

XIV INTERNATIONAL ECONOMIC HISTORY CONGRESS

SESSION 21

Property Rights, Land Markets and Economic Growth in Europe (13th-19th Centuries)

Summary: Property rights in Switzerland (18th-19th c.): a possible explanation for the economic changes?

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This contribution focuses on the problems related to the changes in the conception of property rights and their influence in the various areas of Switzerland.

Most changes occurred de jure with the Revolution at the end of the 18th century, but de facto at a much later period, because some of the constraints created by the Old Regime agriculture survived not only up to the middle of the 19th century, often for financial reasons, in respect of right of way, for example. But also because the power of decision was modified after the 1830s and the communal authorities had to compromise not only with the landowners, but also with the State authorities, those of the canton, each canton having sovereign powers in its internal affair up to 1848. The consequence was a considerable chronological variation in the transition processes. In the Western part of Switzerland (the cantons of Vaud and of Geneva) the changes were visible already in the first third of the 19th century with a substantial increase in the corn-production and an increased number of small farmers. They benefited from the division of some large domains after the Revolution but especially from the distribution of common land. In central and eastern Switzerland, progress was much slower, but there was a most striking difference between the corn-growing areas of Western Switzerland and the mountainous regions of eastern Switzerland (for example, in the canton of Grisons) where the Old Regime rules in the uses of the land survived nearly in their entirety up to the 1860' and prevented a modernisation of the rural world.

In respect to the property structure in the mountainous region, there was an important distinction within Switzerland. On one hand, there was a noted concentration of high pasture land in the hands of the towns' burghers or citizens. These holdings, often leased to immigrated peasant from other cantons of Switzerland, contributed in a large way to the innovation in the cheese production. On the other hand, in a number of valleys in Central Switzerland where access to property was forbidden to non-citizens, some small-scale traditional agriculture survived up to the beginning of the 20th century, often with a major part of the land (high pastures and forests) belonging to the community or to associations of citizens.