

Workshop: Analysis of Historical Data: Collection, Elaboration & Causal Inference

3rd Term, Academic Year 2022-2023

Dates: 15-16 May 2023

Instructor: Felix Schaff (Max Weber Fellow)

Supervising professor: Filip Kostelka

This course provides a practical introduction to the collection, elaboration, and analysis of historical data in the social sciences. The workshop will be mostly example-based, with a focus on quantitative historical data. It begins by introducing participants to sources of inspiration for interesting historical research topics.

The first substantive part – collection of historical data – introduces participants to archives. We will discuss how archives work, which archives exist, how to find the right archives for one's research interest, and how to find the documents the researcher is looking for. We will visit the archives of the EU at the EUI and get an introduction to the collections from their archivists. We will also talk about how to plan archival visits and how they practically work.

The second part – elaboration of historical data – shows how to extract the information the researcher is interested in from historical documents. Apart from archival documents we will cover other historical sources, such as encyclopaedias, and learn about some major publicly available historical datasets. We will mostly focus on the “hands-on approach”, i.e. manual data collection, but we will also get an introduction to automatic digitalization by an external expert. Common pitfalls of data collection, and how peculiarities of historical data inform and limit the subsequent analysis will also be discussed.

The third part of the workshop covers the analysis of historical data, with a focus on studies that apply causal inference techniques. We will dissect a number of papers that speak to major debates in social, economic and political history. Participants will understand how the datasets have been built, how the causal claims of these papers are constructed and which problems they have. This part of the course will also cover and reflect critically upon so-called “persistence papers” that aim at directly linking historical shocks to present phenomena.