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Keep Calm and Cite Better: Impact Factor Pressures and Review Articles in the History of Economics

Gardez votre calme et citez mieux : facteurs d'impact et articles de synthèse en histoire de la pensée économique

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Keep Calm and Cite Better: Impact Factor Pressures and Review Articles in the History of Economics

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Clarivate Analytics' suppression of the Journal Impact Factor (JIF) for three history of economics journals in 2018 resulted from the publication of a single review article solicited for *History of Economic Ideas* (HEI). That episode highlights several connections between JIF pressures on authors and editors, on the practice of writing review articles, and on the field of history of economics. We examine the different roles and proliferation of review articles, discuss recent examples of review articles in the history of economics literature, and conclude with a brief discussion of review articles, in connection with the way historians of economics cite.

Keywords: review articles, journal impact factors, historiography of economics

Gardez votre calme et citez mieux : facteurs d'impact et articles de synthèse en histoire de la pensée économique

La suppression du facteur d'impact pour trois revues en histoire de l'économie par Clarivate Analytics en 2018 fait suite à la publication d'un unique article de « revue de littérature » par la revue *History of Economic Ideas* (HÉI). Cet épisode met en lumière différents liens entre la pression exercée par les facteurs d'impact sur les auteurs et les éditeurs, sur la pratique d'écriture d'articles de revue de la littérature, et sur le champ de l'histoire de la pensée économique. Nous examinons les différentes fonctions et la diffusion d'article de revue de la littérature, nous discutons les exemples récents de tels articles en histoire de l'économie, puis nous concluons par une courte

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discussion sur le lien entre les articles de revue de la littérature et la manière dont les historiens de l'économie pratiquent la citation.

Mots-clés : articles de revue de la littérature, facteurs d'impact, historiographie de l'économie

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Clarivate Analytics' suppression of the Journal Impact Factor (JIF) for three history of economics journals in 2018 (Edwards and Meardon, this issue) resulted from the publication of a single review article solicited for *History of Economic Ideas* (HEI). Clarivate judged the article's references to constitute "citation stacking." After a few exchanges between Clarivate and the anxious editors and publishers of the affected journals (see Giocoli's editor letter, 2019; Presidents of history of economics societies and journal editors to Tom Ciavarella, 2018), HEI quit Clarivate's Web of Science system altogether in order to continue its series of solicited review articles.

The episode highlights several connections between JIF pressures on authors and editors, the practices of writing review articles, and the field of history of economics. Review articles—like citation indexes, in a way—aid scholars' navigation of the voluminous and burgeoning scholarly literature. They give visibility to narrowly specialized disciplines. They may serve a regulatory function in some disciplines (e.g., by setting new academic agendas or defining disciplinary boundaries). Not least, they also cite more, and are conspicuously more cited, than regular research articles (Herring, 1968; Forgacs, 2003). This last feature has direct effects on the calculation of Journal Impact Factors. Bibliometric research has found increments of between 3% and 10% on the JIFs of *Science*, *Nature*, and *Cell* in consequence of review articles (Lei and Sun, 2020), and other research connecting review articles and JIFs is well known by journal editors, publishers, librarians, and information scientists (Amiri and Michel, 2018). Growing awareness of these JIF-effects goes hand in hand with the rise of review articles in academic literature (Ketcham and Crawford, 2007).

Our purpose is to examine the different roles of review articles, including but not only their JIF-effects, with special focus on the history of economics field. First we address definitional issues: what *are* review articles?, together with a quick overview of the practice of writing them, their proliferation in academic literature, and their JIF-effects. Next we discuss recent examples of review articles in the history of economics, most notably in *History of Political Economy* (HOPE) since 2015, and HEI since 2016. We conclude with a brief discussion about review articles in connection with the way historians of economics cite, and a note of caution about (over)reactions to JIF pressures.

1. Review Articles in Academic Literature

Clarivate's Web of Science system distinguishes 42 different document types. Among them, 11 are published in academic journals: "articles," "biographical items," "book reviews," "corrections," "editorial material," "letters," "notes," "proceedings papers," "reprints," "retracted publications," and "reviews."¹ Unlike "articles," which report "research on original works," Clarivate defines "reviews" as analyses of "material previously studied" which do "not present any new information on a subject."² Throughout this article, to avoid unnecessary ambiguity and for consistency with the literature in this genre, we use the fuller term "review articles" for what Clarivate calls "reviews." Our usage points up more clearly the difference between these documents and "book reviews," which are more familiar to historians of economics ("review essays," i.e., extended book reviews, is another type of document familiar to our scholarly community—but it is not recognized by Clarivate separately from the two other types). In the five-year span beginning 2015, the Web of Science's Core Collection lists 5.82, 6.22, 6.57, 7.08, and 7.32 review articles for every 100 articles: as many as one review article for every fourteen articles! This rising trend may owe something to misindexing and conflation of review articles with other document types. For instance, none of the commissioned review articles in the *HOPE* and *HEI* series, which we discuss in the next section, are classified by Clarivate as reviews, while most of the articles that *are* so classified are dubiously so due to their long reference-lists.³ The trend is also owing to the expansion of academic

¹ See Clarivate https://images.webofknowledge.com/WOKRS59B4/help/WOS/hs_document_type.html

² According to Clarivate's Web of Science system, "reviews" include both "review articles and surveys of previously published literature." Clarivate purports to code documents to this type if they are: "any article containing more than 100 references"; "articles in 'review' sections of research or clinical journals"; or "articles whose titles contain the word 'review' or 'overview.'" (<http://clarivate.com/webofsciencegroup/essays/impact.factor/>). According to Elsevier's Scopus: "Reviews typically have an extensive bibliography. Educational items that review specific issues within the literature are also considered to be reviews. As non-original articles, reviews lack the most typical sections of original articles such as materials & methods and results." (Content Coverage Guide: elsevier.com/solutions/scopus).

³ Unlike Clarivate's Web of Science or Elsevier's Scopus, both *HOPE* and *HEI* identify their commissioned series as "surveys" instead of "reviews." Besides illustrating the disconnection between the historians of economics' practices and the indexing of academic literature, this difference, together with the long reference lists in the history of economics literature (see Edwards and Meardon, this issue), explains the misindexing of regular history of economics articles as review articles. A review article including "survey" in its title might not be classified as a "review." However, a research article that has a long reference list, might. The Web of Science lists over 45 "reviews" published since 2002 in *HOPE*, *HEI*, the *EJHET* or *JHET* (and

literature, and especially to the increasingly valued purposes served by review articles.

Review articles are common to almost every scholarly discipline outside the history of economics. Three aspects of them are important to keep in mind for present purposes. First, review articles serve a variety of functions. They take correspondingly different forms, both within and across scholarly disciplines. Second, they are not only listings of works previously published: they carry important interpretative content about those works. However comprehensive their authors may purport them to be, they are necessarily shaped by the authors' selections. Third, because review articles typically cite more and are more cited than original research articles, they are focal points of JIF pressures (i.e., pressures to increase JIFs) on journal authors, editors, and publishers.

Writing review articles has a long history of being, in part, an answer to the increasing quantity and dispersion of produced knowledge as well as a genre in itself (Restrepo Forero, 2003). Besides the internal purpose of communicating knowledge within disciplines (i.e., reinscribing disciplines' various cultures of reporting), external factors have also imposed standards for producing review articles. During the 1960s there were two official reports in the U.S. and subsequent debates between government research agencies, scientists, and information experts (*ibid.*). Those technical discussions connected with the perceived "explosion of information" underlying the practices of citation indexing and writing review articles (Woodward, 1977). In 1975, together with its Journal Citation Reports (JCR), Eugene Garfield's Institute of Scientific Information (ISI) started its *Index to Scientific Reviews* (ISR) covering the already extensive 1974 scientific review literature.

During the 1970s, scientists, editors, librarians, document analysts, and information scientists undertook considerable efforts to identify and distinguish "literature reviews" from "systematic reviews"—the latter connected to the "evidence-based science" movement and evaluation of academic knowledge (see Csiszar, 2017). These systematic reviews, as elements for "distilling knowledge" (Herring, 1968), took different forms in different disciplines. In 1975, statistician Gene V. Glass coined the term "meta analysis" in reference to such review articles in the areas of psychotherapy and education psychology. From there they spread to other clinical disciplines and appeared as the formalized "Cochrane Reviews," named after Archie Cochrane, who famously advocated for using randomized controls in medical sciences. The Cochrane Review Library contains over 7,500 review articles produced through a global network of Cochrane Review Groups. But while fields such as physical, chemical, medical, and life sciences promote

Scopus over 410 !). For a comprehensive list of all document types indexed in the Web of Science for the four journals, see Edwards and Martin (2019).

cumulative progress at their “research fronts” (see Edwards, 2020) through this kind of review articles, systematic reviews have hardly appeared in the social sciences and humanities, where less formalized qualitative literature reviews dominate.

Although the role of literature reviews is commonly thought to be that of keeping scholars up-to-date with the latest developments in their disciplines (e.g., Ketcham and Crawford, 2007), they play many other roles, such as evaluating and condensing knowledge on specific topics, setting directions for new research, identifying emerging sub-fields, or serving as teaching devices. Woodward (1977, 176-177) identifies thirteen different functions for these review articles: six “historical functions” and seven “contemporary functions.”⁴ Historiographic reflection provides even more ways to understand the roles and functions of such articles. Restrepo Forero (2003, 20) calls attention on the historical narratives in literature reviews. Creating “the past and the community to which that past belongs,” these narratives become “official histories” or “standard narratives.” Science’s “imagined past,” as put by Wilson (2017) or Blum (2017), also set boundaries between disciplines. What sociologists of science call “boundary work,” implies selecting what becomes part of the different disciplines, and also signaling that information to audiences both *within* and *outside* them (Gieryn, 1983). In this last role, review articles serve as entry-points to non-specialists looking to grasp meaning within particular fields, literature subsets, or research questions.

Besides the foregoing roles of review articles, their effects on measured scholarly impact, not least on Clarivate’s JIF, receive much attention from those studying the recent rise of this genre in academic literature. Concerned by the “publication of more review articles than any reasonable scientist can sort through efficiently,” the aforementioned Ketcham and Crawford (2007, 1175) explain the “value of review articles” to both authors and journal editors wishing to increase the visibility, readership, and also the impact factors of their journals: “Quite frankly, review articles are viewed by many editors as a mechanism used by competing editors to ‘drive the impact factor’” (*ibid.*, 1176). Although JIF pressures on authors may have diminished after the 2013 San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA, see Hicks et al., 2015 and also Cardoso, this issue), pressures on editors and publishers are bound to remain as long as JIFs are used to assess journals.

⁴ Woodward’s (1977) historical functions are: i) the peer evaluation of published papers, ii) the collation of information from other sources, iii) the compaction of existing knowledge, iv) the superseding of primary papers as the written record, v) the identification of emerging specialties, and vi) the direction of research into new areas. As for contemporary functions, Woodward lists: i) informed notification of the published literature, ii) current awareness of related fields, iii) back-up to other literature searching, iv) searching for alternative techniques, v) initial orientation in a new field, vi) teaching aids, and vii) feedback.

These pressures will likely continue encouraging editorial “JIF-boosting stratagems” (Martin, 2016): from reducing JIF denominators to increasing their numerators (see Edwards and Meardon, this issue), by seeking to publish more review articles, or, worse, by coercing citations (Wilhite and Fong, 2012; see also Hurtado and Pinzón-Fuchs, this issue).

2. Review Articles in the Historiography of Economics

The historiography of economics being a meta-discourse on economics (see Klaes, 2003), part of its scholarly literature may be considered review literature, especially insofar as it consists of exegetical exercises on published economics works. But if we are interested in review articles pertaining to the literature of the history of economics, and if such articles are defined strictly as described previously, then review articles in the history of economics would be something else entirely. They would constitute a subcategory of the history of economics literature: one whose constituents systematically explore the historiography of economics on given topics, or employing given methods.⁵ Defined in that way such articles are uncommon. At least they were until less than a decade ago, when *HOPE* and *HEI* began their commissioned survey series. *HOPE*'s “Surveys of Recent Scholarship in the History of Economics” (Weintraub, 2015) initiated with Maria Pia Paganelli's (2015) review of recent work on Adam Smith and the Scottish Enlightenment. *HEI*'s “Annual Survey of Ideas in History of Economic Thought Journals,” started with Giulia Bianchi's (2016) on the previous two years' history of economics literature.

Before these and other recent contributions to the *HOPE* and *HEI* series, A. W. Coats's (1969) “Research Priorities in the History of Economics,” and the articles by De Marchi and Lodewijks (1983) and Coats (1983) on the first decade of *HOPE*, come closest to what could be considered early review articles in the history of economics. But like the first issue of *Research in the History of Economic Thought and Methodology* (1983), they reflect on the pre-specialized times of history of economics scholarship. In those times, and well into the 1990s, the history of economics scholarly community was perceived as having “too few” rather

⁵ Of course there are also review *journals*. Whereas journals comprising review articles emerged during the early twentieth century (e.g., *Reviews of Modern Physics*, 1928), in economics, *The Journal of Economic Abstracts* was created much later, in 1963. It became the *Journal of Economic Literature* in 1969. *The Journal of Economic Surveys* (*JES*) was created in 1987 to help economists “keep abreast of recent developments beyond their immediate specialization” (see *JES*'s website). That same year, the *Journal of Economic Perspectives* started commissioning articles with the objective of coping with the increasing specialization of economics (Duarte and Giraud, 2016). See also Trautwein's (2017) recent case for historians of economics to write review articles in economics journals.

than too many specialists (Coats, 1983). In that context, the community's discourse happened among relatively few scholars, and the literature was hardly so voluminous as to warrant the systematic summary and analysis of particular topics, or employment of particular methods. Over time, though, the increased specialization and growth of the history of economics scholarly community (see Weintraub, 2002; Goodwin, 2008; Trautwein, 2017; Edwards, 2020) has motivated new forms of reflexive literature with purposes closer to those of review articles described in our previous section.

As pointed out earlier, review articles serve different functions, and boundaries between research articles and review articles are not always obvious, especially if they are not identified as such by the journals publishing them, or if they are incorrectly indexed in the academic databases (see footnote 2). Indeed none of the review articles published in *HOPE's* or *HEI's* survey series, nor the ones referenced in our previous paragraph, appear as review articles in the Web of Science system. Our own search yielded just a handful of cases besides those in the two survey series. These few cases may be grouped as surveys of publications in specific journals (e.g., Dudenhefer, 2009; Giraud, 2019; Edwards, 2020), or quantitative investigations on the history of economics, such as Marcuzzo and Zacchia's (2016) or Duarte and Giraud's (2016) examination of 196 historic, methodological or heterodox (i.e., JEL code B) articles in eight general economics journals.⁶

As for the two formal series, *HOPE* started its variant to help scholars overcome "some real barriers to entry to historical topics distant from their own research activity" (Weintraub, 2015, 361). Intended to "show all historians of economics what is happening in a particular research sub-community" (*ibid.*), this series responds to recent concerns over the "silo-ing" of interests among historians of economics, and conforms to several of the functions depicted in our previous section on review articles. To date, in addition to Paganelli's (2015) "Recent Engagements with Adam Smith and the Scottish Enlightenment," the series includes Philippe Fontaine's (2016) "Other Histories of Recent Economics: a Survey," and Marcel Boumans' (2019) "Survey of Recent Work in the History of Econometrics: a Witness Report." A shortcoming of this series is that unlike *HOPE's* "review essays" or "book reviews," these surveys are not distinguished explicitly, by either their titles or the tables of contents in the journal, from its regular research articles. Where the journal does not lead, the Web of Science and Scopus do not follow, so the contributions to the *HOPE* series cannot be found as such in those databases. Outsiders, newcomers, and scholars within the history of economics community, who face barriers

⁶ See Edwards et al. (2018) for a literature review including 23 different quantitative histories of economics, from 1969 to 2017.

to entry that the articles are supposed to help them surmount, face yet another barrier to finding these articles.

HEI's survey series started one year after *HOPE*'s with Bianchi's (2016) "Annual Survey of Ideas in History of Economic Thought Journals (2014-2015)". A first thing to point out from this survey and the others in the series is that they comment on selections of papers published mostly in *HOPE*, the *EJHET* and *JHET* during the previous two years (i.e., precisely the JIF 2-year window), so as to increase "the visibility of research in the history of economics" (Lange et al., 2017, 171). Curiously, by systematically excluding references to *HEI* (now outside the Web of Science) together with the many other non-indexed outlets publishing history of economics literature, they overlook precisely the least visible research. Besides their 212 citations provoking Clarivate's JIF suppression (see Edwards and Meardon, this issue), Lange et al. (2017) usefully identified 263 other history of economics articles in the indexed literature during the 2-year span, giving a total of 475. That total is the entirety of the literature rather than a selection from it. Their selection, however, appears clearly at odds with the research practices and purposes common to writing review articles elsewhere.

Instead, *HEI*'s surveys serve a different purpose. According to Giocoli's (2019) "Editor's Note," they are commissioned to junior scholars, their goal being "first and foremost to let survey authors recognize and assess" research trends in our discipline "in order to draw a map of their own of the territory they [are] about to inhabit academically" (9). In line with that statement, *HEI* published not one but two surveys in 2019 (i.e., after the JIF suppression): Chassonnery-Zaïgouche and Herfeld's "New Scope, New Sources, New Methods? A Survey of Contemporary Scholarship in History of Economic Thought Journals, 2016-2017,"⁷ and Denilson Beal et al.'s "Macroeconomics, Development Economics, and Biographical Topics: Two Years in the History of Economic Thought (2016-2017)."

Although remarkably different from those motivating review articles more generally, the author-centered goals of *HEI*'s surveys do relate to Woodward's (1977) first historical and contemporary functions described in our previous section. However, the recent Clarivate episode also shows how adopting *HEI*'s 2-year window selection, puts the implicated journals at risk of JIF suppression for "citation stacking."

⁷ Chassonnery-Zaïgouche and Herfeld's survey was originally written by three authors: the foregoing two plus Erich Pinzón-Fuchs (Chassonnery-Zaïgouche et al., 2018). However, after the Clarivate incident and after revising the email-exchanges between the editor of *HEI* and the authors of the surveys, in particular those in which the editor explained the authors what were the objectives of the survey series, Erich Pinzón-Fuchs decided to withdraw his name from the paper that was finally published in *HEI* as Chassonnery-Zaïgouche and Herfeld (2019). Pinzón-Fuchs believed that the initiative of publishing this series was, indeed, a strategy for boosting the Impact Factors of three specific history of economics journals.

Opinions may vary as to whether review articles conforming to *HEI*'s standards necessarily imply such stacking. In any case, the history and analysis presented here leads to more fruitful conclusions than the mere adjudication of the *HEI* survey series/JIF suppression case would.

It suffices to observe that, on the one hand, the practical effects of producing review articles that survey the last two years of indexed literature, will likely be difficult for the citing and cited journals alike, as well as for the authors of such articles. On the other hand, review articles that use selected samples of literature, which have long been familiar in other fields but only recently tried in a systematic way by historians of economics, are ever more useful. The selection of literature to review, and the signaling of which topics and what literature pertaining to those topics merits the attention of scholars, are indeed important functions. Attending to the peculiarities of citation-indexing databases may help at the margins to make review articles gain usefulness. But the greatest gain will come from historians of economics recognizing the qualities of that kind of work, and publishing better of it.

3. Discussion

Review articles serve several different purposes and take different forms depending on the structure, nature, and history of the fields they serve. The history of economics being a relatively small but growing international discipline with members scattered across countries and in different scholarly traditions, it is understandable that it just recently started producing this kind of review literature.⁸ As has happened in other disciplines, events such as Clarivate's JIF suppression serve to turning the spotlights over this "new" genre.

Getting back to our previously identified three main features of review articles, we conclude with three elements for discussion. First, the different purposes of review articles justify a variety of review literature, but it seems important that the authors, referees, and editors of that literature be acquainted with relevant information about the genre (to which this short article may serve as an entry-point), and about its indexing in bibliometric databases. As pointed out earlier, there are already too many history of economics articles misindexed as review articles (especially in Elsevier's Scopus) due to their long reference-lists (see Edwards and Meardon, this issue, for an analysis of low JIFs despite such long reference-lists). Second, the selective criteria (i.e., the boundary work) should be carefully thought of and justified as, for instance, the overlaps of reviewed literature (i.e., one full year) between

⁸ Survey episodes in the podcast "Smith and Marx Walk into a bar" are another interesting example of contemporary surveys in the history of economics (see in particular episodes 5 and 14: <https://hetpodcast.libsyn.com>).

subsequent annual 2-year surveys. Third, review articles in the history of economics should stay clear from JIF pressures on either authors, editors, or referees, and truly serve their intended purposes.

Historians of economics, perhaps more than other groups of scholars, are eager to be in and recognized within their community rather than worried about JIF scores or citation counts (see Cardoso, this issue). Yet, in their writings they often do not include literature reviews nor invest much effort in placing their contributions among competing literature by their historians of economics colleagues. Perhaps the rise of review articles may contribute to setting new standards of professionalism in our growing field. Not only expressed in the boundary-setting functions of those articles, but in achieving more prosaic results: that historians of economics read, understand, respect, and appropriately cite each other.

Keep calm and cite better.

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