Abstract

In World History, the 17th and 18th centuries represent an ambivalent period, conceptually caught between the realms of tradition and modernity. Conventionally, European scholarship has interpreted major developments of this period through a framework of modernization, with the conceptualization of the period as an ‘early modernity’ gaining ground. In recent decades the notion of an early modernity has been extended to serve as a framework for global history as well.

This thesis challenges these frameworks of modernization and early modernity on the grounds of their inherent teleological problems. Instead, it argues that the major developments of the 17th and 18th centuries can be largely accounted for in terms of the continuous workings of pre-modern dynamics of change and stability. The argument of the thesis is structured around a comparative analysis of processes of economic development, state formation, and the formation of social elites in China, France, and the Austrian Habsburg Empire, c. 1650-1800. By departing from the usual pattern of East-West comparison and using China as the model case for the analysis, the thesis provides a new perspective on the major developments in the period, stressing their deep continuities with pre-modernity.

On this basis, the thesis argues for a reconceptualization of the period as ‘late pre-modernity’, a period characterized by the continuation and extension of the pre-modern, agrarian social formations.