Not “easy to win”: the British war on French trade, 1716-1822

The British waged a restless war on French trade during the “Second Hundred Year War” (1689-1815). Despite numerous victories, decisive success only came in the nineteenth century. Why then and not sooner? Thanks to a new database of French trade statistics coming from the Toflit18 project (http://toflit18.medialab.sciences-po.fr) this paper explores this question by looking at the evolution of the structure of French trade. It quantifies the disruptive effects of different elements of British strategy, such as naval supremacy, colony capture, policy towards neutral countries, activities of privateers and the budget of the British Navy. It identifies a clear link between changes in trade structure and trade losses. In many ways, the Continental System was the best ally of the British Navy.