

COMPREHENSIVE EXAMINATION IN ECONOMIC HISTORY

Answer four of the following questions.

1. Economic historians are in general agreement that substantial differences in agricultural productivity between England and France persisted from the pre-industrial period well into, if not beyond, the nineteenth century. Three sets of factors (geographic, institutional, and degree of urbanization) have been advanced as potential sources of this longstanding contrast. Please discuss these interpretations, and outline a method of either distinguishing between hypotheses, or of estimating the relative contribution of each factor to the persistence of the productivity disparity.
2. What was the general record of migratory flows to the New World during the era of European colonization of the Americas (say through 1760), and what factors have been suggested to account for the differences in the numbers, composition, and status (indentured servants, slaves, etc.) of migrants going to different New World economies? How did differences in migratory flows to different places contribute to the extent of inequality that emerged in the various colonies? In what ways would you modify or extend the emphasis that some scholars have put on factor endowments in accounting for the various patterns of migration? Explain.
3. The historical development of financial institutions and capital markets in industrializing economies is often cited as an example of how economic institutions tend to evolve endogenously, and of how growth is not dependent upon a particular institutional form. Other scholars disagree, however, and argue that financial institutions have frequently failed to evolve in such a way as to be conducive to growth. How consistent are these competing perspectives with historical experience? Explain, making reference to specific examples.
4. Like economists generally, economic historians have been devoting more attention in recent years to geographic clustering in the types and magnitudes of economic activity. What are some of the most prominent examples of geographic clustering that stand out in the record? How persistent have these cases of clustering been over time? What sorts of explanations have been proposed in theory, and how have they stood up to tests of consistency with the evidence? How do you think that the nature and extent of geographic clustering in economic activity will change in the future? In general, what does the historical record of the United States suggest about the importance of different kinds of external economies or external economies overall? Explain.
5. The question of whether and how the institution of slavery hampered the long-term growth and development of the U.S. South is one of the great issues in American economic history, and has certainly received extensive attention from scholars over the last thirty years -- since the work of Conrad and Meyer. In your opinion, what has been learned, and from what work and how did we learn it? Is there any more important research to be done on this subject? Explain.
6. Thomas Malthus argued that the connection between population and food supply could not be broken. Yet today Europe devotes relatively little of its resources to food production. Please review the demographic and agricultural developments in France and England since 1600, and identify when -- if ever -- their economies ceased to be Malthusian. Which factors were most important in their breaking free of the Malthusian constraints? Explain.