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The French economy in the longue durée: a study on real wages, working days and economic performance from Louis IX to the Revolution (1250–1789)

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A long-standing tradition in the literature concerning living standards in pre-industrial France has focused on the study of specific regions, what Philip Hoffman (2000) has eloquently called "local economics." Yet, to date, there is no comprehensive understanding of the long-term development of wages, prices, and economic performance from a broader national perspective. On the basis of newly constructed data-set containing more than 22,000 wage observations and almost 49,000 price observations, this dissertation provides a comprehensive empirical reconstruction of some of the key macro-economic aggregates of France from the phase of early state formation to the Revolution.

The first section presents new series of real wages for male agricultural laborers and construction workers in France from 1250 to 1789. The analysis highlights three main issues. First, the real wage series suggest that there were only limited long run improvements in living standards for French wage earners before the Industrial Revolution. Second, the estimates reveal that the period 1370–1500 saw the emergence and consolidation of a real wage gap between France and England (with English wages pulling ahead) as well as other leading European cities. Indeed, after a first phase of rapid expansion following the Black Death, by the 1370s real wages in France grew less than elsewhere in Europe where, instead, real wage improvements kept on consolidating till the 1450s. Investigating the origins of this trend, I show that the Hundred Years' War, with its negative effects on production and labor demand, as well as debasement were important factors in explaining the chronology of the gap in real wages between France and England. Finally, even if demographic data before the 1550s are fragmentary and fragile, it is possible to argue, consistently with the Malthusian interpretation, that the interaction between real wages and population was characterized by a long-lasting inverse relationship. However, while this mechanism appears to hold in general, one can detect a structural break in the relationship that points to a transition from a "high" to a "low" pressure Malthusian regime at least by the early seventeenth century.

The second section provides a broad characterization of working time in pre-industrial Europe concentrating on three dimensions of time: the calendar working year that corresponds to the calendar year net of general holidays and religious festivities; the actual working year of construction workers estimated from a sample of 96 building projects between France and England; and the implied working year defined as the annual working days required by a male breadwinner to provide for a notional family of five components (Allen and Weisdorf 2011). By analyzing the joint evolution of these three dimensions of time, I identify two distinct regimes of labor industriousness featuring unskilled workers in the construction industry in France and England between c.1300–1800. In France, the implied working year was much longer than the actual working year. This suggests that women and children's labor force participation as well as the presence of additional sources of non-labor income were necessary to assure the basic levels of consumption. Increases in the offer of labor were thus primarily driven by raising inflation and economic hardship. By contrast, I find evidence that in the post-Black Death phase, and between c.1650–1800, English regular construction workers supplied more days of work to the market than required by basic household subsistence. The mid-seventeenth century episode of surplus labor input derived from an upsurge in actual workloads and a contemporary drop of work requirements necessary for family subsistence in a context of progressive expansion of the frontier of working possibilities. This evidence is consistent with De Vries (2008)'s argument positing that the "industrious" revolution was driven by a consumer revolution and that workers toiled more in order to afford to buy a broader and more modern consumption bundle comprising colonial products and luxuries.

The second episode originated instead from the fact that the actual working year of regular urban laborers decreased much less than implied by the contemporary increase of their wages in the post-plague phase. I argue that the incomplete adjustment of labor supply reflected the presence of both technical-institutional constraints that limited voluntary reductions of actual workloads, and the rise of a new attitude toward higher quality consumption from an increasing share of urban workers.

Finally, in the last section I present new estimates of agricultural and GDP per capita in France between 1280 and 1789 using the so-called demand side approach (Nuvolari and Ricci 2013). The series offer little quantitative support to the hypothesis that France could have experienced appreciable long run improvements in living standards before the Industrial Revolution. Nevertheless, GDP per capita was highly volatile and presented multiple peaks and troughs alternating phases of economic crisis to periods of economic expansion. These include the "efflorescence" of economic growth between the 1280s and the 1370s and the growth trend starting from the mid-sixteenth century that ran in parallel with the consolidation of the French state and the opening of new trade routes from Europe to Asia and the Americas.

Overall, the estimates suggest that the evolution of GDP per capita in France can be suitably interpreted as an intermediate case between the successful example of the North Sea Area and the pattern of decline experienced by Central-Northern Italy and Spain. Being neither a southern country nor a northern one, the growth experience of France seems to reflect this geographic heterogeneity.