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Third Workshop of Working Group 3 – Peasant Societies
 Scientific Report

**Inheritance Practices, Marriage Strategies and Household Formation in European
 Rural Societies**

Sarospatak, May 15-17 2008

The third WS of Working Group 3 (Peasant Societies) took place at Sarospatak (Hungary) on May 15-17, 2008. The organizer on behalf of the COST programme was Dr. Peter Pozsgai from Corvinus University in Budapest. The contributors and discussants came from 15 European countries from a wide geographical spectrum (Ireland, UK, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Poland, Czech Republic, Austria, Hungary, Russia, Greece, Spain (2), Germany, France and Switzerland). The period dealt with by the contributions went from the 16th to the 20th century and the 19th and 20th centuries were particularly well represented. Each of the sessions was commented on by a discussant and each was followed by a general –very lively – discussion

The topic: The aim of the workshop was to discuss the interaction between inheritance systems, marriage and the household formation of those who inherited as well as of those who were excluded from inheriting the (family) farm or part of it, and to explore to what extent and for which reasons some of these systems have survived up to the end of the 20th century. This was a topic of major importance, since the persistence of huge differences in inheritance patterns and in the structure of rural households can still be observed in Europe right up to the present day.

The papers revolved around the topics related to inheritance systems, impartible (broadly speaking, the passing on of the landed possession whenever possible from one generation to another in the same family, implying the transfer to a single heir), and partible (that is, the division of the family inheritance in order to allow the sons and daughters to establish themselves and create a new household). They examined in particular the consequences for marriage, age at marriage and household formation and the varied solutions to which rural societies resorted in order to provide for those who did not inherit or inherited too little, and the subsequent changes brought about by economic diversification. Several authors insisted on the significant differences existing between the areas where ante-mortem transfers of landed property were possible. In these cases the timing of household division and the formation of a new household were key elements in an individual life course and his chance of becoming head of the household. On the other hand, there were those areas where the transfer took place only after the death of the owner and household head, and here one can often observe more complex households (extended families, stem families, joint families, etc.). With post-mortem transfers, though, the size of the family holding was a decisive factor in structuring the composition of the households, as small farms were unable to support complex households. However,

it must be noted that there were exceptions to this model, as in Serbia. There, partible inheritance prevailed, but the majority of people were nevertheless members of a joint household at some stage in their lives, small scale farming and the joint ownership of summer pastures requiring the cooperation of all the male members of the household and fathers, while still alive, tried to prevent the division of their households.

Sources: The sources consulted were of a very diverse nature, which is essentially a reflection of the way in which European national states were organized up to the middle of the 20th century, mirroring in turn the varying degrees of institutional autonomy given to local communities and governments.

The very extensive corpora consulted comprised censuses, civil and church records of births, marriages and deaths, marriage contracts, sales contracts, retirement contracts, tax lists, land registration (cadastre), interviews (especially of old people who supplied information on the household composition existing when they were young for regions where extended documentary is lacking), also letters (from paupers) to overseers, and surveys of (paupers') households, etc. Where contributors worked mainly with censuses, and especially when they could use several censuses, interesting data were provided on household composition, changes in household structure, data on marital status during the life course, the proportion of those never married, etc.

Central questions dealt with: The workshop brought about a many-sided discussion of the different objectives of European rural societies in respect of landed property and of the situation of families and the individual, and the changes brought about by **commercial farming** (R. Paping), **new activities** (R. Congost et al., J. Gray, S. Holmlund, H. Kollé), the role of **local authorities** (S. King), the interference of **state institutions** in respect of inheritance law and property transfer (S. Holmlund, K. Górlach et al., A.-L. Head), the creation and the development of the **welfare state** (V. Hionidou, A.-L. Head). In rural Serbia, however, the changes in agricultural specializations and the different requirements of family labour they implied were not always sufficient to affect the still very patriarchal structure of the household and the division of land. In fact, it was only with the income provided by an increasing sector of trade and handicraft in some villages that the proportion of their nuclear family households increased (S. Gruber).

In respect of **women in farming households**, their position varied considerably. We can observe on the one hand that in some cases they had considerable power, either as part-owner of the family farm being legally entitled to half of the property (R. Paping), as heads of farms and even as single women in regions where there was considerable emigration (R. Rey Castelao), as widows who managed the farm as long as their adult children remained single (P. Pozsgai, A. Velkova), or their increased power in the second half of the 20th century when legislation brought about equality between men and women in connection with the transfer of farms (A.-L. Head). On the other hand, one can observe that in some parts of Europe early marriage was a powerful weapon in the hands of the husbands' family: it permitted the incorporation of the bride into the household in an inferior position which made it easier for the husband and his parents (as long as they were alive) to maintain a much superior position (S. Gruber). Then in the 20th century, commercial farming also resulted in a deterioration of the situation of daughters compared to that existing in the 18th and 19th centuries. They had fewer chances of succeeding their parents at the head of the farm, and they even came to be driven out of farm work altogether as a result of increasing mechanization (R. Paping).

The adaptability of the family systems – Many participants in the workshop insisted on the importance of the adaptability of the family system. Even where impartible inheritance was the preferred mode of transfer, celibacy could be reduced, and it became possible for families to settle or be settled locally with increased working opportunities (for the father) (J. Gray). Even where the transfer to one heir was always the rule, an considerable increase in population could sometimes occur due to the fact that new agricultural activities (wine growing, etc.) or new rural industries allowed the non-inheriting siblings to marry, albeit at a later age than the heir (R. Congost et al.). The individual's dependence on family resources could diminish as a result of the openings created by industrial activities. The strong link between marriage and inheritance of land could diminish, allowing younger sons to marry, as in the Swedish case as from the end of the 19th century (S. Holmlund). Alternatively, emigration was the solution adopted in some northern parts of Spain with the consequence of a growing number of females heading a farm (O. Rey Castelao).

In the eastern European regions, where partible inheritance was the norm, families were also affected by the new employment opportunities occurring in some communities as from the middle of 19th century: there were more simple households and fewer joint households as already mentioned in the Serbian case. More work opportunities outside agriculture for peasant offspring in the region studied by H. Kolle permitted division strategies that deviated from those found in purely agricultural areas as the non-agrarian income of the junior members of the family altered the power balance within the multiple family household. This led to an earlier household division despite the legal and economic requirements imposed by the Russian State to slow the phenomena, and consequently textile workers attained headship earlier in their life course than was the case for agricultural workers. This also meant that an important proportion of the household divisions took place during the life time of the father or mother (H. Kolle), whilst in the Hungarian case household divisions were postponed until the death of the father (P. Pozsgai).

Commercial farming also had its specific rules with regard to the transfer of land and household formation. Commercial farming, combined with specific institutional rules concerning farm ownership produced more economic opportunities and meant that the self-interest of the farmers (both husbands and wives) was more important than the aim of passing the farm to one of the descendants. In the Northern part of the Netherlands, for example, in this context of commercial farming, up to the end of the 18th century, it was economically speaking it was not in the interest of parents to give up their farm as they would then not have been able to afford a comfortable retirement, and it was not considered to be very desirable to live together with one's married children. Consequently, selling the farm to strangers was just as frequent as a transfer within the family. Important changes did occur during the 19th century; and the renting out of farms to children getting married grew increasingly popular, so that parents could retire and live on an annual rent after some 20 to 30 years working the farm.

The concept of inheritance for the rural population which had no access to land, especially in the 19th century – One contributor (S. King) investigated marriage and household formation practices outside the context of landed inheritance which was the case for a large part of the rural population in England. During the first half of the 19th century the labouring poor were just too poor to be part of any formalised inheritance system. His argument was based on samples from paupers' letters to the effect that for the section of the rural population which was poor, the analysis of marriage motivations that emphasise wages and wage expectations needs a corrective. The term 'inheritance' in respect of the poor must be understood in a much more wider sense than simply as the ante- or post-mortem disposable of material goods. Other items were equally regarded as

'inheritance' by the poor. For them the link between the support they received in conjunction with the poor law and the household formation was quite evident. Such support was considered by the poor as a resource and a substitute for accumulation prior to marriage and as a friend/relative substitute in the aftermath of marriage. And one could only benefit from this resource by the putting moral and rhetorical pressure on the parish officials. For paupers marriage motivations were not at all tied up with the notion of achieving sustained independence.

The independent household and the independent holding – There were considerable variations in the meaning attributed to this two terms. There were thus huge differences in the rights of the newly wedded couples and in the degree to which they remained dependant on their parents, or alternatively the parents on their children in societies with little social security. This led to some fruitful discussion as can be inferred from the Hungarian and the Greek examples. In the case of Hungary it was specified that married sons could live in a different farmhouse but work together with their old father and even using the same farm implements as he did (P. Pozsgai). In the case of the island of Mykonos, an elderly couple remained independent – in terms of residence - after the marriage of their offspring, with the household being headed by the husband. The relevant census indicates that the use of term of independent households refers to a separate place of residence, but it does not allow a further distinction to be made as to whether independence refers to the finances of the household or to its cooking arrangements. The interviews relating to the beginning of the 20th century show however how following the marriage of all the children, the parental couple would retain their independent household, and also remain economically independent. A son – usually, but not necessarily, the youngest – would be chosen to look after the parents who were still involved in farming. He would then be the recipient of the largest part of the parental farm. In such a case the parents secured their future in old-age by ensuring proximity of residence of one of their sons. It was not a stem family situation, since the two couples were living in separate houses, did not share meals, and each retained their independent household economy. All the same the two households were 'linked' through the land that was owned by the father and would subsequently be inherited by the son.

The family farm as social security for old age – There was a useful discussion regarding the fact that the family is and has been the main welfare agency for the elderly and those in need to a varying extent in all European rural societies. Even in the second part of the 20th century family ties were heavily dependent on financial arrangements and the lives of sons and daughters could be, and were, shaped so that optimal provision for the elderly could be ensured with or without retirement contracts as can be observed in certain papers (among others V. Hionidou, A. – L. Head)

State intervention – During the whole of the period under review, the State or **its institutions** intervened in several domains, amongst others in order to influence the formation of new households for environmental reasons or for economic ones relating to the labouring power of the household. Interestingly in this context of State intervention, a political debate on the future of family farming and farming households took place in several countries at the same time towards the end of the nineteenth century and around the beginning of the twentieth century. During the 20th century it is indisputable that the trend to increased state interventions in the process of intergenerational transmission of peasant landed property grew considerably, and the aims were manifold: economic and social (viability of the family farm, the protection of owner-occupied farms versus

expanding farms, modernization of the agricultural sector, etc.), political (the continued maintenance of a peasant population, or as in the Polish case (K. Goralach), the attempt to destroy this population with the reorganisation of farming activity under the Communist system).

Conclusion — It became obvious from the many lively discussions in Sarospatak that the preferred system of property transfer and of household organization adopted by the different European rural societies in the past as in the present to ensure the social reproduction of family farms varied considerably. However, in a present day context, the question raised regarding Czech lands in the 18th century as to whether it was really in the interest of the heir to take on the parental farm at an early stage and to marry while young is still valid and should be developed further: do heirs nowadays really want to inherit the family farm and go on farming? In European rural societies today, the answers are probably just as diverse as the organization of property relations and households were in the past.