Call for Sessions - WEHC 2015 [S20024]

Proposed title of the session

Winners and Losers? Accounting for divergent redistributive effects of environmental shocks and hazards on property distribution across the pre-industrial world, 1300-1850.

Abstract

The historical study of disasters has blossomed in recent years. It is clear that disasters did not just have 'destructive' effects – they also had powers of redistribution too. Unfortunately of the work we have on the redistributive impact of pre-industrial disasters on property, there is little consensus as to whether it was 'equitable' or 'inequitable', whether these were temporary or long-term structural changes, and how to explain such divergences.

More literature has either explicitly or intuitively argued that disasters led to a less equal distribution of property in the pre-industrial world. David Herlihy's pioneering work into this subject, for example, showed in a mountain area of Tuscany that the Black Death, while having short-term 'egalitarian' effects, soon paved the way for further long-term inequality through speculation and hoarding. Peasant property was often abandoned after terrible plague, while high mortality coupled with increased availability and reduced price of land led to easy land consolidation by elites. It is often said that small peasants simply did not have the necessary resources to buffer exceptional losses in the event of shocks such as livestock diseases or floods. Much of this work fits well with a 'Disaster Studies' literature, more focused on contemporary societies, often suggesting that the poor and marginalised were more vulnerable in the face of disasters than the wealthy. The subject relevance recently was demonstrated in the terrible aftermath of the earthquake hitting Haiti in 2011, where many poor peasants lacked legal documents to prove ownership of their land, often dating back to the division of the French colonial plantations in the early 1800s.

However, the inevitability of this 'inequitable' redistribution in the face of disasters has not had consensual acceptance everywhere – and certainly not over the long term. In fact, recent scholarship has suggested, for example, that the shock of the 1755 earthquake and tsunami in Lisbon was essentially a 'force for good' over the long term, helping stimulate economic reform of Ancien Régime institutions and property dominated by 'old' powerful feudal interest groups such as the Church. Elsewhere, in contrast to the inequitable long-term trends suggested by Herlihy after the Black Death, Guido Alfani has suggested that seventeenth-century Northern Italian plagues had only modest inequitable effects –any inequality established was incremental and simply part of a slow general trend identified in other parts of early-modern Western Europe.

The idea behind this session is to tease out causal mechanisms as to why disasters could have a sharp inequitable impact in some regions, and a more moderate, perhaps indistinguishable impact elsewhere. Did the 'type' or magnitude of hazard matter? Did pre-disaster levels of inequality make a difference? What was the role of property rights in dictating the redistributive effect of disasters? Were societies with very 'modern', 'clear', 'secure' rights to property able to limit the inequitable impact, or were societies with very complex multi-layered property rights better able to do that? Furthermore, what role did arrangements such as insurance schemes, tax concessions, reciprocal credit agreements, and state relief play?

I. Corresponding Session Organiser

Dr. Daniel Robert Curtis (Utrecht University [Netherlands])

II. Co-Organiser(s)

1. Corresponding Organiser.

III. Expected Participant(s)

1. same as correspondent.
2. Tim Soens (University of Antwerp [Belgium])
3. Peter C Perdue (Yale University [United States of America])
4. Stuart Borsch (Assumption College, Worcester MA [United States of America])
5. Guido Alfani (Bocconi University, Milan [Italy])