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Session Proposal for the European Social Science History Conference (Wien, 23-26 April 2014)

Networks:

“Labour” and “Economics”

Title

Work and Property in Europe (1500-1900): Toward a Connected History

General Aims of the Project

Over the last decades the history of property rights and the history of work have been deeply renewed. Recent investigations have challenged the traditional idea that the rise of European capitalism was due to a linear transition from ‘non-private’ to ‘private’ property and from ‘non-commodified’ to ‘commodified’ labour (Grossi 1992; Brass, Van der Linden 1997; Steinfeld 2001). Different institutional forms coexisted indeed for many centuries, far beyond the Industrial Revolution.

Despite this new evidence, few studies have analysed the historical evolution of work and property *together*. This absence is regrettable. Work and property were indeed both at the basis of the social inclusion, citizenship rights and other fundamental institutional devices which are usually considered as typical of the economic growth and political modernity. Therefore an analysis that jointly investigates the evolution of the forms of property *and* work could significantly help to better clarify the historical mechanisms of development and modernization.

Following this perspective several key questions remain still open. They can be summarized as follow: how did ‘work’ and ‘property’ as historical institutions reciprocally interact, and, in turn, which were the socioeconomic implications of this interaction? This macro-session aims to answer to these questions, investigating the relationship between labour and property using a wide European comparison and a long-term perspective, since the 16th century to the beginning of the 20th century. This wide perspective will allow us to evaluate the impact on ownership and work practices of some outstanding legal changes, such as the movement of English enclosures, the 1804 French Civil Code, or the Second Serfdom in the Eastern Europe.

Starting from the main research questions sketched above, we welcome papers articulated around three major research lines, which reflect three different sub-sessions:

Sub-session 1. Communities, households, individuals

In this first research sub-session we encourage papers dealing with the analysis of the role of the various historical property regimes (private, collective, dissociated, etc.) and labour relations (free and unfree labour; reciprocal and wage labour) in the (supposed) process of ‘emancipation’ of individuals from family or communities. More specifically, we would like to understand: (a) If, and how were the forms of work and property based on the model of the domestic household and (b) how did the relations between household systems, property regimes and labour organisations evolve across centuries.

Sub-session 2. Appropriations, dispossession, capabilities

Until recently, the history of the industrial revolution has been seen as a process of dispossession started in Europe since the agricultural enclosures. Following this interpretation, the closure of open

fields had two main effects: the spread of a culture of a ‘full owner’ and the transformation of a mass of landless peasants excluded from their communities into an exploited and unskilled working class. In our opinion, this too rigid interpretation could be questioned. We argue that the integration of wage labour in a series of rules and contractual arrangements may have contributed to the development of a set of individual or collective ‘capabilities’ (in line with the interpretation of Amartya Sen), which were able to generate inclusion and improve labour skills rather than create division, separation or exploitation. The two main questions here will be: (a) how did property rights *and* labour relations help, or dampen, the process of acquisition of skills in the various times and context? (b) Was there a relationship between the fragility/imperfection/uncertainty of property rights and the ‘precariousness’ in labour relations? How did the status of owners interact with the professional status?

Sub-session 3. Embeddedness, evaluation and commodification

A third line of research would test the (‘supposed’) progressive depersonalization and commodification of economic relations in property and labour systems. The basic question can be expressed as follow: the Polanyi’s hypothesis concerning the “disembeddedness” of the economy from society starting back from the Industrial Revolution can be proved comparing and connecting the histories of property and work? The authors are invited to reflect on these points: (1) when, how and why did the work turn into a commodity? (2) Did the emergence of full private property have some effects on contractual conditions and negotiations between employers and employees in labour relations, especially in term of wages fixation and working times?

We welcome both micro-historical studies on single cities or communities and macro-approaches on entire regions and States. From a micro perspective, our aim is to compare urban and rural contexts, in order to understand when and how the so-called ‘modern’ concepts of property and work appeared first. From a macro perspective, we would explore the property and labour ‘divergences’ within Europe, in order to better highlight the role played by these two institutions in the supposed ‘Great Divergence’ between continental Europe and Great Britain, as well as between Eastern and Western Europe. Authors should indicate in which sub-session the paper refers.

Abstracts (100-500 words) and one-half page CV have to be sent **by 25 April 2013** to:
workproperty2014@gmail.com