

Call for Sessions - WEHC 2015 [S20032]

Proposed title of the session

Privileges and economic development from the 16th to the 19th century: a comparative approach (Europe-Asia)

Abstract

Within the framework of an increasing focus on institutions on the part of social sciences (economics, law, sociology, history...), and of a renewed interest for the question of the sources of economic growth and European dominance throughout the world system, it is crucial to study further one institution in particular, the institution of privileges, since the latter structured economic activity in every territory and Nation of Europe throughout the Early Modern Era. Privilege, defined as the temporary grant of a field of activity within the economic sphere, constituted a resource for States, communities and individuals alike. Indeed, while the ability of sovereigns to edict general and abstract norms for all of their subjects constituted a key indication of the self-affirmation of the Modern States, the process of submission to general rules and a common law was far from complete and generalized. In Old Regime Europe, with its societies of orders, the fact is that one almost never met a general statute, but rather a multiplicity of particular rights underpinned by privileges, which therefore could not possibly be seen as a legal exception. Such a perception of a *jus singulare* opposed to a *jus commune* could only develop along with increasingly influential notions of legal equality and of the law as a set of abstract rules applicable to all. However, no quantitative study of economic privileges has ever been attempted on either a national or a European scale.

This session has two main goals : the first is to present a project that had filled this gap, by locating, counting and classifying privileges in a set of European territories considered particularly significant: France, England, and the German and Italian areas. The period considered spans the XVth to the early XIXth centuries. The choice of the starting point is justified both by the early development of privileges and their deep roots in medieval social-political realities. As for the endpoint, the project goes beyond the revolutionary era and encompasses the early XIXth century. This choice is an important element in the whole project, which does not merely assume that the French Revolution constituted a *de facto* and *de jure* sharp break in economic processes and institutions, but proposes rather to explore the real extent and contents of this putative break.

The second goal is to confront those results with various researches about similar institutions that could exist in the Asian world and to compare the diversity of development in this crucial sector of legal instruments that benefit to economic actors.

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