

6.4. Peasants and their relationship to land. Part II

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



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 organised under the auspices of the CRH and GDRI CRICEC.

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

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6.4.1. Land ownership, an unattainable horizon for French peasants in the early modern and modern periods?

Béaur, Gérard, Centre de Recherches Historiques, GDRI CRICEC, CNRS & EHESS, Paris, France

This paper criticizes three common assumptions that characterize, in a caricatural way, the relationship between French peasants and their land. The first is that until perfect, absolute ownership emerged in the French Revolution, the tenant was in no way a land

owner; in the struggles to introduce a Civil Code and enclosures during the period leading up to that change, criticism of confused property rights was a key economic argument. The second assumption, which partly contradicts the first, is the belief that the history of peasant property is the story of a long and ongoing expropriation by the big landowners, the so-called rentiers du sol, so land-hungry that they were ready to drive the population into debt in order to achieve their aims. Finally, the third assumption is that the peasant was so deeply attached to his property that except when farms were transmitted through inheritance and succession, land scarcely changed hands at all, and that when it did circulate, it only did so through exchanges that were not real market transactions. We will show, first, that peasants occupying land were, from very early on, its real owners, and that the overlaying of rights over the land was by no means a handicap for them; second, that the constant decline of peasant property, as well as creditors' greed for land, are two recurring historiographical myths; and, lastly, that there was, from an early date, an active land market that could compete with other forms of property circulation, and that consequently it is impossible to place exchanges of land outside the sphere of economic activities.

6.4.2. Retaining possession of the family farm and the interference of the Swiss State (19th-21st centuries)

Head-König, Anne-Lise, University of Geneva, Switzerland

Significant legal changes have taken place in Switzerland since the 19th century and this occurred especially at the beginning of the 20th century when the 29 legal inheritance systems were replaced by a Federal Code tending to privilege the family farm before other forms of farming by favouring intergenerational transfers and impartible inheritance. In the middle of the 20th century, however, the influence of three main inheritance systems (impartible, partible and pseudo-egalitarian) was still evident in the farm structure existing in the various cantons since these systems were deeply rooted in the relevant geographical, economic and cultural contexts. Far more than changes in the legal system, it was rather modifications in agricultural policy which brought about a certain convergence in the different successional practices. State institutions exerted a growing influence with their system of support payments based on strict rules such as the minimal size of a farm, compulsory age at retirement for the elderly farmer and requirements in respect of professional training etc. In order to retain the viability of their farms, however, farmers were obliged to complement their resources with off-farm work so that an increasing proportion of farms were worked part-time. To adapt to market demand farm size also had to increase and non-family land had to be leased. This explains the development of land tenure legislation in the second half of the 20th century.

6.4.3. „If my brother sold the farm in the future I'd probably be the first one trying to buy it back off him“: an exploration of the relationship between non-inheritors and land in Irish farming families.

Cassidy, Anne, National University of Ireland, Galway, Ireland

This research is carried out with a cohort of young Irish university students from farming families who through embracing education have developed a pathway that takes them away from agriculture. Although few will inherit, their attitude to the land is important since a smooth transfer of the holding depends in part upon their cooperation. The findings show that relationships with the land are dominated by emotional responses that are shadowed by duty and obligation rather than perceptions around its value as a capital asset. There is a strong desire to see the land retained within the family either by a sibling who is regarded as the 'natural' farmer or in absence of this option they are often willing to take ownership on themselves rather than see it sold. The response to this is gendered with many male participants struggling with a profound sense of responsibility not only to take the land but also to farm it, while their female counterparts are more likely to distance themselves from a functional relationship even were they to take possession of the land. The predominant wish to see the land kept in the family at almost any cost is based in part on the farm's capacity to act as a repository of personal, parental and historical memories as well as its symbolic representation of their intergenerational endurance. The research highlights that even while the number of active family farms in Ireland continues to decline the sale of land in Ireland is unlikely to increase in the near future.

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 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.

Cassidy, Anne

Anne Cassidy is a final year PhD student in the National University of Ireland, Galway. Her research focuses on the experience of growing up on Irish family farms and its impact on the transition to adulthood for a cohort of university students who will not become farmers. She has a BA in Sociological and Political Studies and History and an MA in Community Development. Her research interests include rural youth sociology, belonging, research methodologies and rural development.

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.

Head-König, Anne-Lise

Anne-Lise Head-König is professor emerita of economic and social history at the University of Geneva. She is currently co-editor of the periodical *Histoire des Alpes/Storia delle Alpi/Geschichte der Alpen*. She is also a member of the scientific board of the Swiss rural History Society. Her research focuses on rural and especially mountain societies with an emphasis on farm transfers, collective property, the labour market and migration. Her most recent publication, edited in collaboration with Péter Pozsgai is *Inheritance Practices, Marriage Strategies and Household Formation in European Rural Societies*, Turnhout, Brepols Publisher, 2012.