

D'haeninck, T., Hengchen, S. and Verbruggen, C., 'A genealogy of causes': recognizing social reform topics in 19th century congress series

Abstract

Between 1840 and 1914 more than 1500 congresses were organised where a variety of social causes were discussed by a heterogeneous group of social experts, politicians and other intelligentsia. These international congresses can be seen as laboratories of new expert knowledge.¹ They were – par excellence – the sites where scientists, administrators, politicians, artists and others reform-minded elites of different countries met and exchanged ideas.² In earlier research we have indicated a (strong) presence of Low Country reformers at these congresses as well as strong shared patterns of congress visits which engendered networks of knowledge exchange³ and thus gave rise to a social and discursive field related to social reform.⁴

Topic modeling and text mining seem to us interesting technics to recognize social reform topics and to create a genealogy of social causes. In this paper we explore a corpus of over 151 French reports of international congresses, good for more than 41 000 pages of scanned text (OCR). In this presentation we will explore two approaches to quantitatively analyse the corpus. First, we run Mallet in order to detect “meaningful” topics in the corpus. Second, we used Antconc (a freeware corpus analysis toolkit for concordancing and text analysis) in order to explore the occurrence of one selected topic in a selection of congress series. The aim of doing these approaches is to ascertain the potential but also recognize the difficulties and limitations of these digital approaches to explore a considerably large corpus of texts. To what extent enable quantitative textual approaches to recognize social reform topics in 19th century congress series?

¹ Nico Randeraad, “The International Statistical Congress (1853–1876): Knowledge Transfers and their Limits”, *European History Quarterly* 1, nr. 41 (januari 2011): 50–65.

² Marie-Sylvie Dupont-Bouchat, “du tourisme pénitentiaire à l'internationale des philanthropes”. La création d'un réseau pour la protection de l'enfance à travers les congrès internationaux (1840-1914)”, *Paedagogica Historica* 2–3, nr. 38 (2002): 553–63.; Chris Leonards, “Ter bestrijding van armoede, misdaad, oorlog en immoraliteit; Europese congrescultuur in de negentiende en vroege twintigste eeuw vanuit filantropisch perspectief”, *Filantropie in Nederland; Voorbeelden uit de periode 1770-2020*, 2007: 49–62.

³ Thomas D'haeninck, Nico Randeraad, and Christophe Verbruggen, “Visualizing Longitudinal Data: Rooted Cosmopolitans in the Low Countries, 1850-1914”, in *CEUR Workshop Proceedings*, vol. 1399 (First Conference on Biographical Data in a Digital World 2015, CEUR WS, 2015), 116–21, <http://hdl.handle.net/1854/LU-6883896>.

⁴ Christian Topalov, “Les ‘réformateurs’ et leurs réseaux : enjeux d'un objet de recherche”, in *Laboratoires du nouveau siècle. La nébuleuse réformatrice et ses réseaux en France (1880-1914)* (Paris: Editions de l'École des hautes études en sciences sociales, 1999): 11–58; Chris Leonards and Nico Randeraad, “Transnational Experts in Social Reform, 1840–1880”, *International Review of Social History* 55, nr. 2 (2010): 215–39.; Pierre-Yves Saunier, “La secrétaire générale, l'ambassadeur et le docteur. Un conte en trois épisodes pour les historiens du ‘monde des causes’ à l'époque contemporaine, 1800-2000.”, *Monde(s). Histoire, Espaces, Relations* 1, nr. 1 (2012): 29–47.; Chris Leonards and Nico Randeraad, “Building a transnational network in the 19th century: Work and Social Reform in a European Perspective”, in *Shaping the Transnational Sphere (c. 1850-1930)*, bewerkt door Davide Rodogno, Jakob Vogel, en Bernhard Struck (Oxford ; New York: Berghahn Books, 2014).