

Indexing Price Trends of French Academic Books in the Humanities and Social Sciences

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Information on the cost of academic books published abroad is important for American college and research libraries. These libraries expend considerable sums of money annually on foreign books, and reliable information on the cost of these books is essential for the budget planning process. In a recent article Frederick C. Lynden points out that American research libraries purchase a substantial amount of foreign materials "with particular emphasis on materials from France, Germany, and the Netherlands. Although these countries have a well-developed book trade, there is, unfortunately, very little published data available on the costs of academic materials from these countries. . . . It would be a significant contribution to library budgetary planning if there were some standard and reliable sources of data on the costs of foreign materials."¹ The purpose of this paper is to fill that lacuna in part by providing data on recent price trends for French academic books in the humanities and social sciences.



he availability of information on the prices of foreign academic books is very uneven.

Information on the cost of British and German academic books, derived from vendors' databases, is published annually in *The Bowker Annual*. The same source also publishes information on the cost of Latin American books, based on purchases made by nine research libraries that have significant acquisitions programs for Latin American books.²

General and statistical information on French book publishing can most conveniently be found in the *Annuaire Statistique de la France*, a publication of the French National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE) and in *Livres Hebdo*, the weekly magazine of the French booksellers' association (*Cercle de*

la Librairie).^{3,4} The *Annuaire Statistique* publishes annual statistics on the number of books published and the number of books sold in France. Statistics are given for several broad subject categories. No information on book prices is included. *Livres Hebdo* publishes an annual summary of publishing and book selling activity (entitled *Le Bilan*), which appears as a supplement to the first issue of *Livres Hebdo* in January of each year. The information on the prices of French books given in *Livres Hebdo* reflects the interests of the sponsoring organization and is directed primarily toward booksellers. For example, the statistics in *Livres Hebdo* show gains or declines in the publishing industry, but no information is given for specific subject areas. In addition to the annual summary given in *Le Bilan*, statistical information appears

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from time to time in the various weekly issues of *Livres Hebdo*.

The statistical information that appears in the *Annuaire Statistique* and in *Livres Hebdo* is of limited value to college and research libraries in their budget planning process because price information is not given for specific subject areas, and academic books are not treated separately from book publishing as a whole.

METHODOLOGY

The data presented in this paper are derived from the *Bulletin Critique du Livre Français*, a book-reviewing journal published monthly in Paris by the *Association pour la diffusion de la pensée française*.⁵ The *Bulletin Critique* was founded in 1945 when the French publishing industry was reestablishing itself after World War II, and has been published continuously since then. Its purpose is to inform academic scholars and libraries abroad about current French book publishing.⁶ The *Bulletin Critique* publishes critical reviews of a broad selection of new French books each month. About 450 to 500 books are selected for review in each monthly issue. Most of the reviews are from 200 to 250 words, and are written by university professors or other subject specialists in a particular subject area. At present, the *Bulletin Critique* is the only publication that covers the whole range of French book publishing with a substantial number of critical reviews, and that is directed specifically toward an academic audience. Therefore, it is an excellent source of data on the costs of French academic books.

This paper presents data on price trends for French academic books in the humanities and social sciences for the five-year period 1986-90. The definition of an academic book is somewhat problematic. In the context of this paper, an academic book is one that would be of interest to an academic library. But collection development practices vary considerably from one academic library to another. For example, detective fiction, comic books, or cookbooks may be excluded from some libraries as being non-academic, but may be included in others

as primary source material for the study of popular culture. Likewise, science fiction may be studied as a literary genre in some academic settings but not in others.

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In order to make the data from the *Bulletin Critique* as useful as possible to most college and research libraries, certain categories of materials were excluded. These categories include: (1) French-language books published outside of France (since this is a study of the prices of books from France); (2) publications of UNESCO (these are better treated as international documents rather than as French publications, although they do have a Paris imprint); (3) foreign *belles lettres* translated into French; (4) single issues of periodicals and single fascicles of reference works; (5) titles listed in the *Bulletin Critique* as science fiction, juvenile literature, humor, cartoons, sports and leisure, tourism and travel, and daily life, cooking, and fashion; (6) law books; (7) science and technology (since this paper is limited to the humanities and social sciences). In addition to the categories listed above, books are occasionally reviewed in the *Bulletin Critique* without any indication of price. These titles were also omitted.

RESULTS

Table 1 shows the number of French books in the humanities and social sciences reviewed in the *Bulletin Critique* for the years 1986-90, together with average prices and prices indexed to 1986. Prices are given in French francs. In reviewing the results shown in table 1, perhaps the most surprising thing to note is the relatively small increase in the price of French academic books during

TABLE 1
FRENCH ACADEMIC BOOKS IN THE HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES: AVERAGE PRICES AND PRICE INDEXES, 1986-90

	1986		1987			1988			1989			1990		
	No. of Titles	Average Price	No. of Titles	Average Price	Index	No. of Titles	Average Price	Index	No. of Titles	Average Price	Index	No. of Titles	Average Price	Index
<i>Humanities</i>														
General works	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	17	106	—
Fine arts*	247	159	224	188	118	318	187	117	330	180	113	255	209	131
Linguistics	53	177	40	123	69	43	123	69	47	161	91	56	138	78
Literature†	571	101	606	100	99	657	106	105	685	115	114	673	109	108
Philosophy	54	107	55	147	137	74	138	129	85	114	107	123	142	133
Religion	219	129	211	134	104	253	140	109	240	136	105	197	131	102
Total humanities	1,144	123	1,136	127	103	1,345	134	109	1,387	136	111	1,321	136	111
<i>Social Sciences</i>														
Anthropology	33	113	42	180	159	60	178	158	102	147	130	66	151	134
Archeology	38	259	35	190	73	28	233	90	33	220	85	40	248	96
Communications	—	—	—	—	—	15	112	—	15	117	—	20	167	—
Economics	124	124	87	117	94	93	131	106	143	140	113	142	138	111
Education	77	95	103	86	91	70	101	106	86	103	108	64	116	122
Geography	40	116	40	147	127	33	150	129	30	150	129	33	157	135
History	419	145	383	154	106	422	156	109	502	158	109	389	163	112
Political science	159	96	177	118	123	177	122	127	146	109	114	127	130	135
Psychology/ psychoanalysis	76	125	81	126	101	67	117	94	117	130	104	101	140	112
Sociology	73	104	74	112	108	83	125	120	60	121	116	61	126	121
Total social sciences	1,039	129	1,022	135	105	1,048	142	110	1,234	142	110	1,043	151	117
Reference books‡	34	276	33	234	85	39	236	86	30	276	100	71	226	82
Grand total	2,217	128	2,191	132	103	2,432	139	109	2,651	140	109	2,435	145	113

* In the *Bulletin Critique* this category includes painting, sculpture, architecture, music, film and photography.

† In the *Bulletin Critique* this category includes theater.

‡ Adjusted by omitting four titles of more than 1,000 French francs each.

the five-year period 1986-90. The 1990 price index (113) compares with a price index of 131.5 for North American academic books and 132.2 for British academic books for the same time period.⁷ No comparable data are available for German academic books.⁸

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One possible explanation for the relatively low price index for French books is that there is a negative price index for reference books for the five-year period under consideration. It is sometimes difficult to integrate price information for reference books with data for monographs. The range of prices for reference books, from the least expensive to the most expensive, is generally much greater than for monographs. Thus there may be some distortion in the data when reference books are included with monographs in a comparative price study.

Of course, this would be true whether or not unusually expensive items (all those above a certain price) are eliminated from consideration. In this case, however, including the data for reference books does not alter significantly the index figures. If the line for reference books is removed from table 1, the price index for the remaining items would be as follows: 104 (1987), 109 (1988), 110 (1989), and 113 (1990).

CONCLUSION

This paper points out the need for data on the prices of French academic books. It presents a source (the *Bulletin Critique du Livre Français*) from which this data can be derived, and demonstrates a method for developing a price index for this material. Average prices for French academic books in the humanities and social sciences are given for the years 1986-90, and prices for each year are indexed to the base year 1986. The data presented here are intended to support the budget planning process and collection development activities in academic libraries.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

1. Frederick C. Lynden, "Prices of Foreign Library Materials: A Report," *College & Research Libraries* 49 (May 1988): 217.
2. For recent information, see Filomena Simora, compiler and editor, *The Bowker Annual; Library and Book Trade Almanac*, 36th ed. (New Providence, N.J.: R. R. Bowker, 1991), 415-21.
3. *Annuaire Statistique de la France*. (Paris: Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques). Published annually.
4. *Livres Hebdo*. (Paris: Éditions professionnelles du livre); 44 issues per year.
5. *Bulletin Critique du Livre Français*. (Paris: Association pour la diffusion de la pensée française); 11 issues per year.
6. For a general statement of the history, scope and purpose of the *Bulletin Critique*, see Jean-Pierre Seguin, "Le 500e numéro du Bulletin critique du livre français, 1945-87; présentation historique," *Bulletin Critique du Livre Français*, no. 500-501 (août-septembre 1987): 3-22.
7. These indexes were derived from data given in *The Bowker Annual*, 34th ed., 1989-90: 453-54, 463-65, and 36th ed., 1991: 404-405, 416-18.
8. According to the explanatory note in *The Bowker Annual* on prices for German academic books, "the base year has been changed to 1989 because data from prior years are not comparable to those for the last two years." *The Bowker Annual*, 36th ed., 1991: 420.