: international, national, regional, and local, as well as individual actors.

Before the Revolution, France was not a custom union. The *Bureau de la Balance du commerce* treated the trade statistics of some provinces (especially Alsace and Lorraine) as if they were of foreign countries. This was also the case for the French colonies. Despite not being in the custom union, some other provinces – including most free ports (except Dunkirk) – were treated as domestic French trading partners. This complexity should allow us to deepen our understanding of the specific trade impact of political borders versus custom borders, especially as we might have the occasion to cross-check France's external trade data with other country statistics (especially Britain and the Austrian Netherlands).

Another objective would be to deepen our knowledge of economic phenomena as they pertain to specific issues: economic development, transformation and the determinants of international trade.¹⁰

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10. See "the introduction to this volume" for a more specific discussion of possible research questions linked to these three issues.

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