

Economic containment: customs laboratories and merchandise inspections in late-19th century Spain

*Ignacio Suay-Matallana*¹

¹ Instituto Interuniversitario López Piñero - Universitat de València, Spain

Abstract. This paper shows how chemistry and customs inspections were employed as a tool of containment in late-19th century Spain. In fact, the control of merchandise, as that of people, has been employed in many countries not just to regulate trade and health, but also to protect a large range of interests, including political and economic ones. A wide variety of experts were involved in customs inspections: from physicians working in sanitary controls, and pharmacists in charge of public health and fraud inspections, to chemists and other officers controlling merchandise. First, the paper considers some links between sanitary and economic crises, and analyses the various roles played by customs. It also deals with the creation of customs laboratories to protect both the revenue and certain national interests. Second, it considers a particular case involving the inspection of drugs and medicines circulating from Portugal to Spain in the late-19th century. A complex network of experts and institutions were involved in the control of these products, each of them with its own interests. In this sense, customs inspections established a sort of “economic containment” in which science and chemical analysis were employed to avoid the circulation of foreign goods.

1 Introduction

Writing a paper on quarantines and containment while the author itself – together with the rest of society – is subject to a nationwide lockdown established by the government to fight the Covid-19 pandemic is a complex and uneasy task. The “state of alarm” decreed in March 2020 restricted the movement of citizens across Spain, and many other countries. The main objective was to contain the spread of the virus, while mitigating its “sanitary, social, and economic” impact. For this reason, the authorities soon regulated customs transits, and the activity of border control posts located in ports and airports, with a special focus on facilitating the arrival of staple commodities. [1]

As expected during a sanitary crisis, most of the news, TV shows, and communication strategies were focused on public health issues. However, the economy also found room in the public debate. The terms “economic quarantine” and “economic containment” were widely employed, either for claiming extra measures limiting the circulation of suspicious products, or for alerting about the long-term economic impacts of the sanitary crisis. In fact, these terms have been previously used in many different contexts. For instance, the Spanish-

Peruvian Nobel laureate writer Mario Vargas Llosa once advocated for “economic and diplomatic quarantines” as an “effective antidote” to defend (his own idea of) liberty against Latin American dictatorships. [2] More significantly, Franklin D. Roosevelt’s “Quarantine Speech” defined, in 1937, the position of the USA against the Axis Powers until the entrance of the country into World War II in 1941, following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. President Roosevelt affirmed that “war is a contagion” and, in his view, “when an epidemic of physical disease starts to spread, the community approves and joins in a quarantine of the patients in order to protect the health of the community against the spread of the disease”. [3] He used all these sanitary metaphors to express its determination to pursue a policy of peace. On the other hand, scholars of political economy link the term “economic containment” with international economic sanctions, and still discuss about the effectiveness of such measures to achieve political objectives in different contexts, like the Napoleon’s Continental System, the League of Nations’ sanctions against Italy in 1935-1936 or the US sanctions against the Soviet Union in 1980. They differentiate three strategies of economic containment. First, “economic warfare” was defined as “the use of, or the threat to use, economic means against a country in the attempt to weaken the economy of the target state”; second the term “strategic embargo” is meant “to prevent the target state from importing only those items that could make a direct and specific contribution to its military capabilities”; finally the concept “tactical linkage” seeks “to influence the target’s behaviour—specifically the willingness of its government to use its military power”. [4]



Fig. 1: Spanish authorities tightening the “sanitary cordon” up on farmers claiming against its effects on commerce, as represented by the setting sun (note also the image of a syringe, as a symbol of the life-saving vaccines). Source: “Así hace quince días,” *La Moma* 9, 73 (May 30, 1885)

The term “sanitary cordon” is also widely employed to connect health with movement restrictions and with limitations on trade and commerce. In some cases, the term implies a sort of political containment, as pointed out in a book published by a Portuguese customs inspector in 1920. Inspector Barbosa highlighted how customs experts contributed to the defence of the new Republican regime established in 1911 when banning the importation of

some boxes of rice powder showing a portrait of the former king, the royal flag, and other symbols of the monarchy that had been received at the Lisbon customs house¹. [5] An example linking sanitary cordons to economy appeared in a satiric cartoon published in a Spanish journal in 1885, when the cholera pandemic was affecting the country. The drawing reacted against the cordon established by the authorities for over fifteen days, stressing its harmful effects on farmers, which were close to economic collapse (see figure 1 above).

However, this paper is not about Covid-19 or other previous epidemics, but on how imported and exported merchandise was controlled in late-19th century Spain. It shows how customs laboratories became a specific space where a variety of interests and people intermingled and where chemistry was transformed into another tool of containment. Second, it considers a local case-study to analyse the variety of experts working at customs, and their connections with other official departments.

2 Borders, inspections, and customs laboratories

Customs are places where people and goods are exchanged, but also sites to negotiate commercial, fiscal, and economic interests, scientific traditions and technical standards, and, of course, they are spaces affected by sovereignty tensions. Historians of the territory have analysed the concept of border, originally marked by its military origins. Later, legal and diplomatic borders were delimited. There are other definitions as well, such as natural borders, which combine geographical and diplomatic dimensions, or cultural borders, including linguistic aspects. Finally, there exist economic borders, where customs are located, conceived as spaces for the economic control of a territory and the protection of its customs rights. [6] All these kinds of borders have often been studied from a top-down perspective, with a vertical conception of states. In contrast, local history and the history of borders provide other views to study how a large variety of local and regional actors and social forces established – or deconstructed – borders, making these spaces the result of complex relationships between the power and the population. [7]

History of science also provides relevant clues to analyse the complex network of people, institutions and interests existing at customs. Some historians proposed the term “strategic use of public policy” to explain how many regulations were intended to serve more the interests of businesspeople than those of consumers. This was, for example, the case of the 1906 Food and Drug Act of the USA, seen by many food industries as a tool to secure advantage over domestic competitors and to expand markets, while protecting both reputable manufacturers and consumers against dishonest businesses. [8] A similar example shows how chemistry and laboratories were considered the best tool to face a serious commercial crisis in 1880s Spain. [9] New technical methods had been developed to produce large amounts of industrial alcohol from potatoes instead of grapes. These artificial alcohols were much cheaper than wine alcohol produced in Spain and other Mediterranean countries, so the price of domestic wine collapsed. A massive campaign arose in the public sphere against alcohol produced in factories of Central Europe, mainly Germany, accused of being the cause of massive intoxications, as well as mental, behavioural, and social problems. Due to commercial and diplomatic agreements, it was not possible to forbid the imports of German industrial alcohol. The way to stop them was proposed by the wine producers and stakeholders, which defended a “sanitary solution”. They lobbied the government to pass new regulations – over 15 laws between 1887 and 1888 – that obliged to inspections and chemical analyses of imported alcohol in order to reduce its circulation. One of these laws led to the creation of a central laboratory of chemical analyses ran by the Treasury Ministry

¹ Because of this case, new regulation on customs clearance was approved in 1914 banning the importation of “all kind of objects showing symbols of the old regime”.

in Madrid in July of 1888 (see figure 2 below). In fact, a customs chemical office (*Consultorio Químico de Aduanas*) had been already established by that Ministry in 1850, though it was not very operational. The crisis triggered its renewal, with the objective of providing a chemical solution to public health, commercial and fiscal questions. [10] The same problem with artificial alcohols would motivate the creation of chemical laboratories by the customs authorities of other southern European wine-producing countries like Italy (1886) and Portugal (1887) at that time². [11] As shown in the following section, customs laboratories and other customs inspections were employed to control the circulation of people and goods, as well as to protect other kind of interests.



Fig. 2: The Treasury Ministry, which housed the central customs laboratory in Madrid. Source: J. Laurent (c. 1860/1866). Archivo Ruiz Vernacci, IPCE, Ministerio de Cultura y Deporte. Madrid.

3 Science and economy in action: the circulation of drugs from Portugal to Spain

In 1891 a cargo of 184 kg. of gauze impregnated with phenol and iodine, as well as 43 kg. of sterile gauze arrived at the customs inspection of Valencia de Alcántara, a border town between Cáceres (Spain) and the Alentejo (Portugal). The cargo was cleared as “general chemical products” by the pharmacy inspector at the customs; nevertheless, he decided to ask the central laboratory of Madrid for further advice. The so-called *Inspectores de Géneros Medicinales* had been placed at Spain’s main borders and seaports since 1855³. [12] They were pharmacy experts testing the quality, purity, and chemical characteristics of merchandise (mainly drugs, medicines, alcohol, and other substances). They provided technical support for law enforcement activities, facilitating revenue collection, and protecting public health. Thus, they played both a fiscal and a scientific role.

² Similar laboratories were also created in other countries, like the customs laboratories of London (1842), Paris (1875), and New York (1878).

³ For very recent Spanish and European rules on customs, see “COVID-19,” Agencia Tributaria, https://www.agenciatributaria.es/AEAT.internet/Inicio/La_Agencia_Tributaria/Aduanas_e_Impuestos_Especiales/ Presentacion/COVID_19/COVID_19.shtml; “COVID-19: Waiving VAT and customs duties on vital medical equipment,” European Commission, https://ec.europa.eu/taxation_customs/covid-19-taxud-response/covid-19-waiving-vat-and-customs-duties-vital-medical-equipment_en

A dispute aroused when the customs laboratory of Madrid identified the Portuguese cargo as “sheer fabrics and muslins”, for which customs taxes were 20 times higher. The new decision was harmful for the importer, possibly a pharmacist, who found its way into the pages of the pharmaceutical journal *La Farmacia Moderna*. [13] The journal was against the new clearance and disagreed with the technical argument with which customs authorities had justified the change: that the chemical products impregnating the gauzes could be removed after several washes, turning them into a cargo of fabrics liable to be taxed with the new higher tariff. The journal argued that importing drugs and medicines such as medical gauzes to be employed as fabrics had no sense, resulting in a very disproportionate tax. The journal also blamed both customs authorities and custom inspectors for being the only ones who benefited from the change, because of the extra taxes collected by the government, and the fine collected by officials.

Beyond the specific details of the gauzes dispute, the case reveals the variety of actors and institutions controlling imports in Spain. First line experts operating at customs in borders and ports included the pharmacy inspectors previously mentioned. Another body of experts working at customs since 1855 were the *Delegados de Sanidad Maritima*, later *Delegados de Sanidad Exterior* (border and maritime quarantine officials). They were state physicians controlling public health issues, namely the inspection of trains, boats, and persons entering or leaving the country. [14] Pharmacy inspectors as well as quarantine officials were appointed by the Interior Ministry. A third body of experts were the customs officials (*Cuerpo Pericial de Aduanas*), created by the Treasury Ministry in 1850. They comprised appraisers, inspectors, surveyors, collectors, and other officials who controlled imported and exported merchandise, and calculated its tariff.

The appraisal system of customs officials was often limited to visual inspections, so, on many occasions, they were not able to provide a full identification of the merchandise. Often, pharmacy inspectors were also unable to conduct complex chemical analysis in the laboratories of their own private pharmacy, the only one they had. In case of doubt, customs officials and pharmacy inspectors asked the Treasury Ministry or customs authorities of Madrid for guidance on how to proceed. Then, they had to send samples of the merchandise collected to the central laboratory of Madrid to be analysed and identified. An analysis of the central customs laboratory could be also requested when the importer or exporter disagree on the clearance. In the 1920s, the creation of ten regional customs laboratories in many borders and port-cities – due to the sharp increase in trade, and the economic growth of the country – increased the complexity of the institutional structure in charge of the inspection of merchandise at customs in Spain.

4 Conclusion

This paper has studied the relationship between customs and health, during a sanitary crisis as well as at uneventful times. The terms “economic quarantine”, “economic containment” and “sanitary cordon” help highlight the impact of epidemics in economy and trade. Economic and commercial decisions affect the decision-making process in the expansion phase of a health crisis, in its managing, and, even more, during the recovery period. Customs controls fulfil very different purposes, from screening the people crossing borders, to ensuring the arrival of essential commodities, banning the export of vital products, and even, constraining the circulation of ideas.

Customs are sites, located at borders, where goods and people circulate or are contained. They are not just checkpoints to regulate fluxes and exchanges, but also sites of military, cultural, legal, natural, diplomatic, sanitary, economic and commercial negotiations or impositions. Customs laboratories are part of the customs system. These spaces were created in many countries during the mid-19th century to fight against fraud and to increase tax

revenue, during the so-called aged of adulteration. Chemistry was often employed to adulterate many products, and some governments decided to use the same tool to discover and prevent frauds. However, economic protectionism was a more decisive reason to explain the creation or consolidation of many customs laboratories. As happened in Spain (and other wine-producing countries), these scientific spaces came to be seen as the solution to the sanitary crisis triggered by the massive production of industrial alcohols in Central Europe in the 1880s. The inspection and control of merchandise, food, drinks, and other substances was considered as a useful tool to protect national interest, or at least the interests of powerful industries or economic sectors.

Customs are also sites of intense scientific activity, involving the activity of a large variety of experts. The arrival of a merchandise, like a medical product at the border of Spain and Portugal in the 1890s, mobilised local experts, such as pharmacy inspectors and customs officers (advice from border quarantine officials could also be requested). Government officials as well as customs chemists at Madrid also participated in the dispute, as well as some pharmacy journals. All of them contributed to both economic and sanitary containment. On the one hand, they discussed the technical characteristics of the merchandise, its purity, quality and composition. On the other, their decisions had a fiscal and economic impact, which could even result in a restriction to the entry of products. All in all, they were using science to control the circulation of goods at customs, protecting either the interests of the government or private interests.

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