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‘A rethinking of Labrousse’s analyses of wheat price movements in eighteenth-century France: Labrousse versus Labrousse?’

The transformation of French historical methodology that Ernest Labrousse (1895-1988) brought about during the interwar period was something of an epistemological: he employed statistical tools drawn from economic analysis to construct new models for historical interpretation (Borghetti 2002, Caron, 1990). He therefore furthered the study of quantitative history, giving it the task of explaining social dynamics and, more specifically, the history of the kingdom of France during the eighteenth century, paying particular attention to the objective causes of the French Revolution (Borghetti, 2002, p. 16).

Nonetheless, at this Labroussian moment there are some discrepancies between the contrasting arguments advanced in his first two works, leading him to advance two different explanations of the French Revolution. In the thesis that he defended in 1932 and published in 1933 as *l'Esquisse du mouvement des prix et des revenus en France au XVIII^e siècle* a rise in cereal prices will affect distinct social groups in different ways. These trends, coupled with the progressive deterioration of the peasant economy, would tend to explain the occurrence of the Revolution (Borghetti, 2002, p. 30). The rise in grain prices is therefore considered to be one of the causes of the French Revolution.

Coming back to this in 1944 with *La crise de l'économie française à la fin de l'Ancien Régime et au début de la Révolution*, Labrousse put forward a rather different explanation. Taking greater account of the ideas of the Physiocrats and the analysis of writers favourable to the liberalisation of the grain trade, Labrousse established that the growth of agricultural prices in the long run was more an opportunity for French agriculture and the economy as a whole (1944, p. 149). Even more than in 1933, the "surge in price" of cereals (and more generally of agricultural prices) was treated as the symptom of a lengthy period of prosperity extending from 1733 to 1817, if not from 1726 to 1873. Logically, therefore, the possible economic causes of the Revolution change. Henceforth they would be located in the existence of an intercycle extending between 1778 and 1787 or perhaps 1791, breaking the trend of rising agricultural prices.

Here we would be faced with an "extraordinary" decline in a more general cycle of growth in agricultural prices over a (very) long 18th century. Labrousse then more particularly highlights the impact of the fall in the price of wine on the recession, emphasising that the sale of wine, unlike that of cereals, was the basis of peasant money income. Using contemporary data analysis and cliometrics, we propose to test different hypotheses that emerge from our reading of Labrousse (1933 and 1944). Like Labrousse, we do not have data relating to the production of wealth at the national level; this prevents us from studying the correlation of price and production, and forces us to restrict our analysis to price movements.