



**COST action A35 Progressore
Programme For the Study of European Rural Societies (PROGRESSORE)**

Third Workshop of Working Group 4

With the collaboration of :

Archiv für Agrargeschichte **Archives of rural history**
Archives de l'histoire rurale AFA AHR ARH

Scientific report of the workshop

**State Agricultural Policies: Causes, Implementation and
Consequences**

Place: Möschberg/Grosshöchstetten (Bern): 3-5 June 2008

Organizer: Peter Moser, Archives of rural history (ARH)

Scientific Committee: Giuliana Biagioli, Paul Brassley, Socrates Petmezas, Tony Varley,
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1. Programme, participants, finances and media reporting

The workshop lasted for three days and was divided into two parts. On Tuesday and Wednesday 17 papers dealing with the topic of the workshop - causes, implementation and consequences of State Agricultural Policies - were presented and discussed; on Thursday the workshop was first contextualised within the theme of the working group 4 which was defined as "State, government, politics and peasants" and then, in view of the final conference in Gerona in 2009, a first attempt was made for making an overview of the progressore programme. Representatives of the working groups one, three and four were present. The 17 papers had been selected from the more than 20 proposals which we submitted in response to the call for papers. The 17 authors, the four discussants and the representatives of

the working groups came from 15 different European countries, representing the south, east, west and north alike.

The workshop was held in Möschberg, a small rural place 15 miles outside Bern, where in the interwar-period the young farmers movement and their college for farmers wives was located. This place than became the headquarters of the organic-agriculture movement in the 1950/60s. Today it is a conference centre – but the archives of all the different movements are still located there and can be consulted on the internet.

On Tuesday evening an excursion was arranged to a spelt producer in the area with a view to illustrating a contemporary aspect of rural life in the Emmental as well as creating an opportunity for a discussion between theory and practice.

The workshop was financially supported by the Swiss National Research Fund in Bern. A national and a local newspaper, in two articles, reported on aspects of the workshop.

2. Content

As stated in the call for papers, the workshop set out to deal with three elements of agricultural policies: the causes, the process of implementation and the consequences. While the third element was not really addressed systematically or in any great detail, the presentations and discussions concentrated on the following three questions: First: What do states do when they intervene in agriculture? Second: What are the causes for their intervention (or non-intervention)? And third: What difference can actors outside the state make to the shaping and implementation of agricultural policies?

What do states do when they intervene in agriculture? While it is possible to identify a myriad of distinguishable activities with the agricultural interventions of states, for practical purposes it is useful to try to arrange these activities into categories. One obvious principle of categorisation derives from the functions that states perform. Thus, at the level of broad functions, “liberal democratic” states have routinely regulated, stimulated, planned and co-ordinated agricultural activities as well as economic activities more generally. In “autocratic” states the appropriation of land by the state and its redeployment in a centrally controlled agricultural economy would need to be added to a listing of the state’s functional activities as

has been shown by the two papers which dealt with the Bulgarian and Hungarian cases (Varga and Bachev) in the period of state socialism.

Up to a point to categorise state activities along functional lines may be revealing, but it tells us little or nothing about the actual forms assumed by the regulation and non-regulation, stimulation, planning and co-ordination of agricultural activity in specific cases. Nor does such categorisation illuminate of itself the politics that surround the different functional activities of the state or the vital issue of the consequences (whether intended or unintended) that follow state interventions. It is in elucidating the forms, politics and consequences of state interventions that the work of historians and social scientists has something of significance to contribute. And that is what most papers in the workshop did.

The aim of the workshop was to produce a deeper understanding of the complex processes of change and continuity in European agriculture and agricultural policies before and after World War I. The time covered was roughly the period of modern European statehood, beginning in the 18th century and proceeding right up to the present day. The spatial range of the papers embraced the experience of countries as diverse as Portugal and Belgium, Greece and Ireland, Holland and Austria, Germany and Spain, Bulgaria and Switzerland and the United Kingdom and Hungary. While some of the papers dealt with single cases (Schuurman; Flückiger, Brassley; Varley; Harwood; Sanz Lafuente; Schmitz; Varga; Bachev), there were a number of comparisons (Langthaler; Streifeneder; Freire and Taboas) presented as well. Other contributions dealt with developments on a supra-national level (Petmezas; van der Burg; von Gravenitz; Koning).

Another way of approaching the contributions of the workshop is to categorise the papers into the three groups: a) Those who were following/developing “models” that try to explain long term developments, b) those who basically illustrated and analyzed specific cases from the 19th/20th centuries and c) those who focussed on the options and activities of a variety of “actors”. The contributors who choose to use “models” (Koning, Moser, Schuurman) all addressed the questions of what role states play, and whose interests they serve, when they intervene in agriculture – and whether this intervention is significantly different in the agricultural sector compared to other sectors.

While two broad, in many ways fundamentally diverging theories of the state can be identified – the marxist and the liberal – these interestingly converge in the case of agriculture. Both theories gravitate to the view that rural interests will, as a rule, find themselves in a structurally subordinate position in industrialised and urban-centred modern societies. The subordination of rural interests, in both the liberal and the Marxist interpretations, is even a precondition for the development of modern societies.

That the three “models-based” and long-term analyses in the workshop presented varying interpretations of the basic Liberal-Marxist narrative shows, on the one hand, the potential for development of an ideal-type oriented approach in historical research and debates. On the other hand what differences emerged were simply the result of the fact that one of the papers was concentrating on a single-state case (Netherlands) while another focused on the different resources industry and agriculture have relied on since the industrial revolution, and the implications such reliance has had for the agricultural policies in industrialised societies. What became clear, in any event, was that “models” remain essential for the understanding of long term historical developments even though they can never tell us exactly what specific people did at a certain time in a specific place.

How fruitful a combination of “ideal-type” oriented approaches with source-based case studies can be was illustrated when those papers dealing with specific issues were discussed at the workshop. Locating seemingly disparate cases within a wider and longer perspective facilitated a better understanding of the specific topics which were presented for discussion. It became clear, for example, how politically antagonistic governments, such as the Iberian dictatorships and the USSR-oriented ones in eastern Europe, could play similar roles when it came to perceptions and policies towards the great majority of the rural population. And, on the other hand, the examples from western Europe illustrated convincingly how deep and substantial state interventions in the agricultural sector and the countryside were by no means confined to “autocratic” states.

While there was a consensus in the workshop that World War II was in many ways a crucial juncture for the understanding of the motives of liberal democratic states in intervening in agriculture as we came to know it in the post-war period, there is strong evidence for the argument that it was in fact World War I that marked the real turning point in this respect. And some (Koning, Harwood, Moser) went even further back in time and pointed to the great

variety of state interventions in the last quarter of the 19th century which included many and – where the development of agriculture and industry alike are concerned – often more significant measures than the much discussed international trade regulations and restrictions. It became clear that discussions that focussed purely on the level of trade-restrictions often conceal more than they illuminate when it comes to our understanding of the interactions of agriculture and industry in modern societies.

It is here, when attention is paid alike to the rule as well as the exception, that it becomes fruitful to look closer at the behaviour of individuals and groups as ‘actors’. Why did the state intervene (or, indeed, sometimes not intervene) in a certain time under certain circumstances? Was it, for instance, at the behest of the food producers (as commonly is suggested) or was it in the interest of a safe and cheap supply of food for urban consumers? Not only do observations of long trends tend to suggest an explanation along the latter lines, but also the gradual marginalisation of the agricultural sector in modern societies. Convincing answers to these questions are, again, more likely to be produced when the behaviour of actors are contextualised within a longer term perspective. The examples presented in the workshop, notably the Irish case (Varley), suggest that there must be many more factors coming together to trigger of – or prevent – successful state interventions than the demand of pressure groups – however influential or articulate they may be judged in hindsight.

Discussions in the workshop suggested that for a better understanding of the behaviour of states attempts to identify and analyze “hidden” actors and agendas (Schmitz) such as, for example, the agronomists (Flückiger, Brassley) might be a more promising approach than focussing on well known pressure groups and their tactics. A close analysis of this body of experts – and, indeed many others - moving between theory and practice suggest that they played a crucial, but usually overlooked, role in influencing the behaviour of civil servants and pressure groups alike. But the agronomists were, as was true of many other actors as well, not only go-betweeners but also successful movers whose actions quite often produced unintended results. Such unintended results are well worth documenting in the field of agriculture, because this sector was (and often still is) approached through the application of models derived from industrial conditions and realities.

All the contributors were invited to re-work their presentations and submit them for publications. The editors of the volume (Peter Moser, Tony Varley) made, with the help of the

scientific committee, suggestions to all the authors. Most, but not all have stated their willingness to re-work their papers; and a majority has already submitted revised versions. On receipt, these revised papers have been sent to two reviewers for their comments.

Bern/Galway, 20th September 2008, Peter Moser, Tony Varley