

Call for Papers
to Session 50

on the XVth World Economic History Congress, Stellenbosch, 9-13 July, 2012:

ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND DEMOGRAPHIC CONSEQUENCES OF FAMINES IN THE PRE-INDUSTRIAL PERIOD

In the last few decades, interest in famines in the late Medieval and Early Modern period has declined. Most recent research on the topic has involved the 19th or even the 20th century. As a result, a certain view of famines, that is adequate to describe the situation in the last couple of centuries, has tended to influence perception also of the earlier episodes.

This session aims to investigate whether there are specific characteristics of Medieval and Early Modern famines that differentiate them from later crises. To do this, the session invites papers concerned with old (but still, to a degree, debated and unresolved) questions, such as the causes of famine (lack of production, à la Malthus, or lack of entitlement and inefficient distribution, à la Sen?) or the relationship between epidemics of infectious diseases and undernourishment. The session, however, particularly encourages papers about aspects that have been relatively little investigated, and particularly:

- the relationship between famines and growth/development. Did famine hinder growth, curtailing the economy as well as the population, or did it instead act as a stimulus to economic development, for example by allowing to overcome resistance to innovation (such as in the case of the introduction to Europe of maize and potato from the New World) and favouring the improvement of agrarian techniques and technologies?

- the impact of famines on the most developed (pre-industrial) areas. While England escaped famine since the middle of the 17th century, other parts of Europe, even among the most advanced, continued to be vulnerable to famine for a long time. Furthermore, in earlier periods, the most advanced parts of the continent could also be the theatre of the worst famines, maybe due to their high population density. This was for the example the case of North Italy in the 16th century. Which were the specific consequences of a severe famine for a very advanced area, particularly one possessing economic, commercial and technological advantages over the neighbouring areas?

Most of what we know today about pre-industrial famines is related to Europe. The session, however, welcomes contributions related to other parts of the world, in order to begin a long overdue global comparison of the impact, and especially the economic impact, of famine on pre-industrial human populations.

Corresponding organiser: Guido Alfani, Bocconi University, Milan, Italy
(guido.alfani@unibocconi.it)