

4.4. Peasants and their relationship to land. Part I

Panel organiser: Congost, Rosa, Centre de Recerca d'Història Rural, University of Girona, Spain; Béaur, Gérard, Centre de Recherches Historiques, GDRI CRICEC, CNRS/EHESS, Paris, France

In some current representations of European Rural Societies, the relationship of peasants to land is dominated by the idea of a visceral attachment; not only regarding property rights, which are seen as stable and hardly changing, but also the attachment to individual farms of those who work them. Beyond its economic worth, the social and symbolic value of land was crucial, and therefore its transmission to the next generation constituted a priority and marked a key stage in the lifecycle and identity of peasant families. This attachment largely determined social behaviour. It provoked harsh competition and also enforced complex processes of negotiation in order to ensure the continuity of the farm. In the end, the sale of a plot of land or the abandonment of a farm were always considered to be trials that must be avoided at all costs. The loss of an exploitation was an unbearable drama, even more so when the accumulation of land was achieved at the cost of considerable sacrifices, and the transmission from generation to generation of the family's land had become a moral obligation. In these circumstances, the land market would be modest, indeed, almost paralyzed were it not for the expropriation of land caused by continued financial pressure on indebted peasants. These are issues we must discuss. What did the possession of land represent for the farmers of different regions, both yesterday and today? How far is the image we have today merely a product of the triumph of agrarian individualism? How could families ensure by themselves their reproduction through inheritance or marriage, and how great have changes in their decision-making processes been under the impact of recent economic and social upheavals? Were peasants really motivated by a passion for "their" land, or rather did they treat it as any other part of their capital? Did they see it as a simple work tool, or did they crave landed property? Was the attachment to land that we assume existed a reality, or, rather, is it the reflection of "our own" relationship to property and to the "family's goods"? In what ways did the relationship between peasants and land in different societies produce significant changes in property rights to land, and thus, in social relationships as a whole, that is to say, in the society itself? This panel is organized under the auspices of CRH and GDRI CRICEC.

Chair: Béaur, Gérard, Centre de Recherches Historiques, GDRI CRICEC, CNRS/EHESS, Paris, France

Tuesday, 20 August 2013 // 1030 – 1200 // Session 4 – Room A 201



4.4.1. Which property? The rise of a class of powerful emfiteutes in Catalonia (15th-18th centuries)

Congost, Rosa, Centre de Recerca d'Història Rural, University of Girona, Spain

One of the most interesting processes of change in the history of Catalonia, clearly contrasting with other European regions, is the rise of a class of powerful emfiteutes in the early modern period. The possible contrast between the judicial reality of feudal rights as described in legal texts and the social reality of a strengthened dominium utile shown in empirical research, poses a stimulating challenge to historians since it demands that we focus on aspects of daily reality that are not always visible and explicit in official documents. How could an important number of peasants emerge as a powerful social group despite the fact that the interests of dominium directum landlords were protected by law? From a comparative perspective, what would seem more specific to Catalonia is not so much the end of serfdom or the strengthening of the dominium utile but the consolidation of an important number of wealthy and well-off peasant families. Up to what point did the strategies practised by emphyteutic tenants contribute to a certain corrosion of the dominium directum? We propose two lines of very interrelated inquiry. First, to consider certain practices of peasant resistance, known and practised in some European regions, as a working hypothesis to explain the different ways of overcoming the crisis of the late middle ages in western Europe. The second line aims to broaden this task of interpretation by considering the attitudes and strategies related to the available documents and titles and, therefore, to the social use of information.

4.4.2. English farmers and the land 1500-1926

Broad, John, CAMPOP, Cambridge, UK

This paper takes a long view of English peasant farmers and their property rights from the later middle ages to the early twentieth century when customary or feudal rights were finally (largely) extinguished. It argues that the combination of the predominance of the will over custom in English inheritance practice, combined with a widespread practice of lifetime gifts to children, and the ability of peasant farmers to buy and sell customary land provided the basis for a fluidity of peasant property holdings. Good transport links, and the growth of London and later of industrial cities, provided incentives for farmers to specialise and expand operations, while the widespread availability of non-agricultural work in the countryside minimised subsistence competition for land. While English peasant farmers may have had an attachment to a piece of land in a particular place, their geographical mobility was considerable, and while the prosperous tenant farmer of the 18th and 19th century might own land to give him a political voice, and as a store of wealth, they increasingly used their capital to invest in their farms. The paper will provide a framework for the development of the 'English system' of agriculture from the peasant point of view and will provide data to show how the structure of land ownership was frequently very different from the farm structures in a village, and examine aspects of the decline of customary and feudal tenures in the 19th century.

4.4.3. Owning Land and Building „A Great Rural Civilization“ for White Farmers in the U.S. South

Herbin-Triant, Elizabeth, St John's University, New York City, USA

Small white farmers in the early twentieth-century U.S. South were desperate to buy and keep farms. These were people with an agrarian worldview – farming was central to how they understood their heritage and their purpose on earth. These farmers imagined that if they could own farms, they would be able to build a society quite different from the one they lived in, where landlords rented eroded farms to debt-ridden sharecroppers and tenants. They hoped to build a society dominated by thriving white yeomen. For them, this was a vision radiant with meaning and beauty. It was also a vision built on racial exclusion. They envisioned white farmers working cooperatively and enjoying rich social lives – and they considered African American farmers living and working nearby a threat to this vision. For this reason, many small white farmers supported a campaign to segregate rural North Carolina in 1913-1915 after the model of South Africa, a campaign led by The Progressive Farmers Clarence Poe. This paper uses what Poe and the small white farmers who supported his rural segregation campaign said about the importance of farm ownership. It explores the world – which Poe called a "great rural civilization" – that they wished to build. It argues that land ownership was important to these farmers because they viewed it as an essential component of political power – a step toward full citizenship. The paper also considers how the desire for farms shaped the behavior of small white farmers, arguing that agrarianism heightened racism in the 20th century U.S. South.

Participants

Béaur, Gérard

Specialist of rural and economic history, Gérard Béaur is Directeur de Recherches at CNRS and Directeur d'Etudes at EHESS (Paris, France). He is a member of the Centre de Recherches Historiques and he was director of this unit of research from 2002 to 2010. He was Chair of the COST Action A35 Progressore and he is director of the GDRI (International Research Network, CNRS) CRICEC (Crises and Changes in the European Countryside). He is director of the series Rural History in Europe (Brepols) and he is actually co-editing a volume of this series about Property rights, land markets and economic growth.

Broad, John

John Broad taught at London Metropolitan University and since 2009 has been attached to the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure, University of Cambridge on a project with Richard Hoyle and Leigh Shaw Taylor to explore new ways of analysing and digitising the late eighteenth century Land Tax data for England and Wales. Recent publications include 'Bishop Wake's Visitation Returns for the diocese of Lincoln c1710' (2 vols 2012) while he is currently completing a history of rural housing in England.

Congost, Rosa

Senior researcher at the Centre de Recerca d'Història Rural, Rosa Congost teaches at Facultat de Lletres in Universitat de Girona as Professor of the Economic History Department. She was vice-chair of the Cost Action A35 Progressore and she is vice-chair of EURHO. Her research interests cover the history of landed property and agrarian social relations. She has co-edited the volume about Contexts of Property in Europe. The social embeddedness of property rights in land in historical perspective. She is director of the programme Impoverishment and enrichment processes in rural societies: a way of studying social dynamics in History.

Herbin-Triant, Elizabeth

Elizabeth Herbin-Triant is an Assistant Professor in the History Department at St. John's University in New York City. She received her degrees from Harvard University (AB) and Columbia University (PhD), and held a postdoctoral fellowship in Agrarian Studies at Yale University. Herbin-Triant is completing a manuscript entitled: A "Great Rural Civilization" for White Southerners: Agrarianism and Rural Segregationist Ideology in the American South. This manuscript argues that segregationist thinking in the Southern countryside developed independently from urban segregation, and grew out of a different tradition – agrarianism.