

the confusion of the engineering industry with the “machinery” industry, a confusion prompted by everything, the very little, I had read at the time (Fenoaltea 1967, 2020).

2.2 RULE 2: DISAGGREGATE!

Disaggregate, disaggregate, that is Moses and the prophets!

To a historian the impulse to disaggregate should be a natural one, a direct consequence of our curiosity about the past. An aggregate alone is like the low-resolution newspaper photographs of now long ago, which if magnified dissolved into a meaningless blur; the internet has made us used to photographs that when magnified reveal increasing detail, photographs that allow me to zoom in from my hemisphere to my continent, to my country, to my province, to my house, to add an Italian touch to my laundry drying in the sun. An aggregate (“chemicals”) that allows us to zoom in on its immediate components (“electrochemicals”) and then on theirs (“calcium cyanamide”), and even on the local sources of these, is thoroughly satisfying – a rare satisfaction, achieved only where the surviving documentation is unusually rich. But the impulse remains, we want disaggregated “data” because details are our *frandises*.

But the curiosity that drives us is by no means idle. In general, the path of an aggregate places only very loose constraints on the possible “interpretation” of its movements, as is well illustrated by the extant literature on post-Unification Italy; the likely validity of such interpretations can be gauged only by drawing out their specific implications, and verifying their likelihood in the light of more detailed “data.” More specifically, when we limit ourselves to an aggregate we implicitly and naturally assume that its composition remained more or less unchanged; disaggregation can reveal the falsehood of that assumption, it can demolish the shared beliefs that underpin an entire literature (as that on the industrial investment cycle in post-Unification Italy, Fenoaltea 2020).

Technically, of course, as far as aggregate-level “measurement” alone is concerned the purpose of disaggregation is reaggregation, the calculation of an improved aggregate that takes changes in composition into account; and to that purpose both vertical disaggregation (across “stages of production” within a production