
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 extend enable quantitative textual approaches to recognize social reform topics in 19th century congress series?


