10.5. Towards a comparative approach to rural inequality in the transition debate

Panel organiser: Ryckbosch, Wouter, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Belgium // Furio, Antoni, Universitat de València, Spain

In explaining the transition from an essentially feudal to a predominantly capitalist rural society during the late medieval and early modern period, the contributions of evolving social property relations, the development and spread of leasehold, and the emergence and expansion of factor markets have generally taken pride of place in the historiography of the past decades. By comparison, the social and economic differentiation within late medieval and early modern rural society has received considerably less attention, and has often been treated chiefly as a side-effect of evolving class relations, of shifting institutional structures of land ownership and tenure, and of the functioning of land and credit markets. Although several authors have suggested that the outcome and prior emergence of these important transitional dynamics were themselves contingent upon the degree of social differentiation and inequality present within pre-capitalist peasant societies, rural inequality has but rarely figured as an explanatory variable in the transition debate (exceptions are Hilton 1978; Whittle 2000; Byres 2006).

The present session aims to develop a comparative empirical framework for exploring the roots, dynamics and outcomes of inter- as well as intra-class differentiation and inequality in the countryside of late medieval and early modern Europe. The central question posed in this session is not only whether inequality in land holdings (such as patterns of morcellement or en grossissement) – but also the social distribution of different components of both moveable and immovable wealth, of housing, livestock, and financial assets – could act either as an impediment or as conducive to growth and transition. In bringing together different, but systematically comparable case studies on rural inequality, differentiation and polarization, it is anticipated that the evidence on the evolution of social inequality in the countryside can be re-integrated into the overarching narratives on long-term trends in pre-industrial inequality – a historiography which remains predominantly informed by empirical evidence relating to urban social stratifications alone (van Zanden 1995; Milanovic et al. 2011). To this aim, the present session intends to adopt a thoroughly comparative approach, dealing with both regions in Southern Europe and in the North Sea area, and commercial areas as well as regions dominated by peasant ‘survival’ modes of production. The session will be organised in collaboration with the CORN research network.

Chair: Ryckbosch, Wouter, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Belgium

Thursday, 22 August 2013 // 1000 – 1200 // Session 10 - Room A 027

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  - Wouter Ryckbosch is guest lecturer in Early Modern History at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (Belgium), and postdoctoral research fellow at Ghent University (Belgium). His research focuses on social structures and change during the early modern era and its relation to material culture and economic growth. In 2012 he successfully defended his PhD thesis, in which he questioned the close association between eighteenth-century consumer change on the one hand, and early modern economic and social ‘modernization’ on the other.