

Call for Sessions - WEHC 2015 [S20061]

Proposed title of the session

Evolution in History: Applying Biological and Demographic Concepts to Explain Economic Decision Making in Global History.

Abstract

Among social scientists and historians there is a growing interest in the application of methods from evolutionary biology to economic systems and social processes. Such interdisciplinary approaches can be used to gain new insights and formulate new questions about the investment of parental resources in children, investment decisions within the family and household and investment decisions made by institutions and society at large. These questions are linked with theories such as the child quantity-quality trade-off, which has received much recent attention by economic historians working on human capital formation, and which is closely related to Life History Theory (LHT) in evolutionary biology. LHT explains variation in life histories in relation to ecological and environmental conditions - for example, it predicts that limitation of resources (e.g. food, time, money) forces individuals to make investment decisions, which usually result in trade-offs, such as between growth and reproduction or quality and quantity of offspring.

It has been argued that in modern developed societies, high survival prospects and birth planning may mask the effects of any quantity-quality trade-off in parental resource investment, which makes historical and/or developing country data very interesting for testing such ideas. In developed countries, nonetheless, low birth rates and increasing life expectancy have created 'ageing societies', which has forced important investment decisions on individuals, families and governments, particularly relating to inter-generational transfer of resources and care for the elderly. For example, the question of which age groups and institutions should receive preferential investment, faced with increasingly ageing societies? Should we invest in programs for the elderly or in the training, development and wellbeing of the younger generation? And who cares for the elderly – or who bears the costs? What are the demographic, social and economic outcomes of such decisions?

Insights developed within biology can be integrated into economic history research, adding new dimensions to current debates on topics such as declining fertility, ageing societies, distribution of investments between different generations and welfare policies. One might ask what factors influence reproductive decision making? How important are parental investment decisions for survival chances of children? How do parents adjust their investments in relation to the sex or abilities of their children, as well as in relation to other household factors?

In this session, we are particularly interested in the emergence and role of institutions from an interdisciplinary perspective; this includes macro-level institutions, such as religious, political or administrative structures, but also micro-level institutions, such as the family or community, trade and business organisations, which many have contributed to the cultural, social and economic structure of a region, population or country in a particular period and thereby influenced the demographic or economic trajectories of nations, or indeed wider regions. In evolutionary terms, we may talk about what is adaptive in a genetic sense, or in the sense that it leads to population expansion or rise in life expectancy, but we may also talk about adaptive memes, i.e. ideas or behaviours that may spread from one individual to another and ultimately affect cultural change.

I. Corresponding Session Organiser

Dr. Charlotte Störmer (Utrecht University [Netherlands])

II. Co-Organiser(s)

1. Corresponding Organiser.
 2. Prof. Tine de Moor (Utrecht University [Netherlands])
 3. Dr. Anita H. Boele (Utrecht University [Netherlands])
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III. Expected Participant(s)

1. same as correspondent.
2. Tine de Moor (Utrecht University [Netherlands])
3. Anita H. Boele (Utrecht University [Netherlands])
4. Marc Klemp (Brown University [United States of America])
5. Oded Galor (Brown University [United States of America])
6. Alan Fernihough (University College Dublin [Ireland])
7. Jörg Baten (Tuebingen University, CEPR, CESifo [Germany])
8. Sarah G Carmichael (Utrecht University [Netherlands])
9. Auke Rijpma (Utrecht University [Netherlands])
10. Lotte van der Vleuten (Radboud University Nijmegen [Netherlands])
11. Paul Rotering (University Wageningen [Netherlands])
12. Corry Gellatly (Newcastle University [United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland])
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