14 Economics and History: Analysing Serfdom

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Introduction

Economists and historians are often pictured as fundamentally separate clans – sometimes even as warring tribes. In the one camp, economists are believed to fetishise abstract models, assume narrowly materialistic motivations, posit perfectly functioning markets innocent of coercion or institutions, rely exclusively on quantitative evidence drawn from huge homogeneous datasets and construct baroque statistical edifices in an obsession with identifying causal relationships. On the other side, historians are supposed to reject abstraction, focus on non-material desires, regard the market as an ahistorical modern concept, privilege qualitative and narrative sources, reject statistics and – in extreme cases – repudiate causal explanations altogether.[1]

Are the two disciplines indeed so antithetical? Are they doomed to sever future links as they dig deeper into their trenches? Quite the contrary, this chapter will argue. The space between economics and history consists not of no man's land but rather of common ground which benefits both communities and enriches the wider scholarly world.

Economics, as this chapter seeks to show, offers theoretical tools for thinking logically about goal-maximising action, but adopts no a priori definition of what people's goals might be, incorporating preferences for leisure, altruism, security and social bonds alongside pecuniary and material interests. Economics does not restrict itself to well-functioning markets but also analyses market imperfections, information asymmetries, entry barriers, institutions, coercion and crime. Economists often analyse quantitative data, but also use qualitative evidence (e.g., on institutions) where this is most appropriate for investigating the phenomena at hand. Economics has certainly developed advanced statistical approaches, and some of these focus on identifying causal relationships,

[1] See Fogel and Elton 1983 for illustrative arguments to this effect, though also for strong similarities of approach unanticipated by the authors.

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but it also uses a wide array of other techniques to address bias, data gaps, selection problems, sample composition issues and multivariate associations – empirical issues that also perturb historians.

History, conversely, does not recoil from grand theory. Nor does it intrinsically restrict itself to focusing on intricate nuances and cultural features. Precisely because historians seek a comprehensive understanding of the societies they study, they have been at the forefront in uncovering markets operating in far-flung times and places. Much history does not rely solely on qualitative and narrative evidence, but rather seeks out all possible sources of information, including quantitative ones. Historians may not typically use advanced statistical approaches, but some do. Many historians count, measure, compare, and use quantitative information to test and refine their hypotheses. Finally, few historians wholly abjure questions of causation.

Economic and historical approaches, as will be argued here, are not substitutes but complements. This chapter will build its case in the first instance by exploring an example, showing how economics and history together provide complementary approaches to analysing a specific historical institution: serfdom. To draw out general implications of such disciplinary complementarities, it will scrutinise three scholarly controversies about serfdom: how it shaped peasant choices; how it constrained these choices; and how it affected entire societies. To resolve these controversies, economics and history each brings special expertise, which proves most productive when used jointly. The chapter uses these specific debates about serfdom to draw out general implications concerning the mutually reinforcing capacities of economics and history. It concludes that, by working together, economics and history have improved our understanding of pre-modern society to a much greater extent than either discipline could have achieved in isolation.

Serfdom

Serfdom is the shorthand term for an institutional system in which a landlord was legitimately entitled to restrict the choices of people living on his lands, including binding them to his territory, compelling them to work for him and limiting many of their other economic and demographic decisions.[2] Serfdom prevailed in most European societies in various forms between around 800 and around 1350. After the Black Death (1346–52) serfdom gradually declined in some societies, especially in north-western Europe, but survived for much longer in others.[3]

[2] Ogilvie 2014a; Ogilvie 2014b; Ogilvie 2014c; Ogilvie and Carus 2014.
[3] Brenner 1976.

Then, beginning in the sixteenth century, it intensified across much of central, eastern and south-eastern Europe in a development known as the 'second serfdom'. This early modern manifestation of serfdom was abolished in some societies (such as Bohemia) as early as the 1780s but survived in others (such as Russia and Poland) into the 1860s.

Typically, a serf was legally tied to his landlord and had to get that lord's consent to migrate, marry (or stay single), head a household independently (especially if female), sell or bequeath land or buildings, get education or training, practise a non-agricultural occupation, sell goods, lend or borrow money, and make many other economic, demographic, social and cultural choices. In numerous societies under serfdom a large percentage of rural people were personally unfree, were obliged to perform coerced labour for their lords, and were forbidden to move away to escape these burdens.

In pre-modern societies the rural economy employed most of the population and produced almost all output, so where serfdom prevailed it affected the overwhelming majority of people and activities.[4] This makes it important to understand how serfdom worked.[5]

Individual Agency

A central question about serfdom concerns peasant choice. Much traditional scholarship assumed that pre-modern rural people were unwilling or unable to choose what they produced or consumed.[6] Peasants were thought to lack key concepts, such as cost or profit, which were prerequisites for making choices. Instead, peasants were risk averse to such an extent that they were oblivious to the possibility of choosing among opportunities. Peasants were also believed to lack any desire to choose new forms of work or consumption. Rather, they defaulted to traditional norms of subsistence and leisure. These assumptions about peasant choice implied that economic stagnation was caused by distinctive mentalities and thus that policies to reform institutions would be futile.[7]

But how realistic were these assumptions? In recent decades, studies combining economic and historical approaches have generated a more differentiated understanding of peasant decision making.[8] From the

4 Allen 2001; Broadberry and Gardner 2015.
5 Ogilvie 2014a; Ogilvie 2014b.
6 Chayanov et al. 1966 [1925]; Redfield 1956; Polanyi 1957; Brunner 1968; Wolf 1969; Shanin 1971; Scott 1976; Figes 1989; Mironov 1990; Hoch 1996; Pallot 1999.
7 Little 1982.
8 Popkin 1979; Wunder 1985; Enders 1995; Ogilvie 2001; Hatekar 2003; Dennison 2011.

perspective of basic microeconomics, it emerged that key components of 'peasant mentalities' are in fact normal for us all.

'Risk aversion', for instance, is a universal feature of economic decision making. Uncertainty has a cost, so reducing it has benefits. Incentives to avoid risks are stronger in poor economies: production is poorly diversified, credit and insurance are lacking, information is scarce, and more people live close to subsistence where risk can mean starvation. Risk aversion is higher in Ethiopia than India, and inside Ethiopian villages it is higher among labourers than farmers. But even rich people in rich economies pay to reduce risks. There is nothing distinctive about risk aversion among unfree peasants.

The same is true of 'leisure preference'. We all choose some combination of consuming goods and consuming leisure. We stop working at the point where the cost of giving up an extra hour of leisure exceeds the benefit. In poor economies, people may choose more leisure because non-subsistence consumer goods are scarce or wage rates are institutionally suppressed. In economies lacking insurance or welfare, people invest in sociability (which may resemble leisure) to create and sustain a social safety net. But even rich people in rich economies consume some leisure. There is nothing specific to serfs about leisure preference.

Historical research on serf societies has upheld, extended and refined this analysis. Archival sources such as court records, land transfers, serf petitions and rent rolls make it possible to analyse serf choices both quantitatively and qualitatively.[9] Serfs rejected innovations when the risk–return ratio was high, but adopted new practices when information was available and risks could be diversified. Serfs were indolent when performing coerced demesne services or forced labour at legally capped wages, but industrious when they themselves received the yield. When their own well-being was at stake, serfs displayed impressive agency, keenly transacting in markets, negotiating for higher pay and haggling for better prices. Serfs bought, sold, rented and leased land, openly seeking good bargains, and calculating the higher price for which a farm might sell because of 'improvement' from clearing and fertilising. Quantitative analyses show that this behaviour was accentuated among poorer serfs, who bought and sold land more frequently than richer ones and transacted more often with strangers.[10] Serfs themselves ascribed inability to assess land values not to the absence of a concept of 'price' but to

[9] Among many other studies see Cerman 1996; Hagen 2002; Ogilvie 2005; Dennison and Ogilvie 2007; Dennison 2011.

[10] Štefanová 1999.

youth, inexperience and deficient information.[11] Serfs also had a clear concept of 'profit', 'advantage' and 'utility', engaging in enterprises they thought would make money and trading 'upon profit and loss'.[12] Serfs paid cash to commute coerced labour services, hired other serfs to perform their services, charged and paid interest on loans, paid rebates to borrowers for early repayment, and rented out cattle and land to fellow serfs. Serfs showed a clear understanding of money, bargained for more of it from lords, stole it from one another, detected when it was counterfeit, recorded it in their inheritance inventories, and easily calculated exchange rates between parallel currency systems. Serfs – including females – developed reputations as keen traders and showed a clear appreciation of supposedly 'modern' economic concepts such as the 'opportunity cost of time'.[13] Even in leisure, serfs presented cash to girlfriends, gambled for it over bowls or cards, and carefully apportioned the collective beer tab by head. Despite grinding poverty, serfs even chose to spend their cash on the occasional silk ribbon, illicit pamphlet or cheap portrait of Joseph II.

Basic economic reasoning, therefore, proffered alternative explanations of serfs' actions, in terms of external constraints on their choices rather than internal mental models precluding choice. The explanations stemming from economic analysis were internally consistent and theoretically credible. But whether they indeed explained serfs' behaviour was an empirical question. The expertise of historians made it possible to test and improve these hypotheses by identifying relevant documentary sources, engaging with texts critically, interrogating them for bias (e.g., whether they included women and the poor), and understanding the wider social framework within which economic activity took place, including information sources, kinship relations, property rights, credit links, labour markets, seigneurial coercion, religious conviction and many more features. Together, the logical reasoning of the economist and the rigorous research of the historian generated stronger and more differentiated explanations of serf behaviour. These were based not on patronising assumptions about 'peasant mentalities', but on consistent, plausible and empirically documented patterns of action by serfs themselves. Unfree rural people, it emerged, exercised agency to make the best choices for themselves and their families within a framework of high risks, low information, limited opportunities and institutionalised coercion. Serf agency existed.

11 Ogilvie 2001, pp. 439–40.
12 Ogilvie 2001, p. 441.
13 Ogilvie 2001, pp. 436–7.

Institutional Constraints

The recognition that serfs made choices did not resolve all controversies about serfdom. Rather, it opened up an even livelier debate. Did serfdom matter?

'Serf agency' began to be interpreted as implying that the constraints of serfdom did not seriously affect rural people. Superficially, this seemed to be borne out by micro-level evidence. Historians had suddenly realised that serfs made a colourful array of goal-maximising choices, in many cases without apparent manorial intervention. Many transfers of serf holdings took place with the landlord's consent recorded only in a formulaic phrase, or not at all. Serf marriages were frequently formalised with no obvious record of landlord interference. Serfs migrated from farm to farm, village to village, and sometimes outside the landlord's domain altogether. Serfs hired labourers, earned wages, borrowed and loaned money at interest. They bought and sold food, raw materials, craft wares and proto-industrial manufactures, sometimes trading them far beyond the estate to which they were formally tied.

Do such observations imply that landlord powers were ineffectual and therefore serfdom did not matter? Is the fact that serfs were able to make some choices without visible interference sufficient to conclude that they could make all their choices autonomously, without taking landlord intervention into account, and thus that serfdom did not impose any binding constraints?

Basic economic reasoning can help us assess this argument. The fact that people are observed making choices does not imply that the restrictions on those choices have exercised no effect. People make choices subject to the constraints they face: resources, prices, technology and the institutions of their society – including serfdom. If someone makes a choice that violates socially defined rules, they face the risk of incurring a penalty. This risk does not have to be 100 per cent in order to have a non-zero expected value. Imagine that in seventeenth-century Bohemia migrating without the lord's consent carried a 10-*Schock* fine. Even if the chance of detection was only one in two, the expected monetary cost of illegally migrating would be half of 10 *Schock*, i.e. 5 *Schock*. Even if there was only a 10 per cent change of detection, the expected cost would be 1 *Schock*. In some cases the expected cost would exceed the expected benefit. On the margin, some serfs would refrain from migrating at this expected cost, even while others would go ahead. The same theoretical reasoning applied to transferring one's farm without the lord's consent, defying manorial commands to marry, weaving linen without paying one's loom dues or buying beer from a supplier other than the lord's brewery. All carried penalties of fines, imprisonment or burdens on one's family; and for all there was at least some risk of detection. As a result, the expected cost of engaging in that action was non-zero, and there would therefore be some marginal migraters, land sellers, marriers, linen weavers and even beer drinkers who would refrain from making that choice (which they would otherwise have made), even while others would go ahead. Only if the penalty or the risk of detection for violating manorial restrictions were zero would no one's choices be affected. The fact that some people can be observed making particular choices does not logically imply, therefore, that the institutional rules governing those choices had no effect.

The economics of crime provides further insights.[14] Serfdom entitled lords to impose a system of rules on serfs, and to designate violations of those rules as crimes. Under this legal system the actions taken by both criminals (serfs) and prosecuting authorities (lords) can be analysed as individual choices, influenced by perceived consequences. This analytical framework predicts that we should not necessarily expect to observe lordly enforcement being exercised very frequently. For one thing, regulation was costly in terms of time and personnel, and lords were only interested in forms of intervention that yielded benefits for themselves; this reduced the frequency of intervention to those cases in which serf violations seriously threatened landlord interests and exceeded the costs of enforcement. Second, the existence of lords' power to impose penalties and the desire to avoid attracting such sanctions deterred serfs from even trying to take certain actions. Situations in which serfs refrained from making certain choices because the expected penalty outweighed the expected benefit would, by definition, not be detectable – because nothing happened. But serfdom would still have affected their choices. The institutional constraints of serfdom still make a difference even if some people violate them.

Economic reasoning alone can tell us what is logically possible, but not what actually happened. Here again the expertise of the historian steps in. If serfdom exercised no effect on peasant choices, there should have been arenas of decision making that were off-limits to lordly intervention. Migration, marriage and landholding are three of the most important choices serfs could make and were crucial to the functioning of the rural economy. Investigating them is thus a good way of finding out whether serfdom mattered for peasant decisions.

[14] Becker 1968; Cook et al. 2013.

Mobility restrictions were a key component of serfdom.[15] Geographical mobility is now a recognised characteristic of rural societies in the past. Unfree serfs, like free peasants, had many reasons to seek to migrate – in order to work, trade, marry, find a vacant farm, learn a craft, visit kin, practise their religion, and many more. But in deciding whether to migrate in practice, serfs had to take into account the constraints of serfdom. In most serf societies, permanent emigration from the lord's estate required an emancipation certificate showing that one had been 'released in goodwill'.[16] Lords typically granted consent only to low-value serfs whose temporary or permanent absence would not harm manorial interests. The most frequent type of serf migration therefore involved landless or land-poor labourers who could not get jobs on the home estate, craftsmen who could not find vacant workshops locally, journeymen whose guilds obliged them to go on the tramp, or soldiers conscripted by the monarch. Even such temporary migration by low-value serfs required securing lordly consent, paying fees, relinquishing inheritance claims, proving that one had carried out one's prescribed adolescent demesne servanthood, finding a new holder to take responsibility for one's farm and manorial dues, providing personal or financial 'pledges' to guarantee ultimate return, or satisfying some combination of these conditions.[17]

Lacking such consent, not only was the serf legally obliged to stay on his lord's estate, but other lords were breaking the law if they tolerated that serf's illicit presence on their estates. Illegal emigration involved sufficient penalties that many serfs were willing to pay substantial fees for migration permits. Those who migrated without permission were penalised by fining, whipping, gaoling, being put in the stocks or being ordered into forced service on the demesne. On larger estates under the same overlord, movement within the estate from one village to another was in principle permitted, but in practice was prohibited when it threatened manorial interests, for instance by leaving a holding vacant in a thinly settled village, thereby threatening its collective ability to render dues, labour services and taxes. In early modern Bohemia a serf could even be ordered to stay on a particular farm if the lord regarded him as essential to ensure that his village could render coerced labour and other manorial payments.[18] In eighteenth-century Poland, lords forcibly

[15] Hatcher 1981; Ogilvie 2005; Ogilvie 2014a; Ogilvie 2014b; Dennison 2011; Klein 2014.
[16] Ogilvie 2005, p. 93.
[17] Smith 1974; Dyer 1980; Hatcher 1981; Whittle 1998; Ogilvie 2005.
[18] Ogilvie 2005, p. 96.

relocated serf families from one holding to another in order to ensure the allocation of serf labour in the interests of the landlord.[19]

This does not mean that all enserfed peasants who wanted to migrate (or wanted not to migrate) were deprived by their lords of any choice in the matter. But it did mean that, before making decisions about their own mobility, those subject to serfdom had to take into account whether they would be allowed to move, how much they would have to pay for a permit, what the penalty would be if they migrated without consent, and what was the risk of being detected migrating illegally. Not every medieval English serf who migrated paid the manorial fine required for permission to move, 'but this does not undermine the point that they were liable to be charged because of their father's tenure and status'.[20] Quantitative approaches have added substance to such arguments. Analysis of 3,644 Bohemian serf petitions between 1652 and 1682, for instance, found that only 25 per cent of applications for migration permits were granted, 21 per cent were denied outright, and all others were deferred or made dependent on satisfying conditions imposed by the lord.[21] As soon as the decision to migrate was made more costly, in terms either of money or of fulfilling other conditions, every serf's migration choices were circumscribed and the marginal migrater was deterred – thus confirming the predictions of the economic models of crime and punishment referred to above. There may have been important types of choice made autonomously by serfs without lordly intervention. But in most serf societies, migration was not one of them.

The same applies to marriage. Peasant nuptiality was influenced by a wide array of factors other than serfdom – individual preferences, family strategies, economic conditions, community pressures – and in most cases there is no record of lordly interference. But the fact that other factors influenced marriage choices and that lords did not frequently intervene does not mean that serf marriage was unconstrained by serfdom. On the contrary: micro-studies show that serfdom constrained marriage choices in far-reaching ways.[22] In most serf societies serfs could not marry without lordly consent: a permit cost money and could be refused. Lords imposed special controls on marriages of orphans, requiring them to pay higher fees and prove that they had been released from forced service on the lord's demesne. Lords also made marriage permits conditional on the couple proving they could support themselves, in order to ensure

[19] Kula 1972; Plakans 1973, Plakans 1975; Freeze 1976; Czap 1978.
[20] Whittle 1998, p. 46.
[21] Ogilvie 2005, p. 81.
[22] Whittle 1998; Ogilvie and Edwards 2000; Ogilvie 2005; Dennison 2011.

that farms were occupied by 'capable holders' who would reliably deliver forced labour, rents and taxes.[23] Lords carefully controlled marriages by their serfs to spouses from outside their estates, since such mixed marriages could create incentives to abscond and uncertainty about the servile status of offspring. Consent was made conditional on settling within the estate, payment of extra fees, promise of future reciprocity by the outside lord, relinquishment of property, debts or inheritance entitlements, and guarantees that offspring would be subject to local servility.

The obligation to obtain the lord's consent imposed costs on serfs wishing to marry and thus constrained their choices. The fees medieval English serfs had to pay lords for marriage permits were sufficiently costly that 'these sums were a burden, and peasants had to adjust their budgets to afford them, and in bad years they would cause real hardship'.[24] Failure to obtain a permit was even more costly. In early modern Bohemia, for instance, those who married without manorial consent were punished with fines, gaoling, and even forcible separation and the deportation of one partner.[25] Denial of a manorial marriage permit led to betrothals being dissolved, illegitimate pregnancies not being legitimised, and serfs eloping. Although such cases may have been rare, it is hard to believe that they did not deter serfs from attempting to undertake marriages likely to attract manorial opposition.

Lords had the power not only to prevent serf marriage but to compel it. In a number of serf societies lords ordered widows, spinsters and bachelors to marry, in order to fill all land with couples that would deliver forced labour and beget new serfs.[26] Even in medieval England, where serfdom was enforced more leniently than in most parts of early modern eastern Europe, lordly pressure on spinsters and widows to marry was not rare.[27] In early modern Bohemia overlords regarded widows as poor fiscal risks and put considerable pressure on them to remarry or vacate their farms. Female household headship was much lower in serf than non-serf societies across Europe, and an econometric analysis of its determinants in rural Bohemia from 1591 to 1722 found that, controlling for other potential influences, female headship was strongly affected by the strategies and policies of the specific manorial regime.[28]

Variants of serfdom in which landlords merely charged fees for marriage permits undeniably constrained peasant choices much less than those in which landlords prohibited certain marriages and compelled

[23] Ogilvie and Edwards 2000, pp. 983–98.
[24] Dyer 2007, p. 74.
[25] Ogilvie 2005.
[26] Hatcher 1981; Ogilvie and Edwards 2000; Ogilvie 2005.
[27] Hatcher 1981.
[28] Ogilvie and Edwards 2000.

others.[29] Not every medieval English serf's daughter who married paid the manorial fine, but that does not alter the fact that they were liable to do so, and thus that serfdom mattered.[30] Although the letter of the law was not always enforced, analysis of medieval English manors indicates that 'the weight of monetary exactions could in itself constitute a grave restriction of freedom'.[31] Likewise, variants of serfdom in which landlords were unsystematic in requiring serfs to obtain marriage permits, or granted applications in most circumstances, were less restrictive than those in which manorial marriage regulation was comprehensive and applications were often denied. But even when the lord typically only imposed conditions or demanded a fee, he constrained serfs' marriage choices and increased their costs.

Analysis of serf land transfers yields similar findings. Most serf societies reveal much elective action by serfs in buying, selling or bequeathing real property – so much so that it is sometimes claimed that although overlords enjoyed the legal right to limit serf property rights, they seldom did so in practice.[32] The main empirical support for this argument is the fact that village registers seldom record cases in which a land transfer was prohibited by the lord. The problem with this argument is that registering a transfer was unlikely to take place before manorial consent had been granted. Problematic transfers were stopped at an earlier stage or even deterred altogether (as with migration and marriage) by the awareness, on the part of both individual serfs and the serf commune, that the lord opposed certain types of transfer.

This is borne out by evidence from micro-studies. In almost every serf society a peasant had to obtain permission from the lord before transferring his holding, and the documents testify that the requirement was enforced in practice.[33] Manorial consent could be refused if the new holder was not regarded as a 'capable holder' who would reliably render manorial dues, or if he or she had other undesirable characteristics such as subjection to a different lord or a poor reputation.[34] In a number of rural societies under serfdom, lords blocked land transfers that threatened the impartibility of holdings, since lords regarded impartibility as a guarantee that a holding would be viable in rendering manorial dues and services.[35] Quantitative analysis of serf petitions on one

29 Hatcher 1981; Ogilvie 2005.
30 Whittle 1998.
31 Hatcher 1981, p. 14.
32 Melton 1988; Štefanová 1997; Cerman 1999.
33 Hatcher 1981; Campbell 1984; Whittle 1998; Ogilvie 2005; Van Bavel 2008.
34 Levett 1938; Homans 1941; Hilton 1975; Ogilvie 2005; Cerman 2008.
35 Ogilvie 2005; Van Bavel 2008; Cerman 2008.

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seventeenth-century Bohemian estate shows that 26 per cent of applications for land-transfer permits were granted, another 26 per cent were denied, and the remainder were deferred or made conditional on satisfying conditions imposed by the lord.[36] Even where lords usually granted permission for land transfers, they were often entitled to collect a fee from both seller and buyer. These fees were not merely symbolic but in many regions amounted to substantial sums that restricted the choices of both seller and buyer.[37] In most medieval English manorial courts such entry fines constituted the largest sums paid into the court, would have sent many incoming serfs to money-lenders to obtain the cash, and 'must sometimes have discouraged them from buying a piece of land'.[38]

Such restrictions affected peasants' choices about land allocation, their ability to borrow money in times of need, their inheritance strategies, the options open to non-inheriting offspring, the stratification of rural society, the development of wage labour and servanthood, the importance of the bond between family and land, kinship behaviour and household structure.[39] Even manorial rules that were violated affected peasant choices by shifting land transfers into the informal sector where risks were high, contract enforcement poor and exploitation rife.[40] The powers of landlords under serfdom created rigidities and rent seeking throughout the whole rural economy, disorted factor and product markets, and prevented serfs from expanding their entrepreneurial activities beyond certain institutionally circumscribed boundaries.[41]

The interplay between economics and history has flowed in both directions as scholars have sought to assess whether and how serfdom constrained peasant choice. A surprising finding to emerge from historical micro-studies, for instance, was that manorial restrictions on migration, marriage and land transfers were often enforced not by the lord or his officials, but by serf families and village communities.[42] Family members appeared in the lord's manorial court to report the illegal emigration of relatives, dispute land transfers and prosecute young people who married (or stayed single) to disoblige their kin. Serf communes hunted down absconding villagers, reported illegitimate land transfers to the manorial court, and put formal and informal pressure on village members to marry or remain single.

[36] Ogilvie 2005, p. 81.
[37] Van Bavel 2008.
[38] Dyer 2007, pp. 80–1.
[39] Razi 1980; Razi 1993; Raftis 1996; Whittle 1998; Campbell 2005.
[40] Ogilvie 2005.
[41] Campbell 2005; Dennison 2011.
[42] Hatcher 1981; Ogilvie and Edwards 2000; Hagen 2002; Ogilvie 2005; Dennison and Ogilvie 2007; Dennison 2011.

Why would serf families and communities act in this way? Surely one would expect serfs and lords to work against one another when it came to enforcing the constraints of serfdom? Economic reasoning provides an explanation. In the absence of an effective local policing and administrative system, enforcement costs are high. This creates incentives for the authorities to use other mechanisms to enforce costs. One method is to require offenders to name personal guarantors, usually family members, who will be penalised if the suspect violates the lord's regulations. A second enforcement mechanism is to threaten that an individual serf's offence will bring punishment on the offender's whole family or community, which will therefore have an incentive to police compliance. A third approach is for the central authorities (the lord) to devolve enforcement to local authorities (serf communes and families) in return for favourable treatment in future transactions.

Micro-historical research in serf societies as various as Prussia, Bohemia and Russia has revealed precisely such mechanisms in action.[43] If manorial officials believed a serf to be at risk of absconding or violating other rules of serfdom, they required him or her to name groups of 'pledges', usually male relatives, as a bond on compliance. Serf families and serf communes were penalised by the lord if one of their members violated manorial rules, on the grounds that 'it was impossible … that there was no knowledge of it in the community'.[44] Threats of collective reprisals induced relatives and neighbours to exert familial and communal pressure on individual serfs to comply with restrictions. Finally, lords systematically granted favours to male householders and village oligarchs in return for their help in enforcing manorial regulations on the local level.[45]

Societal Effects

A final question remains. We now know that serfs were able and willing to make rational economic choices, so that slow rural development was probably not caused by distinctive peasant mentalities.[46] We also know that serfdom imposed binding constraints, so that even though serfs exercised agency, there were some choices they would have liked to make but could not.[47] On the level of individual serfs, therefore, serfdom

[43] Hagen 2002; Ogilvie 2005; Dennison and Ogilvie 2007; Dennison 2011.
[44] Quoted in Dennison and Ogilvie 2007, p. 535.
[45] Dennison and Ogilvie 2007, pp. 526–30.
[46] Little 1982; Ogilvie 2001.
[47] Dennison 2006; Ogilvie 2014a; Ogilvie 2014b.

mattered. But did it matter for the whole economy? And, if so, how much did it matter?

In recent decades a revisionist school has contended that serfdom, while oppressing some serfs, did not harm the wider economy.[48] These scholars point to wide variations across serf economies, with only some being notably underdeveloped, while others were more prosperous. Some serfs in eastern Europe, they point out, were materially better off than some freemen in western Europe. Such arguments are adduced to rebut the claim that serfdom had harmful economic effects. Serfdom, it is concluded, was perfectly compatible with economic growth.[49]

There are three linked problems with this argument. The first is that we cannot compare serf with non-serf economies without systematic measures of economic activity as opposed to impressionistic examples. The second problem is that the presence or absence of serfdom is only one of many possible influences on the level and growth rate of economic activity, so that in seeking to identify the effect of serfdom it is necessary to control for other, potentially confounding variables. Finally, even if one detects an association between serfdom and some measure of economic activity, further analysis is necessary to identify whether this reflects a causal relationship. Together, economics and history have tackled these problems.

First we need to find out the facts. If we want to compare economic performance between serf and non-serf societies, we need to start by establishing 'macroeconomic indicators' – information about overall economic activity in a society – for regions that were and were not subject to serfdom. It might be thought that establishing such indicators for historical economies, especially in the period before modern government statistics, would be impossible. Working together, however, economics and history have made significant progress.

Historical national income accounting is a first major sphere of cooperation. Economics provides techniques for calculating national income accounts from underlying data in pre-statistical societies, while history supplies expertise with archival sources and the understanding of how historical societies operated. Such interdisciplinary projects have generated plausible estimates of macroeconomic indicators for an array of societies reaching back before the Black Death.

Figure 14.1 shows estimates of one of these indicators, real per capita GDP, for the 1300–1850 period, during which serfdom vanished in some European societies and survived in others. These estimates show that the

[48] Moon 1996; Hagen 2002; Cerman 2012; Stanziani 2014a; Stanziani 2014b.
[49] Hagen 2002, pp. 597–601; Cerman 2012, pp. 6–9, 95–123.

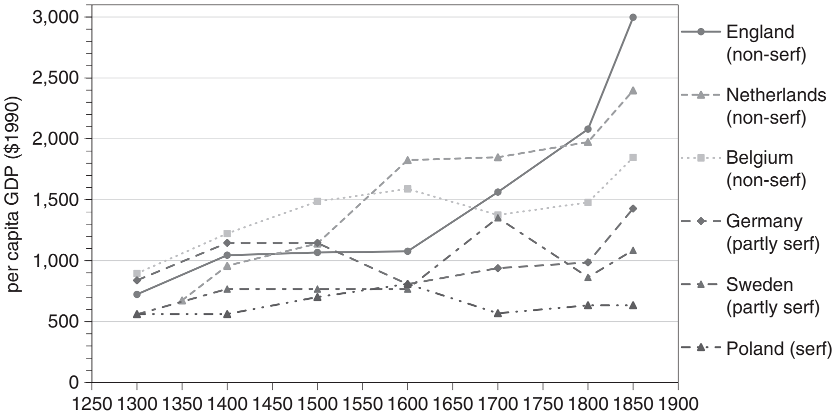

Figure 14.1 Per capita GDP ($1990) in different parts of Europe, *c.*1300–*c.*1850.
Source: Broadberry 2016, table 2; Broadberry, Guan and Li 2018, table 7.

survival of serfdom was associated with diverging economic trajectories, although they do not show that it caused such economic divergence. Among societies in which serfdom survived into the nineteenth century, Poland is the only one whose per capita GDP has been reconstructed over the medieval and early modern periods. Figure 14.1 shows that per capita GDP in Poland was very low, grew very slowly from 1400 to 1600, and declined noticeably from 1600 to 1800. The two partially enserfed societies for which estimates exist are Sweden and the German lands, where serfdom declined in some regions in the late medieval period, but intensified in others from around 1500 to around 1800 under the 'second serfdom'.[50] These societies also had quite low per capita GDP and slow growth, except in Sweden around 1700 and in Germany after about 1800 (the period during which German serfdom was progressively abolished). Among societies in which serfdom disappeared very early, per capita GDP has been estimated for the Netherlands (where serfdom never prevailed), Belgium (where it declined from the twelfth century) and England (where it declined from the fourteenth century). In these societies in the medieval period, per capita GDP was higher than in Sweden or Poland but about the same as Germany. But from around 1400, Belgium and the Netherlands (which were largely free of serfdom by that time) saw consistent economic growth, followed by England after around 1600.

[50] Ogilvie 2014a; North 2014; Rasmussen 2014; Jensen et al. 2018; Seppel 2020.

Figure 14.1 thus shows a rough association between an early decline of serfdom and better economic performance, although this association is quite approximate and not necessarily causal – an insight from economics which must be emphasised, as it has greatly strengthened historical argumentation. What these figures do is to establish a factual basis for comparing overall economic performance in a systematic way, a first step towards assessing the possible societal effects of serfdom.

Estimating historical per capita GDP figures requires dedicated work by interdisciplinary research teams combining the expertise of historians and economists.[51] Generating accurate estimates requires the expertise of the historian to examine the underlying sources rigorously with a view to source quality, alternative interpretations, consistency with other findings, and a comprehensive understanding of how the society functioned. It requires the expertise of the economist to ensure that quantities, prices and growth rates of different sectors and production factors are based on realistic assumptions, follow plausible trajectories, and are consistent with one another. Macroeconomic estimates must always be regarded as current best guesses, which rule out obviously impossible or nonsensical values but are constantly revised as new research becomes available. Without the expertise of both historians and economists, we would not even have such good guesses as we do. But even substantial revisions are unlikely to overturn the general patterns in Figure 14.1.

A second macroeconomic indicator for historical societies is the percentage of the population working in agriculture, which reflects the productivity of farming, the degree of economic specialisation, the security of the food supply and the resilience of the economy to growth reversals.[52] Figure 14.2 shows estimates of this indicator for the period during which serfdom vanished in some European societies and survived in others. The Netherlands, Belgium and England, where serfdom was weak or non-existent, already had less than 60 per cent of the population working in agriculture by 1400, falling to less than 50 per cent by 1700. Poland, Germany and Austria-Hungary-Bohemia, where large regions remained wholly or partly enserfed into the nineteenth century, had 75 per cent of their populations working in agriculture until 1500, and still around 65 per cent in 1700. It took serf economies until about 1800 to attain the same degree of agricultural productivity, sectoral specialisation and resilience to growth reversals as non-serf economies had achieved around 1400 – a development delay of four centuries. Again, it must be emphasised that this is just a descriptive association between serfdom

[51] See, e.g., Broadberry et al. 2015.
[52] Allen 2000; Broadberry and Gardner 2015.

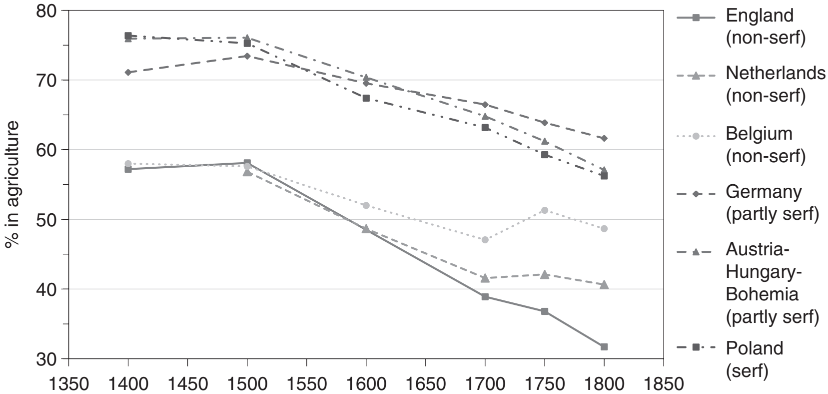

Figure 14.2 Percentage of population in agriculture in different parts of Europe, *c*.1400–*c*.1800.
Source: Allen 2000, pp. 8–9; Broadberry and Gardner 2015, p. 25.

and underdevelopment, whose possible causal dimensions are discussed below.

Economists and historians have worked together to generate a number of other indicators that establish the existence of economic differences between serf and non-serf societies. Urbanisation and agricultural productivity rates were lower in eastern than western Europe from the late medieval period onwards.[53] Real wages were much lower in eastern than western Europe between 1500 and 1800, which economists and historians ascribe to lower productivity in the primarily serf economies of the east.[54] By the early nineteenth century, human heights were around 3 cm lower in the serf societies of Hungary, Galicia and Prussia than in the non-serf societies of England and the Netherlands, despite English and Dutch urbanisation, which systematically reduced human stature because children lacked access to milk.[55] Army recruits from Prussia's eastern territories (where serfdom was more restrictive) were shorter than those from its western territories (where serfdom was mild or non-existent), again despite much higher western urbanisation.[56] Rural female household headship – an indicator of women's autonomy – was substantially lower in eastern than in western Europe during the late

[53] Allen 2000.
[54] Broadberry and Gupta 2006.
[55] Coppola 2010.
[56] Coppola 2010.

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medieval and early modern period, averaging around 5 per cent in the east and 15 per cent in the west.[57]

Together, therefore, economists and historians have succeeded in calculating a variety of systematic measures of economic and social activity in serf and non-serf societies. Their findings establish that, as a pure matter of fact, serf and non-serf economies differed on most measures of economic development. This provides a minimal test of whether serfdom harmed the economy. Had serf economies turned out to be characterised by better development measures than non-serf ones, it would have falsified that hypothesis and suggested that serfdom was indeed perfectly compatible with economic growth.

However, as has been emphasised, the link between serfdom and poor development indicators is just an association. To establish whether serfdom exercised a negative economic impact, we need to devise ways of testing for causal effects. Economists and historians have tackled this question in complementary ways, as can be seen from their efforts to investigate widely theorised causal mechanisms by which serfdom was likely to cause economic harm. One such mechanism operated via labour coercion, a central feature of serfdom. Forced labour for the lord involved the extraction of a non-trivial share of a serf family's main resource – as much as three to six days' work every week.[58] This was harmful not only for serfs, but for the wider economy. When labour is coerced, and is thus inadequately rewarded, it creates incentives for the labourer to 'shirk', in the term used by labour economists – to work slowly and unproductively. Extracting forced labour from serfs meant that a non-trivial share of the most important input in the economy – human labour – was deployed unproductively.

Qualitative evidence from contemporaries appears to substantiate that shirking was a major problem with serf labour. In societies as various as medieval England and early modern Bohemia, serf workers were described as so unproductive that it was sometimes worth replacing them with wage workers despite the extra cost.[59] In early nineteenth-century Hanover, Thomas Hodgskin observed of forced serf workers that 'if the landlord had to hire labourers, he might have his work tolerably well performed, but it is now shamefully performed, because the people who have it to do have no interest whatever in doing it well, and no other wish but to perform so little as possible within the prescribed time'.[60] Yet serf

[57] Ogilvie and Edwards 2000.
[58] Ogilvie 2014b; Klein 2014.
[59] Stone 1997, p. 641; Himl 2003, p. 87; Klein 2014.
[60] Hodgskin 1820, p. 85.

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societies continued to extract forced labour from serfs, even though the incentives created by coercion meant that human time was used unproductively and thus went to waste. This raises the question of whether it might be possible to provide more systematic evidence of a causal link between serfdom and reduced economic productivity.

Historians have tackled this challenge through detailed analysis of archival documents and mobilisation of contextual information on work organisation in serf societies. Stone, for example, made a direct comparison of the productivity of free and forced labour on the fourteenth-century English manor of Wisbech Barton.[61] He analysed a variety of agricultural tasks, including mowing, making hay, weeding, reaping and binding grain. In all cases he found a strong negative relationship between the use of coerced serf workers and the quantity of output per worker. On this demesne alone, for instance, it would have taken coerced serf workers 69–115 more man-days to reap and bind the annual grain harvest than it took free wage workers. Aggregated over the entire economy, this implies that a very large quantity of human labour was wasted by being used in the coerced, and therefore unproductive, institutional setting of serfdom. In analysing the productivity of coerced serf labour compared to free wage labour, Stone gave careful consideration to other variables that might affect productivity, including weather fluctuations, soil fertility, the size of labour inputs, the strength and skill required for different tasks, possible remuneration as a share of the yield, and the potential for theft. Although he could not quantify these confounding variables, he assessed them using contextual evidence and concluded that labour coercion was the main causal factor in accounting for the reduction in productivity.

Economists have tackled the issue of establishing causation very differently, using econometric (i.e., statistical) approaches directed at estimating the effect of serfdom on variations in economic outcomes across time and space, controlling for other possible influences. Such statistical approaches have been applied to a panel of Russian provinces in order to analyse the effect of the abolition of serfdom in 1861 on a range of outcomes, including agricultural productivity, industrial output and peasant nutrition.[62] To deal with the possible influence of confounding variables, variations among provinces in pre-existing characteristics and post-abolition developments were controlled for. The study also used the econometric techniques of difference in differences and instrumental variables to identify whether the associations they found between

[61] Stone 1997.
[62] Markevich and Zhuravskaya 2018.

serfdom and economic outcomes were indeed causal relationships. The conclusion was unambiguous: the abolition of serfdom had a positive causal effect on economic outcomes, substantially improving grain productivity, industrial output and industrial employment. Abolishing serfdom improved demographic outcomes, causing peasant mortality to fall by 5.6 per 1,000. The abolition of serfdom had a particularly marked effect in provinces where serfs had previously been obliged to deliver forced labour, leading to a 1.6 cm increase after 1861 in peasant heights, reflecting better nutritional status. The main mechanism by which the disappearance of serfdom improved agricultural performance was by changing the incentives of peasant workers, leading to greater effort, adoption of better agricultural practices and improved exploitation of local agronomic conditions.

Conclusion: Economics and History

Where does this take us in thinking about economics and history? This chapter began by posing three questions about serfdom. Did serf mentalities preclude goal-maximising action? Does serf agency imply that serfdom did not constrain serfs' choices? And did serfdom affect aggregate economic and social outcomes? Alone, neither economics nor history could answer these questions. Together, they are doing so. Neither discipline has dominated. Instead, each contributes distinctive expertise, which complements and enhances the productivity of the other discipline.

Economics spells out the concepts and preferences that constitute economic agency, clearly defining what historians must look for to determine whether serfs engaged in goal-maximising action, what their goals were, and hence whether historical underdevelopment can be ascribed to serf mentalities that precluded economic volition. Economics also clarifies the logic of making choices within a structure of constraints – the fundamental toolkit of microeconomics. This makes it possible to distinguish conceptually between the preferences of serfs on the one hand and the constraints they faced in pursuing those preferences on the other. Economics provides tools to reconstruct per capita GDP, occupational structure and other indicators, making it possible to assess not just whether serfdom was associated with poorer development outcomes, but how large this association was. Finally, economics contributes econometric approaches directed at multivariate analysis and identifying causal relationships. This makes it possible to control for confounding variables and even, in some cases, to establish definitively that the association between serfdom and underdevelopment was a causal effect.

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History provides complementary expertise. Historians identify innovative sources of evidence shedding light on the concrete enforcement of serfdom, widening our empirical purview beyond official estate accounts, rent rolls and elite correspondence to village records, manorial court minutes, serf petitions, village land transfer registers and community listings which illuminate the aspirations of serfs and the obstacles impeding their achievement. History provides expertise to interpret sources critically, interrogating them for biases imposed by the literate elites who wrote them, the village oligarchs who enjoyed lordly favour and the adult males who usually spoke for subordinate household members. History contributes its disciplinary ethos of tenaciously seeking to establish exactly what happened and taking into account the widest possible range of contributory factors. History provides its own expertise in approaching the tricky question of establishing causal links, identifying concrete situations recorded in the documents showing how productivity differed between coerced serf labour and free wage labour. History supplies the recognition that however important serfdom might have been, it operated in a wider institutional framework which also has to be taken into account. Finally, history furnishes the intuitive grasp (*Verstehen*) of the whole society which supplies hypotheses to investigate, interpretations for quantitative findings and plausibility tests for conclusions.[63]

Cooperation between economics and history has been crucial to advancing our understanding of serfdom, a critical institution in the development of pre-modern Europe. Serfdom was virtually universal throughout the Middle Ages, and its decline in some societies and survival in others is strongly associated with economic and political divergence between eastern and western Europe from the late medieval period until long past 1800. Precisely because economics and history have not behaved like warring tribes, but instead engaged in peaceful exchange, the realm of scholarship has been enriched.

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[63] Carus and Ogilvie 2009.

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