

Slow Port Studies

Applying the ‘Slow Science’ concept in Port Studies^{1, 2}

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1.

Paying tribute to one of the best of maritime economists of all, and the first President of the International Association of Maritime Economists (IAME), the late Richard Goss who passed away on February 8, 2017, it is worth recalling that in the 1980s Richard took a long-lasting sabbatical to visit and study seaports around the world. He then devoted enough time to produce a series of four seminal works on economic policies and seaports, published in *Maritime Policy and Management* in 1990.

Richard was able to provide these pillars of modern port studies as he was working in a scholarly environment characterized by a focus on in-depth discussion, extensive field research, and well-targeted publications. If scholars in the field want to understand the evolution of port studies, they should read the fruits of what is, essentially, an unconscious endorsement of the ‘Slow Science’ concept in port studies development and dissemination.

2.

Since then, research in port economics, management, and policy has emerged to a distinctive and maturing research field.

Seven decades since the early post–World War II years, when public ports became concerned about how to address changing demands on them arising from vessel technology and new methods of cargo handling, a continuously increasing number of maritime and port economists is engaged in research aiming to answer the very same questions within a very different context.

This rising research community also attempts to address a number of ‘new’ questions. Review studies conducted by the founding members of PortEconomics - and published in the well respected scholarly journals *Transport Reviews* (Pallis et al 2010; and Pallis et al. 2011) and *Maritime Policy Management* (Notteboom et al, 2013) – identified how rapidly the interest to study new questions multiplies, and the attractiveness to study this most interesting sector flourishes.

¹ A research note to be presented at the IAME 25th Anniversary Special Session, and discussed during the 15th meeting of the Port Performance Research Network (PPRN), June 2017, Kyoto, Japan.

² I would like to thank Mary Brooks, Peter de Langen, Theo Notteboom, George Vaggelas, and Gordon Wilmsmeier for comments on earlier drafts of this note. Our various exchanges and different angles of approaching the issue made me think that is worth in putting the present note forward for discussion with IAME and PPRN colleagues.

3.

Since the first of the aforementioned reviews of this emerging, and maturing research field, the number of published port studies increased substantially. The huge output leads to important advances in the field.

However, we would argue that the quality of published research could be improved substantially. Perhaps a greater focus of the research community on quality of research output to some extent opposed to quantity of research output) would lead to greater advances of port studies. This paper is the result of an attempt to discuss this issue in the port research community.

4.

Building a foundation of knowledge in the field is not however easy in today's ivory tower. The modern scholar searches the electronic journals readily available in library databases, relies on citation indices to indicate the most important journals in the field and reads few others unless the process of discovery is cherished, not common in the modern time-starved world of the academy.

Such an approach of 'fast' research leads to mis-citations; we have identified one such mis-citation that took place in 1985 and has being repeated again and again for more than three decades. From the perspective of port researchers, many of the more important journals have not been widely adopted by libraries, and some journals where relevant research output is published are only now seeking to have a citation impact factor.

For all these reasons, in 2008 several port economists founded PortEconomics. We set a website that provides freely accessible research, education, information, and network-building material to experienced researchers, but also to newcomers. We constructed and regularly update a PortStudies Database that informs researchers on what port scholars have studied already since 1950s.

5.

Today, appreciating the conditions that have dominated the scholarly world, it is worth to *Slow Port Studies* and scholars studying ports and the maritime world working towards this direction as regards existing port research and the development of future one.

6.

Modern researchers prosper in academia based increasingly on the quantity of research they published the immediate past year(s), rather than the quality of this output.

Each of us is jockeying to increase the number of his/her annual publications to win the race of promotion, and quite many are seduced by the temptation to write another article with limited extension of one previously written and can, in our haste, self-

plagiarize or diminish the value of the work which would have been better served by fewer, best quality articles. Reviewers and editors are increasingly aware of such practices, while publishers are ready to increase the number of journals, annual volumes, pages, or even create pay-per-publish open access journals.

Even the experienced scholars rely on their experience to produce more. The pressure is such that several of us, even those at the level of professor in a tenure-granting institution prefer spending time and effort to publish 'something', even in a journal of doubtful quality, rather than devoting few reading days in the office.

Speed of today is such that as researchers we hardly go deeper or even read studies of the past. Citations provide the proof for this. We noticed that quite a few times scholars are referring to older papers while it is evident that they never actually read them. Most authors only refer to newer papers published after 2000 for the simple reason that older papers often are not included in search engines such as Google Scholar, or the citations to these papers are not counted. Exploring the citations to our very own studies, we noticed that some just refer to them without further discussing or adding conceptual or methodological value. Self-citations are disturbingly used as the mean to produce respectable lists of references; after all they increase the authors 'Google citations' reports when academic authorities like anything that seemingly quantifies research output and a scholar's significance.

The newcomers rarely read the foundations of port studies. As they are 'obliged' to publish, they tend to mix enthusiasm with the following of guidelines and techniques that allow them to do so sooner than latter. Who has really studied those seminal studies of the previous decade providing findings with durability? Who has knowledge of the 'classics' of the previous century that changed the way that ports make decisions or formulate strategy, or had an impact on subsequent scientific concepts and research? The conclusion that newcomers commonly draw is that this is a young field, only coming into its own in the last decade. However, the field is much older but modern scholars rarely visit the earlier works.

Choices of research themes reflect practical issues that dominate the news and information is (electronically) available. The extent is such that many consider today the terms 'port' and 'container port' as synonymous, or the 'big vessels' problem as an issue faced by all. As we all turn attention to the Web, the number of specialised sites and thousand of social media postings per day vying for our attention is accelerating faster than many researchers can handle. In between endless response to e-mails, the accumulated information is limited to (re)production of infographics, and the agenda focuses on reduced number of topics, against the multiple needs of the port and port related industries.

The "publish-or-perish" mentality is much focused on outputs that are not always well embedded in the extant literature or might only marginally add value to the field. Quite a few scholars have published a lot but remain unknown to the industry or policy

makers, as they have never contributed to solving a real problem. Others are (obliged to be) involved in the hectic publication game and the safety of an academic environment where only numbers of citations and publications matter. They often make bad reviewers of novel research as they are too preoccupied with methodology and cannot assess the true (practical) value of new ideas in submitted papers.

Our conclusion is that research corresponds to conference deadlines or matches promotion-assessment schedules. Calls for contributions in special issues on port related themes ask for ‘conceptual’ and analytical studies, yet the “h-factor’ model of academic productivity leads scholars devoting time to submit professionally conducted case-studies with neither theoretical nor methodological advancements, rather than not corresponding to the call. While in depth case studies as a methodology should not be a priori underestimated, the presence of too many papers implementing the same methodology to a different country without justification is not warranted.

8.

Working towards an increasing the quality of port studies demands also a reflection of the research community on which elements improvement is found needed, and thus worthy. It is essential to conclude for example whether more rigor or more relevant port research is found wanted.

The International Association of Maritime Economists (IAME), or other relevant platforms (i.e. the Port Performance Research Network (PPRN) and PortEconomics) are worth to be used in order to engage scholars who developed port research in recent years in an essential discussion, and gain from the experience on the trades-off between quality of research and quantity of research; the burdens to more high quality research; the essential steps that would have a positive impact on the quality of our research? (i.e. more intensified interaction with the port industry, use of advanced formal theoretical models or empirical methods, use of global databases, cooperation with theoretical subject experts etc); and the questions worthy to ask before starting a paper/research project’ (i.e. have spend enough time brainstorming to come up with the most interesting research ideas? does the research address an important research gap? does the research design build upon the relevant previous research? is the empirical data collection effort of sufficient scale? have we included a ‘theoretical subject expert’ in the research team? have we invited sufficient feedback on the research design, analysis and results?

9.

For all these reasons, it is time for the wider Slow Movement, which advocates a more measured pace in everything from cinema to gardening, and more recently the Web and Science, to apply in port studies development and dissemination as well.

‘Slow Port Studies’ is a concept having implications for the themes of research: while not abandoning the development of studies of “practical” value that are promising today, it is worth investing in studies that might take longer to conclude, and will not be submitted for publication in three or four months since their inception, but will re-conceptualise the way we understand the industry.

‘Slow Port Studies’ is a call for revisiting what is read and how it is studied. While not stopping the reading of the latest published research, it is worth reading and using what meaningful was published more than a decade ago; PortEconomics will respond to the call, making again available the key studies that the members of the initiative published in the past, or works by other researchers who will express the interest in such slow port studies dissemination via our initiative.

‘Slow Port Studies’ is a concept for increasing the quality of port studies that demands the reflection of the research community on which elements improvement is found needed, and thus worthy. It is essential to conclude, for example, whether more rigor or more relevant port research is found wanted. The International Association of Maritime Economists (IAME), or relevant platforms are worth to be used in order to engage scholars who developed port research in recent years in an essential discussion, on the existing trades-off between quality of research and quantity of research; the burdens to more high quality research; the essential steps that would have a positive impact on the quality of our research (i.e. more intensified interaction with the port industry, use of advanced formal theoretical models or empirical methods, use of global databases, cooperation with theoretical subject experts etc); and, not least, the questions worthy to be asked before starting a paper/research project (i.e. have research spent enough time brainstorming to come up with the most interesting research ideas? does the research address an important research gap? does the research design build upon the relevant previous research? have we invited sufficient feedback on the research design, analysis and results? etc.).

‘Slow Port Studies’ is also a call for stimulating in-depth doctoral research; supervisors, and the port studies community should motivate doctoral researchers to spend time to dive deep, to go back to read and study the original works, rather than advancing doctoral theses that are simple collections of (published) papers.

‘Slow Port Studies’ is a concept having implications for universities; scholars need enough time to develop quality research, and even allowed to have failed research, Besides there are always lessons from failure, and editors should be willing to publish thoughtful research papers on failures where the lessons and next steps are laid out in terms of scholarly contribution.

This is not a call to return to the past, yet including hard quantitative publication targets in employment contracts is neither essential nor enough to secure scientific progress in the field. Faculties need to change the way they assess 'performance' of scholars, by focusing less on quantity of publications and citations and more on

real/tangible contributions to solving key issues in the port environment and the broader society or where the methodologies used contribute to the advancement of the methodology as a tool for future research.

10.

The *New Scientist* compared recently (February 2017) scientific progress with “a tree with deepening roots and growing branches – which sometimes take a long time to bear fruit”. So the gap between identifying a problem to be solved, devising a technique and then putting it to work – a step often not even on the radar of those who initiated the process – can last a long time.

In our research field, the maturity of research has reached a stage that a lot of existing port studies provide the seed for both present and future generations of scientists to cultivate the tree of knowledge. Research will progress only when time available for understanding the problem sets and the conceptual advancements already made. Better insights will be reached – replacing published studies providing little more than speculation – only when time is available to rate existing analytical techniques but also develop new ones, but also to found new concepts to understand modern times.

Like any other scientist, maritime and port economists can, and need, to build on the work of others, and leave our own work for others to build on .

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