This panel starts from the assumption that recent methodological approaches towards a “history of knowledge” can be fruitfully employed in rural history, in the sense of investigating a panorama of interacting layers of knowledge each shaped by particular traditions, media and institutions. In rural history, this approach is not only applicable to the modern period, but especially to the transitional phase between 1750 and 1850. Since the mid-eighteenth century – and thus preceding what is usually termed the emergence of “agrarian science” –, a practice-oriented strain of the enlightenment, comprising administration officials, scholars, clerogmen and landowners, engaged in collecting, evaluating and spreading what they viewed as advanced agrarian knowledge. The term “economic enlightenment” highlights these activities for increasing the provisioning with agrarian resources. While in Britain, this movement has been quite well researched under the label “improvers”, its activities on the European continent, which in many respects continued far into the nineteenth century, have received much less attention. The panel explores, with regard to methodological issues as well as with regard to case studies, the activities of the promoters of the “economic enlightenment” in gaining, transferring, implementing agrarian knowledge – and also in giving it a new reputation in comparison to “established” learned disciplines.

Chair: Popelow, Marcus, University of Salzburg, Austria

Wednesday, 21 August 2013 // 1400 – 1600 // Session 9 – Room A 122

9.3.1. Hands-on Agriculture. Conceptualizing the Empirical in German Agricultural Enlightenment

Lehmbruck, Verena, University of Jena, Germany

Notions of the empirical can be linked with a crucial feature of German agricultural discourse during the long 18th century. On the one hand, pointing to long-term experience and a direct connection to the land could serve as a telling point on numerous book titles. On the other hand, there was harsh polemical resistance throughout the century against practice-oriented strategies to achieve agricultural improvement. Contemporary sources suggest that contact with the soil was seen as a lowly practice heavily loaded with cultural bias and that learned protagonists therefore emphasized the risks of exclusion from political discourse. Nevertheless, we find that physical acquaintance with the land became a more and more indispensable claim amongst agricultural improvers. Drawing from statements of peasant farmers, academics, landlords (Gutsbesitzer) and state officials I intend to elaborate

9.3.2. The more information – the more Expertise? Collecting, Evaluating, and Implementing advanced Agrarian Knowledge in the Electoral Palatinate, c. 1776-1800

Dauser, Regina, University of Augsburg, Germany

Using the example of the reig of Karl Theodor, Elector Palatine (1724-1799), the paper will discuss the conditions, opportunities, and also constraints of governmental initiative to improve agrarian practice. From 1776 onwards, improving the quality of tobacco grown in the Palatinate became an important project for the electoral government as there was no more American tobacco available because of the War of Independence. Thus, good profit seemed to be possible. Being highly dependent on the expertise of others – local experts and such from abroad, local authorities and elites, but also peasant farmers –, the government had to decide on ways of collecting relevant information, on criteria for evaluating diverse and sometimes conflicting concepts as inadequate or promising for augmenting tobacco quality, and eventually on the creation of a stock of knowledge becoming the basis of electoral orders. The ways of collecting information, generating knowledge, making and promoting decisions on concrete measures were rather different according to the groups of experts they took into account. Thus, communications history in a methodological point of view is densely intertwined with notions of a history of knowledge and will therefore be examined in the second part of the paper.

9.3.3. From „Pflanz-Gart“ to „Stammregister“ – On the history of knowledge of fruit cultivation in the canton of Bern

Stuber, Martin, University of Bern, Switzerland

Among the efforts for the improvement of agricultural productivity, the cultivation of useful plants is particularly at the center of the Economic Enlightenment. In contrast to fodder and textile plants, cereals and potatoes, fruit trees are not included among its favoured subjects. This may be considered as astonishing in view of the significance that fruit has acquired in the contemporary diet. Be it as if it may, efforts to improve fruit cultivation go back to even before the classical period of the Economic Enlightenment. The example of Bern in particular is suited to such an analysis over the Longue durée that covers the time from Daniel Rhägo’s «Pflanz-Gart» (1639) to the «Register of varieties of excellent species of some fruits for the canton of Bern» (Stammregister, 1865). From the perspective of the history of knowledge, the connections between scholarly knowledge and local experience on the one hand and the changing actors in these knowledge systems on the other hand are of special interest here.

Stuber, Martin, University of Bern, Switzerland

The growth of scientific and technical interaction in Western Europe during the long 19th century (c. 1750-1900) is generally described as part of the “Enlightenment movement”. A key institution in this movement are the industrial societies, which initiated a variety of operations and activities intended to promote the diffusion of different types of knowledge seen as useful for increased material welfare. The many activities were systems of prizes. Embedded within French territory, and surrounded by mountains, the Republic of Geneva was characterized by its small size and limited fertile land, making agricultural productivity a source of constant concern. Against this background, the Society for the Encouragement of Arts and Agriculture (established in 1776) offered almost 120 prizes between 1776 and 1875, of which about a third was aimed at stimulating the improvement of farming and livestock practices. While it remains difficult to assess the direct impact of the prizes on agricultural productivity, their existence shows the willingness to facilitate the acquisition and diffusion of knowledge useful for productive purposes. My proposal is to examine the issue of prizes, as they figured in the Society of Arts of Geneva in a long term perspective. In doing so, I seek to obtain a better understanding of the concerns and prerequisites with regard to agriculture in the Geneva region, and to place the initiatives of the Society of Arts in the broader context of diffusion and organization of knowledge in Europe in the long 19th century, sometimes called the “industrial enlightenment”.

9.3.4. From mobilizing knowledge to sustained productivity growth?

Agricultural prizes in Geneva during the long 19th century

Wenger, Sylvain, University of Geneva, Switzerland

The growth of scientific and technical interaction in Western Europe during the long 19th century (c. 1750-1900) is generally described as part of the “Enlightenment movement”. A key institution in this movement are the industrial societies, which initiated a variety of operations and activities intended to promote the diffusion of different types of knowledge seen as useful for increased material welfare. The many activities were systems of prizes. Embedded within French territory, and surrounded by mountains, the Republic of Geneva was characterized by its small size and limited fertile land, making agricultural productivity a source of constant concern. Against this background, the Society for the Encouragement of Arts and Agriculture (established in 1776) offered almost 120 prizes between 1776 and 1875, of which about a third was aimed at stimulating the improvement of farming and livestock practices. While it remains difficult to assess the direct impact of the prizes on agricultural productivity, their existence shows the willingness to facilitate the acquisition and diffusion of knowledge useful for productive purposes. My proposal is to examine the issue of prizes, as they figured in the Society of Arts of Geneva in a long term perspective. In doing so, I seek to obtain a better understanding of the concerns and prerequisites with regard to agriculture in the Geneva region, and to place the initiatives of the Society of Arts in the broader context of diffusion and organization of knowledge in Europe in the long 19th century, sometimes called the “industrial enlightenment”.

Participants