

11.1. Why were some pre-industrial societies resilient over the long-term while other pre-industrial societies were vulnerable to exogenous crises?

Panel organiser: Curtis, Daniel, Utrecht University, Netherlands

This session addresses one main question. Why in the pre-industrial period were some societies resilient over the long-term while other societies were much more vulnerable to crises? All pre-industrial societies had to face economic, environmental and agricultural challenges at some point, which could come in the form of famine, war, expropriation, flooding, failed harvests, pestilence, harsh taxation, or the disappearance of valuable resources. How then can we explain why some societies were able to overcome or negate these problems, while other societies proved susceptible to failure? This session aims to move away from the conditions impacting upon the fortunes of societies and begins to focus on how the arrangement of pre-industrial societies themselves could have increased or decreased resilience. In much modern development economics literature, there is still a prevailing philosophy which suggests that resilience against crisis can be solved through relentless pursuits of economic growth, or an over-resilience on technological innovation, the provision of medicines, or by throwing large amounts of capital at impoverished regions. In this session instead, it will be argued that the intrinsic arrangement and configuration of society (based around certain blends of property structures, power balances, arrangements of commodity markets, and factor markets) was more important for establishing resilience (in the pre-industrial period, at least). The hypothesis which will be tested is that a big part of societies' capacity to withstand and be resilient in the face of environmental and economic crises is connected with equality: not just equality in the distribution of wealth and property but an egalitarian distribution of power and involvement in essential decision-making processes, which determine the ways in which society is able to exploit, manage and care for its resources. In that sense, this session is linked very closely to a growing literature which sees, for example disasters, not as mere natural events but as social processes which test the organizational capabilities of societies in limiting the destabilizing effects and moving onto a stage of recovery.

Chair: Curtis, Daniel, Utrecht University, Netherlands

Thursday, 22 August 2013 // 1430 – 1630 // Session 11 – Room A-126

11.1.1. Irrigation and social structure in medieval Egypt

Borsch, Stuart, Assumption College, Worcester, USA

Social structure, inequality, and the hierarchy of decision making clearly have had profound and shaping influences as elements that can determine the nature and severity of economic reaction to exogenous shocks, such as natural disasters, famines, climate changes, and epidemics. Economic response to natural catastrophe varies remarkably from economy to another, one social structure to another, based on the fundamentals of rural and urban decision making processes. I have argued in my previous works that structural dichotomies may have been responsible for dramatically shaping the nature and severity of economic impact from plague pandemic in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. In this paper I will explore how the nature of hierarchical decision making and the inherent inequities in the structure of Mamluk irrigation system management in the Egyptian province of al-Buhayra may have substantially inhibited local communal response to severe and sustained irrigation system decay that became starkly manifest in the early fifteenth century. Overall, the talk is intended to be an exploration of potential approaches to examining the problem on a local level (i.e. on the level of - and between - villages in the Egyptian province of al-Buhayra). The discussion of irrigation system damage in the province of al-Buhayra is hoped to be the basis for productive thought about social/economic causation on a local level, and a platform for a discussion and analysis of differential authority on the level of village, flood basin, large-scale canal, and provincial management.

11.1.2. Why India was vulnerable to famines during British rule. Local power structures and „forced incorporation“ into a world market in the case of opium production in northern India, ca. 1800-1900

Bauer, Rolf, University of Vienna, Austria

There is no evidence that pre-British India was hit by a famine on the scale that occurred under British rule. Between 1765 and 1902 we count more than 20 famines, some affecting only parts of India, others the whole subcontinent. The famine of 1770 in Bengal claimed 10 millions deaths and the famines of the 1870s and the 1890 together between 10 and 30 millions. Climate change can

not be held responsible for this devastating outcome. In the Mughal period we find local infrastructures for food security (e.g. food reserves) and Emperors who forbid speculation and export of food crops during scarcity. Mughal relief campaigns included interruption of tax payments, reduction of rents and distribution of corn. In British-India, especially in the second half of the 19th century, rural production was deeply linked with a growing world market. The government acted rather as a grand entrepreneur than a welfare institution and had a strong economic interest in a constant outflow of agricultural produce – even in times of famine. Looking at the famine years of 1876-79, it is striking that wheat exports from India to the UK doubled from 1876 to 1877. Also non-food cash-crops, e.g. India's most notorious crop – opium - expanded during famine years. In my case study of opium production in northern India, ca. 1800-1900, I focus on power structures at the village level. It is in the village where power and property was unequally distributed to an extent that let resources flow out – scarcity or not.

11.1.3. Medieval land reclamation: The creation of new societies and their environmental problems. Comparing Holland and the Po Valley, c. 800 - c. 1500

Curtis, Daniel, Utrecht University, Netherlands

One problem with scholarly research into land reclamation has been the tendency to overly focus on two questions - how and why did it happen? It has led to an over-emphasis on technological innovation and demographic and commercial pressures. Furthermore, it has obscured a far more fascinating and significant question – what were the social consequences of pre-industrial land reclamation? What kinds of societies emerged as a result of land reclamation? These questions are addressed through a comparative historical analysis of two cases of land reclamation in the medieval period: the peat lands of Holland (the Netherlands) and the Po Valley plains (Northern Italy). In the paper it is shown that medieval land reclamation led to the emergence of two very divergent societies, characterised by a number of different configurations in; (a) power and property structure, (b) modes of exploitation, (c) economic portfolios, and (d) commodity markets. In the final section, a further question is considered. To what extent was either of these societies inherently better configured to negate the potentially disastrous effects of land reclamation on the natural environment? In the conclusion it is argued that more 'equitable' and 'freer' pre-industrial societies were better placed to deal with the consequences of environmental degradation than those marked by polarisation and repression – even when those polarised societies made recourse to capital investment in technology.

11.1.4. Rural Risks in the Netherlands 16th-19th centuries

van Leeuwen, Marco, Utrecht University, Netherlands

Looijesteijn, Henk, IISG, Netherlands

This paper describes certain risks in rural parts of the Netherlands during the Dutch Republic compared to the situation in the 19th century. A large part of the paper discusses floods, fires and cattle plagues. It describes prevalence of risks, consequences, perceptions, preventive and post-hoc solutions. We argue that the degree to which exogenous crises affected local rural communities depended not just on the exogenous magnitude of the crisis itself but also on the distribution of power and wealth, correlated with social and political structures and on perceptions of risk. A comparison over time, including the regime change from a federal corporatist state to a national state will in this respect also be instructive.

Participants

Bauer, Rolf

Rolf Bauer, born in 1984, studied International Development at the University of Vienna. He has travelled the Indian subcontinent a couple of times. The passion for India and his interest in questions regarding the 'Great Divergence', led him to further research in India's 19th century history, including a trip to the National Archive of India in New Delhi. He is Doctoral Student at the Institute for Economic and Social History at the University of Vienna (Prof. Peer Vries), and Junior Fellow at the Internationales Forschungszentrum Kulturwissenschaften (IFK) Vienna (until June 2013).

Borsch, Stuart

Stuart Borsch (Associate Professor of History, Assumption College) is an expert in the economic history of Egypt. His works (including *The Black Death in Egypt and England*) have comprised in the main the subjects of plague pandemic, landholding structure, and the nature of economic crises. He is at engaged in a study of the irrigation system of the Egyptian province of al-Buhayra.

Curtis, Daniel

Daniel Curtis has completed a PhD thesis (2012) entitled 'Pre-industrial societies and strategies for the exploitation of resources. A theoretical framework for understanding

why some settlements are resilient and some settlements are vulnerable to crisis'. He is interested in understanding why some societies are able to create effective coping strategies in the face of crises.

Looijesteijn, Henk

Henk Looijesteijn (1973) specializes in the history of the Dutch Republic in an international and global perspective. He obtained his doctorate from the European University Institute in Florence, for his thesis on the Dutch radical social and religious thinker Pieter Plockhoy (ca. 1620-1664). Currently he is a postdoc researcher on the GIGA-project at the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam, studying among others how and why private benefactors founded almshouses for the elderly. He also organized the first international comparative conference on almshouses as a specific charitable institution.

van Leeuwen, Marco

My chosen field is social inequality, 1500 to the present. My research on welfare deals with philanthropy, charity, mutual aid, and the history of risks, on which topic I wrote two books on the period 1500-1890.