

Call for Sessions - WEHC 2015 [S20110]

Proposed title of the session

'Counting People, Understanding Economies: Global Histories of Registration and Demographic Statistics'

Abstract

Economic historians rely extensively on demographic and registration data in order to understand change in real economies and measure their performance: several themes and streams of research at the core of the discipline, from the debate on the impact of the Poor Laws in Britain to the reconstruction of GDP per capita in past economies, rely largely on sources such as parish records and census data and, more generally on demographic and registration statistics. Yet, rather than simply being a potential input for historical, economic or demographic analysis, demographic statistics and registration data have a remarkable and fascinating history of their own.

The main assumption of this panel is that an historical exploration of the evolution of demographic and registration data can shed light on a variety of issues of crucial relevance to economic historians. These include, but are by no means confined to, a deeper understanding of the cognitive basis of state formation, and the construction of statistical knowledge as embedded in a broader, and yet largely unexplored, political economy of facts creation. Furthermore a closer look at the making of demographic and registration data provides a powerful lens through which it is possible to appraise the issues of data quality, of obvious importance to economic historians working with fragmentary and sometimes dubious evidence.

By bringing together economic historians and historians of economics and statistics the panel aims at building a bridge between these two communities. Besides presenting several papers on the Western world, the panel introduces a specific focus on Sub-Saharan Africa. Indeed not only the African continent is still largely missing from histories of quantification, but it is argued that a context characterised by mostly weak states struggling to impose their authority on scantily populated territories, and with limited financial and technical resources available for statistical work, is a formidable site of observation to explore the themes mentioned above.

In conclusion, by gathering different historiographical perspectives and a rich sample of case studies from all over the world, the panel aims at constructing a global history of demographic and registration statistics, in a manner which is capable of identifying common trends and patterns, as well as carefully analysing particularities bound by time and place.

I. Corresponding Session Organiser

Mr. Gerardo Serra (London School of Economics and Political Science [United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland])

II. Co-Organiser(s)

1. Corresponding Organiser.
 2. Dr. Morten Jerven (Simon Fraser University [Canada])
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III. Expected Participant(s)

1. same as correspondent.
2. Morten Jerven (Simon Fraser University [Canada])
3. Keith Breckenridge (University of the Witwatersrand [South Africa])
4. Samuel Coghe (Max Planck Institute for the History of Science [Germany])
5. Felix zu Selhausen (University of Utrecht [Netherlands])
6. Theodore Porter (University of California Los Angeles [United States of America])
7. Sarah Walters (London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine [United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland])