

Abstract

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Contrasting experiences: remittances and the household economy in eighteenth-century rural Europe

The institution of life-cycle service has been identified by John Hajnal as one of the basic characteristics of pre-industrial marriage and household patterns in Western Europe. The vast majority of unmarried adolescents in rural areas would typically work some 10 to 15 years outside the household of their parents. This enabled them to acquire both the necessary skills and savings to start and finance an independent household. Most historians working on the institution of service have assumed (implicitly or explicitly) that servants were financially independent from their parents. In other words, the wages earned during service did not serve as an addition to the household income of the parents. This paper compares the saving patterns and remittance behaviour of servants in husbandry in three European regions (Austrian Netherlands, France and England). Research indicates that the remittance behaviour was not uniform across these countries. Especially in the Austrian Netherlands and France, servants frequently remitted part of their wages to their parents and family. In England on the other hand, such intergenerational transfers were less common. This paper uses recent theoretical models on the determinants of remittances by international migrants to explain why these patterns were different in these three countries. I argue that landownership and the supply of local welfare resources are of importance. In the last section of this paper the implications of remittances are analyzed with respect to the process of household formation, mobility and consumption patterns.