



THE LONDON SCHOOL
OF ECONOMICS AND
POLITICAL SCIENCE ■

“History, Culture and Popular Beliefs”

Hosted by the Department of Economic History with generous support from
the LSE Hayek Programme

Organizer: Melanie Meng Xue

14 July 2022

Schedule

- 9.00am Breakfast
- 9:30am Opening Remarks
Tim Besley (LSE)
- 9.40am **Flow of Ideas: Economic Societies and the Rise of Useful Knowledge**
Erik Hornung (University of Cologne)
Discussant: TBA
- 10.30am **High-Value Work and the Rise of Women: The Cotton Revolution and Gender Equality in China**
Melanie Meng Xue (LSE)
Discussant: TBA
- 11:20am Coffee Break
- 11.40am **Universalism: Global Evidence**
Benjamin Enke (Harvard)
Discussant: TBA
- 12:30pm Lunch
- 2.00pm **The Origin and Cultural Evolution of Taboos in Human Societies**
Kevin Hong (Harvard)
Discussant: TBA
- 2.50pm **Violence Against Suspected Witches in France, 1790-1940**
Will Pooley (Bristol)
Discussant: TBA
- 3:40pm Coffee Break
- 4.00pm **What We Teach About Race and Gender: Representation in Images and Text of Children’s Books**
Alex Eble (Columbia)
Discussant: TBA
- 4:50pm **Text Semantics Capture Political and Economic Narratives**
Elliott Ash (ETH Zurich)
Discussant: Noam Yuchtman
- 5:40 pm **Semantic Decomposition on Fairy Tale Tradition Networks: Toward a Method for Understanding Tradition Groups at Scale**
Timothy Tangherlini (Berkeley)
Discussant: TBA
- 7:00 pm Dinner

Abstracts

Elliott Ash (ETH Zurich):

Text Semantics Capture Political and Economic Narratives

Social scientists have become increasingly interested in how narratives -- the stories in fiction, politics, and life -- shape beliefs, behavior, and government policies. This paper provides an unsupervised method to quantify latent narrative structures in text documents. Our new software package RELATIO identifies coherent entity groups and maps explicit relations between them in the text. We provide an application to the United States Congressional Record to analyze political and economic narratives in recent decades. Our analysis highlights the dynamics, sentiment, polarization, and interconnectedness of narratives in political discourse.

Alex Eble (Columbia)

What We Teach About Race and Gender: Representation in Images and Text of Children's Books

Books shape how children learn about society and social norms, in part through the representation of different characters. To better understand the messages children encounter in books, we introduce new artificial intelligence methods for systematically converting images into data. We apply these image tools, along with established text analysis methods, to measure the representation of race, gender, and age in children's books commonly found in US schools and homes over the last century. We find that more characters with darker skin color appear over time, but "mainstream" award-winning books, which are twice as likely to be checked out from libraries, persistently depict more lighter-skinned characters even after conditioning on perceived race. Across all books, children are depicted with lighter skin than adults. Over time, females are increasingly present but are more represented in images than in text, suggesting greater symbolic inclusion in pictures than substantive inclusion in stories. Relative to their growing share of the US population, Black and Latinx people are underrepresented in the mainstream collection; males, particularly White males, are persistently overrepresented. Our data provide a view into the "black box" of education through children's books in US schools and homes, highlighting what has changed and what has endured.

Benjamin Enke (Harvard)

Universalism: Global Evidence

This paper studies the global variation in universalism through a series of hypothetical money allocation tasks deployed in nationally representative samples of 64,000 people from 60 countries. We document that (i) variation in universalism almost entirely reflects heterogeneity in people's moral principles regarding how to treat different types of relationships. (ii) Young, female, poor and atheist people are more universalist around the globe, while correlations with education and urbanicity are specific to rich Western nations. (iii) Individual-level heterogeneity in universalism is strongly predictive of civic engagement and a broad set of left-wing political views, in particular in the developed West. (iv) Universalism exhibits quantitatively large variation across countries, which is related to lower per capita income, Christianity, democracy and weak historical kinship ties. (v) Lifetime exposure analyses suggest that experiencing democracy leads to higher universalism

Kevin Hong (Harvard)

The Origin and Cultural Evolution of Taboos in Human Societies

Why do human societies have so many taboos and cultural prohibitions in general? In this talk, I offer a naturalistic account on the origin and transmission of taboos, drawing primarily from cognitive psychology and cultural evolution. I argue that taboos may

arise from our tendency to retrospectively attribute causes to misfortunes, and their imperfect transmission often leads to loss of the original rationale for the taboos, making them resemble mere cultural conventions. While this account does not explain all cultural prohibitions in human societies, it provides important insights on the psychological-social mechanisms by which taboos are generated in a bottom-up fashion. Towards the end of the talk, I offer a few suggestive thoughts on the relevance of studying taboos in contemporary, modern societies.

Eric Hornung (Cologne)

Flow of Ideas: Economic Societies and the Rise of Useful Knowledge

We argue that economic societies, established during the eighteenth-century, reduced the costs of accessing useful knowledge and thereby contributed to the technological progress central to the Industrial Revolution. We estimate a robust positive relationship between local member density and innovation, combining location information for the universe of 3,300 members across active economic societies in Germany with those of patent holders and World's Fair exhibitors. Further evidence indicates an immediate increase in manufacturing, an earlier establishment of vocational schools, and a higher density of skilled mechanical workers, constituting that mechanisms potentially work via agglomeration economies. We also show that regions with members from the same society had higher similarity in patenting, suggesting that social networks facilitated spatial knowledge diffusion and shaped the geography of innovation.

Will Pooley (Bristol)

Violence Against Suspected Witches in France, 1790-1940

Witchcraft did not disappear in Europe when courts stopped prosecuting 'witches'. In France, this decriminalization was relatively early (1682), and confirmed by the revolutionary law code of 1791. Yet, as historians have long known, the French courts continued to deal with conflicts over witchcraft long after decriminalization. Drawing on digitized newspapers and regional archives, I have built a database of more than a thousand cases touching on witchcraft in France between 1790-1940. This paper concentrates on a subset of 263 cases where suspected witches were attacked or threatened. In 70 of these cases, the 'witch' died of their injuries. The database reveals patterns in this violence that neither contemporaries nor historians have noticed before, from the prosopography of perpetrators and victims to the locations where violence was performed. Above all, there is a notable shift from elaborate rituals of torture and burning in the early nineteenth century, to dispassionate shootings after 1850.

Beyond the specific findings about violence and witchcraft in this period, the paper offers some reflections on the broader issues of using ethnographic or folklore source materials to compare long time periods and different regions, such as labelling. Patterns of violence against witches are not catalogued in newspaper indices or archival finding aids. Historians have often made good use of the categories of the state to chart patterns in violent crimes, but the cultural patterns of witchcraft conflicts are occulted in official categories. Newspaper accounts which did dwell on supernatural beliefs frequently misrepresented them. Some regions have better news coverage than others. Nor did contemporary folklorists have the familiarity – or the desire to gain familiarity – with the repertoires of popular violence to describe these accurately in their writings. The work of assembling and cataloguing cultural examples – as in my database – is always partial. Often, we do not know what we do not know, which poses significant problems to broad comparative approaches.

Close historical work with these primary sources induces a healthy scepticism about the relationship between any such records and wider practices. Some prosecutors and judicial officials tried to cover up the role of supernatural beliefs in criminal cases. Others zealously pursued crimes of ‘superstition’. Trial dossiers are filled with information about the active silencing of the historical record when it comes to shameful or divisive topics. Ambivalence reigns: few participants in violence against ‘witches’ could articulate why they did what they did. Many denied believing in ‘witches’ even after having killed the objects of their suspicion. Trial and news sources are filled with such silences, misdirection, and innuendo, because the meanings of violence were beyond linguistic expression.

The cultural patterns we discern in materials like this are constructions we impose onto imperfect source materials. How much do broad comparisons tell us about the past, and how much do they simply reveal our own research processes and the techniques of archiving and cataloguing they depend upon?

Tim Tangherlini (Berkeley)

Semantic Decomposition on Fairy Tale Tradition Networks: Towards a Method for Understanding Traditional Groups at Scale

While the ATU and Motif indices have been used for the study of small groups of folktales and their associated motifs, there has been little exploration of the broad affordances of describing an entire national or linguistic tradition through the tale-type and motif indexing of a large, national corpus. For this study, we focus on the 2606 folktales collected by Evald Tang Kristensen at the end of the nineteenth century in Denmark, and later indexed according to the second revised edition of the Aarne-Thompson index (1961). By creating linked network representations of the ATU index and the MI, as well as updating the Brandt indexing of the Danish folktales (1974), we generate a network with ~54,000 nodes and ~82,000 edges, where nodes can be ATU numbers, MI numbers, Danish folktales, storytellers, or places of collection. The tree structures of the two indices are preserved. Two additional sets of edges are drawn, the first between ATU tale types based on the “combinations” or the “cf.” references listed for that tale type, and the second, links between the ATU tale types and the MI numbers based on the referenced motifs in the ATU tale type description. For the Danish materials, edges are drawn between a story and its ATU indices, as well as to their storytellers and the place where each story was collected. The network is subjected to a novel fixed-point decomposition based on a network “peel”. Pathways in these peeled layers of the network reveal “network spines” and describe at various levels of granularity the implicit semantic connections between stories based on their indexing. By considering all of the Danish stories embedded in this network and discovering pathways through the network that capture the Danish stories and their numerous relationships, we provide a large-scale overview of the Danish folktale tradition as collected by Tang Kristensen and subsequently described by the ATU and motif indices in a manner that allows comparison at collection scale with other folktale traditions.

Melanie Meng Xue (LSE)

High Value Work and the Rise of Women: The Cotton Revolution and Gender Quality in China

The cotton revolution (1300-1840 CE) led to the prevalence of female breadwinning in affected regions. The adoption of new technologies, regional specialization and long-distance trade dramatically raised the incomes of cotton textile producers. Weaving was skilled labour and performed primarily by women, who then became major income earners and contributed close to or more than 50% of the household income. I examine

the relationship between the prevalence of female breadwinning and the emergence of gender-equitable beliefs. After first documenting a negative relationship between cotton weaving and the belief that men are naturally more capable than women, I show that cotton weaving is associated with less sex selection and more women in positions of authority. This result is robust to instrumenting cotton-weaving with a humidity-based index interacted with proximity to the location from which new technologies first began to spread. There was also a decline in dowry use in affected regions, and those regions later saw more female employment in the modern industrial sector until the state made labour force participation mandatory. Under the centralized socialist rule, the cotton revolution continued to shape behaviour and decisions in private domains, confirming the presence of a cultural channel.