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Patterns of Argentine-Brazilian Bilateral Trade in the Post-War Era: the Effects of the Latin American Free Trade Agreement (LAFTA), 1945-1980

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Abstract: This paper seeks to analyze trade patterns between Argentina and Brazil during the period 1945-1980, focusing on the impacts of the Latin American Free Trade Area (LAFTA) over bilateral commerce. Set up by the Treaty of Montevideo in 1960 with seven countries, reaching a membership of eleven nations late in that decade, LAFTA was formally dissolved in 1980, dashing perspectives to become Latin America's first full-blown integration project. Scholars tend to disregard LAFTA's experience, seeing it as unsuccessful. However, there are few academic studies on the topic, which leaves open the question about the impacts of the agreement over multilateral trade. Employing official and private statistics on commerce, this paper intends to analyze the effects LAFTA had on trade between South America's biggest countries, contrasting the period before with that of during the implementation of the agreement. As the literature emphasizes that Argentina and Brazil were not only responsible for launching LAFTA project, but also were two of the most important LAFTA members, we believe that our case study can bring contributions to the history of integration in Latin America, and shed light on the backgrounds and limitations faced by today's Mercado Común del Sur (MERCOSUL) in South America.

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1. Introduction

Latin America has a long history of attempts at regional economic integration. Dating back to the post-war era at least, the continent experienced several institutional arrangements for bringing about larger intraregional trade and investment. All attempts, with the exception of the Common Market of the South (*Mercado Común del Sur*, Mercosur), established in 1991, produced meager results. Nowadays even Mercosur faces a crisis. Not only trade and investment growth rates among its members have lowered over the past years, but also, partially as a result of that, the level of criticism that the bloc is receiving is increasing, particularly within its two most important members – Argentina and Brazil. Some argue that Mercosur, similar to what have happened to previous attempts, has reached its limit, facing a dead-end (Kuntz 2014). Even though this pessimist view is not consensus, the fact that we still know very little about how previous attempts at regional integration in Latin America evolved over time constrains our ability to understand contemporary issues.

Scholars are unanimous in pointing out that the Latin American Free Trade Association (LAFTA), established in 1960 by the Treaty of Montevideo, was a key episode in the history of Latin America's economic integration.¹ LAFTA aimed at building a free trade area among its participants (but not a common market), which included twelve Latin American countries, all of them (except Mexico) located in South America. Argentina and Brazil clearly led the initiative, which began in the late 1950s driven by the support of the United Nations' Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLA). ECLA economists, such as the Argentinean Raul Prebisch and the Brazilian Celso Furtado, strongly defended policies of economic integration as a way to foster a more efficient and sustainable process of regional industrialization, and, thus, to

¹ For recent references on the importance of LAFTA, see Dabène (2009) and Rivera (2014).

strengthen Latin America's capacity to support periods of decrease in commodity prices in international markets.²

Although LAFTA apparently counted in its beginning with the support of governments, intellectuals, and local organized groups, authors concur that it failed dramatically. In the late 1960s, some of its members, particularly small and medium-sized countries, embarked on a parallel project: the Andean Pact (nowadays the Andean Community). The Andean Pact aimed at constituting a sub-regional common market (and not a free trade area), with the unambiguous focus of strengthening the economy of its participants in order to better compete with LAFTA's largest economies, namely: Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico (Hojman 1981). During the 1970s, the project brought in by LAFTA unambiguously lost momentum, and the bloc was formally dissolved in 1980, being replaced by a much more flexible and less ambitious institutional arrangement: the Latin American Integration Association (LAIA), which still exists. Even though LAIA comprises more members than LAFTA, attempts at economic integration from the 1990s onwards focused on sub-regional goals. Clear examples of this trend include Mercosur, the (relaunched) Andean Community, and the Pacific Alliance (CEPAL 2012).

Despite LAFTA's importance for the history of Latin American integration, specialized studies about it are still rare. With the exception of the 1973's book by Edward Milenky, there is no other single work focused on how LAFTA evolved and why it failed. Recent contributions tend to look at LAFTA as a significant but no more than just another chapter in Latin America's long-term trajectory of failed attempts at economic integration.³ Even though these studies represented important contributions to the subject, many of them brought along hypothesis with scarce empirical evidence. For example, the case of Moniz Bandeira's assertion that LAFTA failed because of Washington's efforts to avoid the integration of South America's long-lasting rivals (Argentina and Brazil), keeping the continent divided, and allowing for greater space of maneuver for U.S. domination in the hemisphere, albeit interesting, is grounded on no evidence at all (Bandeira 2010: 305-307).

If specialized studies on LAFTA are still lacking, the case is worse when it comes to analyzing the participation of Argentina and Brazil within the Association. Although authors

² For a good reference on LAFTA's history, see Milenky (1973).

³ In this regard, see Bandeira (2010), Cervo (2013), Dabène (2009), and Rivera (2014).

recognize that both countries played crucial roles in LAFTA, there are scant references on the topic. Recognizably, much has been written about the Argentine-Brazilian relations in the post-war era, but many of these studies have neglected Argentina's and Brazil's economic external policies towards LAFTA. Indeed, one of the most important works on the relations between Brasília and Buenos Aires after World War II mainly deals with political issues, letting economic matters, particularly the position pursued on regional economic integration, as a secondary issue.⁴

Taking in consideration the limitations of the literature discussed above, this paper seeks to contribute to the debate on LAFTA's development and demise by looking at the Argentine-Brazilian trade relations in the post-war era (1945-1980). The aim is to map out how these relations evolved over time, and to present some hypothesis about its changes, taking the potential effects of the creation of LAFTA as reference. We employ official data from LAIA, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and Brazil's and Argentina's official statistical centers (IBGE and DGEC, respectively). This data presents limitations, as it does not allow us *per se* to see whether LAFTA had any certain impact on sectoral trade, and even to know the extent to which the Argentine-Brazilian general trade performance was due to the trade agreements instigated by LAFTA. Anyway, as this paper represents only the first effort in a long-term research project to look into economic relations between Brasília and Buenos Aires within LAFTA's framework, its limited goals ought to be contextualized.

The paper is divided in five sections. Section two presents a brief historical account of Argentina's and Brazil's political and economic milieu in the post-war period (1945-1980). Sections three and four focus on the Argentine-Brazilian trade relations before and after the creation of LAFTA in 1960, respectively, in order to draw insights about the Association's impact on bilateral trade. Finally, section five concludes.

2. Economic and Political Contexts in Argentina and Brazil, 1945-1980

Argentina's and Brazil's political and economic performances in the post-war period offered remarkable contrasts. Even though both countries experienced similar developments in

⁴ Vidigal (2009). Notable exceptions are Meirelles (1995) and Fonseca (1989), even though both deal with economic relations between Brazil and Buenos Aires on a long-term perspective.

terms of the industrialization pattern they pursued and the fragility of their democratic institutions, one can fairly argue that in many aspects Argentina and Brazil represented opposing poles.

To begin with, political instability in Argentina was much more intense and prolonged than in Brazil. This is not to say that Brazil was a model of political stability. On the contrary, the country's post-war democratic regime, the so-called Fourth Republic (1946-1964), did not have solid representative institutions. Attempts at coup d'états were frequent, and only two out of eight Brazilian presidents of the period finished their tenures. In March 1964, after increasing political and socioeconomic turmoil, the Brazilian military toppled president João Goulart from office, accusing him of promoting social disorder and pushing the country towards communism. A 21-year right wing military regime ensued, repressing political and civil liberties up to 1985 (Bethell 2008).

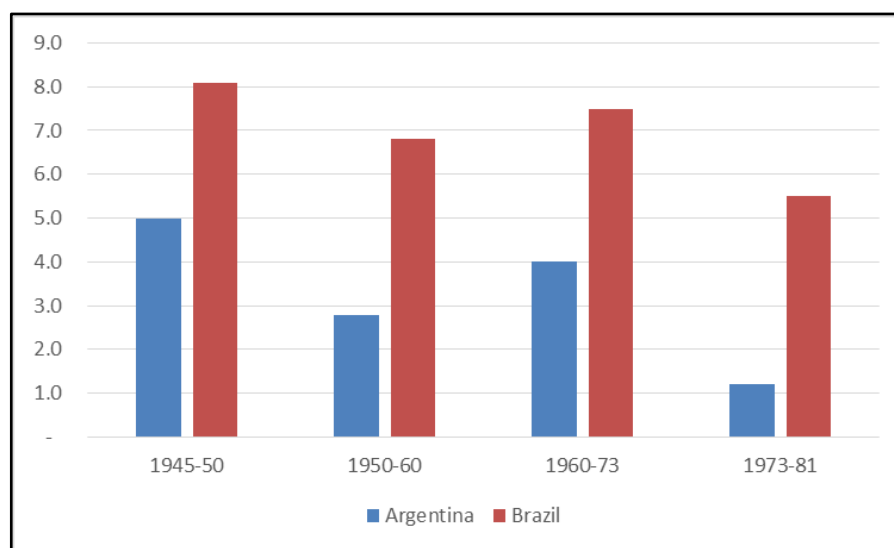
In spite of the weaknesses of Brazil's democratic institutions and the country's prolonged authoritarian regime, political and social instability in Argentina was even more intense. In 35 years (1945-1980), Argentina experienced four military coup d'états against elected presidents (1955, 1962, 1966, and 1976), and lived through three military dictatorships (1955-1958, 1966-1973, and 1976-1983). In fact, recurrent attempts at closing off political participation to *peronistas* (the followers of president Juan Domingo Perón, 1946-1955, 1973-1974) fomented constant political and social struggles. The last time the military took over the presidency in 1976 they implemented one of the crudest authoritarian regimes in Latin America, responsible for systematic and brutal abuses against citizens, particularly against left-wing *peronistas* (Romero 2002, Torre and De Liz 2008). In the end, while in Brazil post-war democracy was stabbed once, bringing about a long-term authoritarian regime, in Argentina periods of military rule were enmeshed in short intervals of democratic or semi-democratic governments, producing a scenario of frequent political volatility.

Scholars concur that Argentina's political instability in the post-war era constituted a crucial factor to explaining the country's poorer economic performance in comparison to Brazil (Bulmer-Thomas 2003). In 1945, Argentina and Brazil present similar levels of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), even though Brazil had the double of the population. In 35 years, the situation changed dramatically: Brazil's economy became three times larger than that of Argentina. While

Argentina grew on average 3.6% per year between 1945 and 1980 (1.83% per capita), Brazil experienced growth rates twice as higher: 6.8% per year on average (3.84% per capita) (Maddison 2003: 122-3, 133-4, 143-4). Variation in growth rates was substantial during this period. Brazil outperformed Argentina in all decades, but the most substantial differences took place in the 1950s and 1970s, as it can be seen in Figure 1.

Not only growth rate levels differed between Argentina and Brazil in the period 1945-1980, but the characteristics of their growth patterns also contrasted. Even though both countries experienced an almost continuous process of Import-Substituting Industrialization (ISI), the pace and nature of Brazil's industrialization were distinct: first, it was much more intense than Argentina's, making the country's manufacturing sector to represent a third of the Brazilian domestic product in 1980, in contrast to only 23.2% in 1945. In Argentina, the manufacturing sector jumped from 21.4% to 25% of the GDP between 1945 and 1980, and still competed with the agricultural sector as the second most important economic activity in the country after the service sector.

Figure 1 – Annual Average of Brazil's and Argentina's GDP Growth Rates, 1945-1980 (%)



Source: ECLAC's Statistic Division *apud* Thorp (2008: 136) and French-Davis *et alli* (2008: 179)

A second important contrast was that the Brazilian industry became much more complex and diversified than that of Argentina. By the late 1970s, heavy manufacturing sectors, such as

those producing intermediate and capital manufacturing goods, became the most important sectors of the Brazilian industry, greatly surpassing producers of non-durable goods. In Argentina, even though heavy industries also became increasingly important, they did not develop as fast as in Brazil (Bulmer-Thomas 2003). This aspect is crucial to explain patterns of the Argentine-Brazilian trade relations during the LAFTA period, as next sections will discuss.

3. The Argentine-Brazilian Trade Relations before LAFTA, 1945-1960

Despite sharing extensive borders, up to World War II Argentina and Brazil have not yet developed significant trade links. Bilateral commerce represented only a tiny fraction of each other's total external trade. Brazil had in the United States its most important partner: Brazilian primary goods, particularly coffee, were sold in exchange for U.S. manufacturing products. Argentina developed an analogous pattern of relationship with the North, but having the U.K. (instead of the U.S.) as her main supplier and buyer of goods. Given that the U.S. produced wheat and beef (Argentina's main exports), Washington and Buenos Aires could not establish the same type of economic complementarity as Brazil and the U.S had.⁵

Trade between Brazil and Argentina was concentrated in a small group of products. On average, between 1914 and 1939, more than 90% of Argentina's total sales to Brazil were constituted by wheat and wheat flour (Fonseca 1989: 19). In turn, Argentina did not have the same level of dependence on Brazilian goods, except for yerba mate and up to the early 1930s. Brazilian exports to Argentina were much less concentrated, and did not represent as much in terms of Argentina's total imports. In the late 1930s, coffee, rice, orange, and pinewood represented Brazil's largest sales. Bilateral trade was structurally leaned towards Argentina, which was favored by frequent trade surpluses (Idem: 22).

World War II brought significant transformations for the Argentine-Brazilian economic relations. For the first time Brazil became a crucial trade partner for Buenos Aires. As the Brazilian industry was more developed at the time, Brazil's light manufacturing goods, particularly textiles, quickly replaced U.K. products in the Argentinean market during the war.

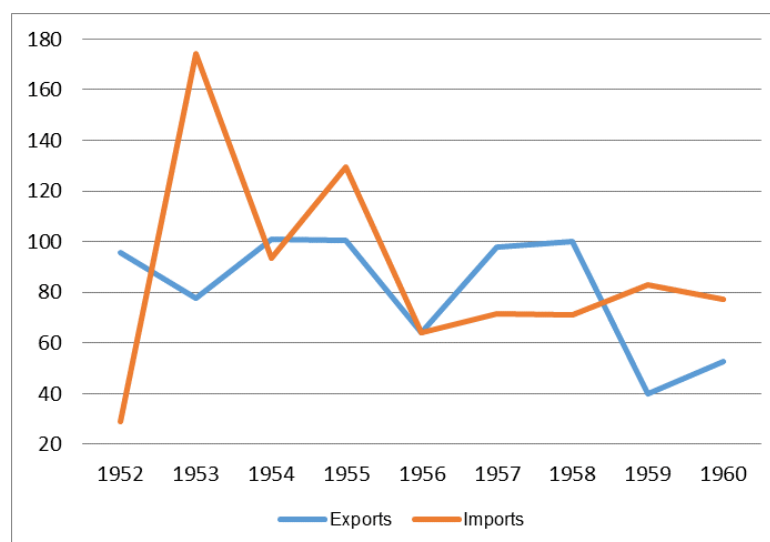
⁵ For more information on Argentina's and Brazil's trade links in the first half of the twentieth century, see Fonseca (1989: ch.1).

From 1941 to 1945, textiles became Brazil's largest export to Argentina, representing on average 30% of total Brazilian trade (Fonseca: 31).

The stimulus brought by World War II to the Argentine-Brazilian economic relations was brief though. In the post-war era bilateral trade again lost importance for both countries. On one hand, Argentina continued to have wheat as its main export to Brazil (on average 71.5% of her total exports in the 1950s), even though Canadian and U.S. wheat started to present significant competition to the Argentinean good in the Brazilian market by mid-1950s. In the case of the United States, the approval of Public Law 480 by the U.S. Congress, granting significant subsidies to primary exports, including wheat, was a crucial factor in this regard (Ahlberg 2008: ch.1). No wonder that this was the first time that Argentina's exports to Brazil presented some (albeit small) level of diversification, with the appearance of other primary products in the trade basket, mainly fruits (pear and apple). On the other hand, the brief upsurge of Brazil's manufacturing exports to Argentina during the war was quickly overturned. The strengthening of an ISI process in Argentina, fomented by the government of Juan Perón (1946-1955), took Brazilian textiles out of the Argentinean market. Once again, Brazil's sales turned back to primary goods, particularly coffee and pinewood, which represented on average 62.5% of Brazil's total exports in the 1950s.

In fact, the level of bilateral trade diminished gradually for both Brazil and Argentina during the 1950s (Figure 2). Taking aside the years of 1952 and 1953, which were outliers (a several drought in Argentina compromised wheat export in 1952), one can clearly observe a decreasing trend in Argentina's export values to Brazil. The same can be said about Brazil's exports, even though these presented a less pronounced reduction. In broad lines, Argentinean and Brazilian overall sales to the world followed a similar pattern, performing rather poorly in the 1950s. Indeed, after the end of the Korean War in 1953, prices of primary commodities declined, putting a heavy burden over the shoulders of exporters of primary goods.

Figure 2 – Brazil’s Exports and Imports to and from Argentina, 1952-1960 (US\$ million, 1952 prices)



Source: IMF Database; Estatísticas Históricas do Século XX (Brazil’s Institute of Geography and Statistics, IBGE)

Although we do not have data on *quantum* exported, it is relatively secure to claim that the drop in Argentinean exports to Brazil in the 1950s was due to lower wheat sales, and not to a decrease in prices. Sailing against the wind, the price of wheat performed better than other commodities, following the world’s overall commodity price index. In contrast, Brazil’s most important export to Argentina (coffee), which accounted for a third of her total sales to Buenos Aires, presented a substantial price decrease between 1952 and 1960 (-35.95%). Therefore, the contraction in Brazilian trade to Argentina (and to the world) was heavily influenced by changes in commodity prices.

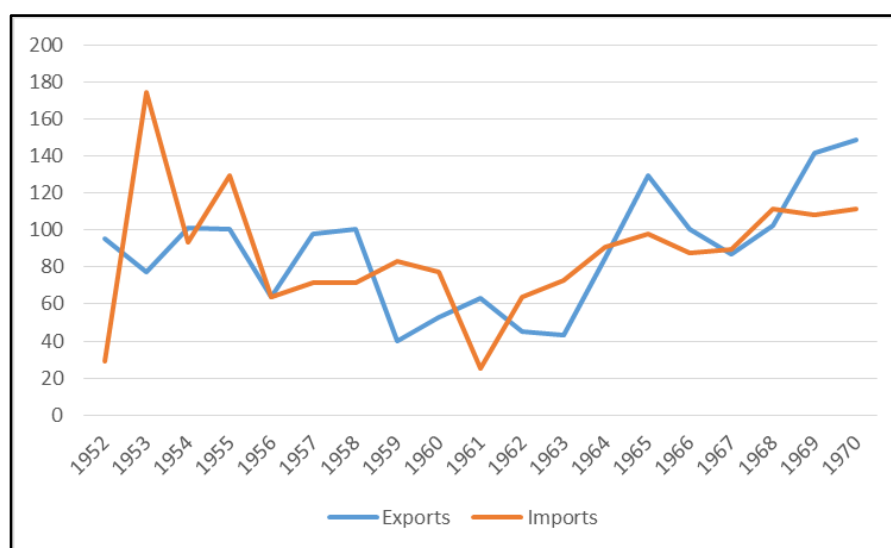
Tough economic circumstances and the desire to deepen the ISI model played crucial roles on Argentina’s and Brazil’s decision to set up LAFTA in 1960. Next section analyzes the extent to which this agreement impacted on the levels and composition of bilateral trade.

4. The Argentine-Brazilian Trade Relations during LAFTA, 1960-1980

The establishment of LAFTA brought important effects to the Argentine-Brazilian economic relationship. The first remarkable aspect refers to a continuous increase in the bilateral trade that took place after 1960. The rise in the Argentine-Brazilian commerce in the 1960s

compensated the fall experienced in bilateral sales in the preceding decade, as Figure 3 shows. Even though it is not possible to claim that this increase was due to the LAFTA agreements, the fact that Argentina's and Brazil's total exports to the world did not performed similarly well represents a good support for the hypothesis that LAFTA may have played an important role in this revitalization of trade. While Brazil's exports to Argentina grew 19% on average during the 1960s, the country's sales to the world expanded only 7% per year on average. As to Argentina, similar variables totaled 16% and 5%, respectively (IMF Database).

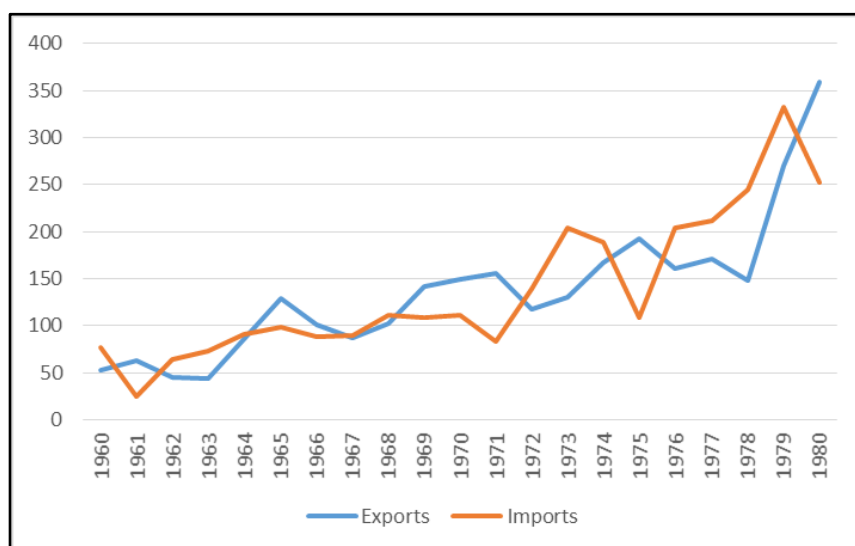
Figure 3 – Brazil's Exports and Imports to and from Argentina, 1952-1970 (US\$ million, 1952 prices)



Source: see Figure 2

The increase in bilateral trade continued during the 1970s, as shown by Figure 4, but two important differences have to be emphasized in comparison to the previous decade: first, in the case of Brazil's exports, and even taking into account the significant growth in sales to Argentina in the late 1970s, the average increase throughout the whole period was lower than that of the 1960s (12% against 19% per year, respectively). Second, in contrast with the 1960s, bilateral trade grew less intensively than total foreign trade. Brazil's and Argentina's sales to the world increased 23% and 20% per year during the decade, respectively, against 12% and 19% when it comes to exports to each other.

Figure 4 – Brazil's Exports and Imports to and from Argentina, 1960-1980 (US\$ million, 1952 prices)



Source: see Figure 2

Once again, although we cannot claim that LAFTA's performance was the main responsible for this relative loss in bilateral trade, scholars recognize that the project to set up a Free Trade Area in Latin America irremediably lost track from the late 1960s on (Milenky 1973, Dabène 2009, Rivera 2014). In 1969, not only a small group within LAFTA created a separate trade organization, with the aim to establish a distinctive Common Market (the Andean Pact), but LAFTA members also recognized that it would not be possible to accomplish a Free Trade Area in the date originally agreed (e.g., 1972). The new target was to be to 1980, but this would not be possible neither. In 1980, LAFTA was dissolved and replaced by a less ambitious framework for economic integration: the so-called Latin American Integration Agreement (LAIA). Therefore, taking into account LAFTA's general evolution, it is curious to note that the performance of the Argentine-Brazilian bilateral trade between 1960 and 1980 followed exactly what was expected: an upsurge in the 1960s, followed by a gradual relative decrease during the 1970s. The end of the decade constituted an outlier, and possibly has to do with the increasing approximation between Argentina and Brazil that would make possible the formation of Mercosur in the early 1990s.

Table 1 – Composition of Brazil's Exports and Imports to and from Argentina, 1939-1980
(% of total bilateral trade)

Brazil's Exports to Argentina					
	Coffee	Pinewood	Iron/Steel	Machines and Transport Equipment	Subtotal
1939-1945	11	17	-	-	28
1945-1950	14	26	-	-	40
1950-1955	35	22	-	-	57
1955-1960	31	37	-	-	68
1960-1965	25	33	-	-	58
1965-1970	15	26	-	-	41
1970-1975	13	17	5	15	50
1975-1980	17	7	6	17	47
1980-1985	4	1	6	22	33
Argentina's Exports to Brazil					
	Wheat	Fruits*	Olive Oil	Transport Equipment	Subtotal
1939-1945	76	3	-	-	79
1945-1950	70	9	-	-	79
1950-1955	65	17	-	-	82
1955-1960	77	9	-	-	86
1960-1965	57	14	-	-	71
1965-1970	52	16	-	-	68
1970-1975	21	16	3	2	42
1975-1980	16	16	3	4	39
1980-1985	13	12	2	4	31

Source: Estatísticas Históricas do IBGE and ECLA Database *apud* Fonseca (1989)

And what about trade composition? Is it possible to claim that the composition of the Argentine-Brazilian commerce changed after LAFTA was implemented? The answer is yes, even though the effect could only be seen in the 1970s, and particularly with regards to Brazil's

exports to Argentina (Table 1). Brazilian sales became much more diversified: two of her most traditional exports to Argentina (coffee and pinewood) lost ground to various goods, most notably manufacturing products. In the late 1970s, 22% of Brazil's sales was composed by machines and transport equipment – two capital-intensive and technologically-advanced manufacturing goods. Argentinean exports to Brazil also presented remarkable changes: wheat lost ground to several products, particularly fruits. Manufacturing exports were not so preeminent than that of Brazil's though. Therefore, as most of these transformations took place during the 1970s – e.g., in a moment when LAFTA had already lost strength –, one can hardly attribute them to the creation of the Association.

5. Conclusions

This paper constitutes a preliminary assessment of a long-term project to evaluate LAFTA's impact on the Argentine-Brazilian economic development. Here we briefly analyzed the data on trade between Argentina and Brazil before and after the formation of the association in 1960 by the Treaty of Montevideo. Two conclusions were presented: first, evidence supports the hypothesis that LAFTA had a positive impact on the volume of bilateral trade. The Argentine-Brazilian commerce not only grew during the 1960s (a period when LAFTA reached its apex), but also increased more intensively than the levels of Argentina's and Brazil's total exports in the same period. In the 1970s, however, total trade performed better than bilateral trade, which suggests what most scholars have already argued: that LAFTA lost its momentum after the creation of the Andean Pact in 1969.

A second conclusion refers to the role played by LAFTA on the composition of trade. Historically, Argentina and Brazil had developed minor commercial links between each other. Although trade links increased gradually during the first half of the twentieth century, they were mainly constituted by primary goods – and, in the case of Argentina, basically wheat, which accounted for more than 90% of total sales. The creation of LAFTA allowed for a diversification of the Argentine-Brazilian trade list, even though this process became more acute only in the 1970s. The weight of wheat in Argentina's exports was dramatically reduced (but this had also to do with U.S. and Canadian competition), losing ground to other primary goods, such as fruits and olive oil. In the case of Brazil, there was a significant increase in manufacturing exports during

the 1970s, specially capital-intensive and technologically advanced products. However, as these changes took place in a moment when LAFTA was losing importance, it is necessary that future research look into specific agreements signed within LAFTA's structure in the 1970s to know whether the Association played any significant role on the increase of Brazil's manufacturing exports to Argentina.

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