

The impact of disasters on pre-modern rural economies: Consequences for the countryside in Northwestern Europe before 1850

Workshop Münster, 13–14 November 2014

Call for Papers

Pre-modern societies were highly vulnerable to all kinds of disaster. This is particularly true for rural economies as agricultural production was directly affected by climate and environmental changes. Recurrent adverse climate during the Little Ice Age as well as widespread epidemics or warfare often caused serious social and economic dislocation. However, not only did disasters had different causes and variable consequences across regions, but in addition communities and states differed with respect to institutions designed to manage such crises and to cope with a wide range of environmental hazards.

Being part of the CORN and CRICEC research programmes, the workshop aims at shedding light on the degree of vulnerability of rural economies in Northwestern Europe in the late Middle Ages and in early modern times and their capacity to react to short-term and long-term effects of different sorts of disaster. It addresses four types of disaster in the countryside, namely climate variation and climate anomalies, flooding, warfare and epizootics diseases. These disasters produced short-term dislocation to a variable extent, such as market disequilibria and a disruption of trade, food shortages and famines, the spread of epidemic diseases as well as increases in the inequality with respect to income and/or property rights. In addition they had distinct long-term repercussions on the rural economy. Thus, a focus of the workshop will be laid on the ways in which disasters and the institutions designed to cope with them influenced the development of rural Northwestern Europe before 1850. Moreover, pre-existing differences in institutions, technologies, social relationships and market organization that may explain regional divergence in handling disasters shall be considered as well.

Specifically, the workshop addresses the following research issues:

- What was the immediate impact of a specific disaster, and what sort of, if any, long-term consequences had it?
- Were food markets capable to alleviate regional supply shocks? Or did an adverse income development lead to demand failure and to an aggravation of hardship in the wake of disaster?
- Which institutions, either being in use, being reshaped or being newly introduced, helped to mitigate the immediate impact of disasters and to cope with future environmental risks?
- Which technologies already existed or were newly developed to cope with environmental hazards?
- To what extent did disasters increase inequality regarding income, food entitlements, access to measures of relief and the distribution of property rights in the countryside?
- How were disasters perceived by contemporaries, which narratives on disaster were told and by which sources can specific discourses be reconstructed?

The convenors welcome papers that address the effects either of climate variation, flooding, warfare or epizootics on rural economies in pre-modern Northwestern Europe, preferably by longitudinal empirical research or a comparative analytical approach. It is expected that short-term and long-term consequences of disasters for the countryside are studied in the historical context of the specific farming pattern, property rights system and degree of market development prevailing a particular rural region.

Paper proposals containing a paper title and a brief abstract (up to 250 words) should be sent by e-mail to Ulf Christian EWERT (ulf-christian.ewert@uni-muenster.de) before 1 February 2014.