

Call for Papers of the first meeting of the working group 3

Agrosystems and Labour Relations in European Rural Societies (Middle Ages – 20th Century)

September 1-3, 2006, Retz/Austria

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It goes without saying that agriculture is a form of colonisation of the natural environment by man, a kind of ‘applied ecology’. In the course of history the articulation of ecological and socioeconomic features gave rise to a wide variety of agrosystems within the boundaries of Europe. It is also evident that local and regional rural societies in Europe were embedded in supra-local and supra-regional socioeconomic contexts since at least the High Middle Ages. What has been rarely attempted until today is the integration of these perspectives. Studies in the tradition of cultural ecology, on the one hand, all too often advocate causal relationships between nature and society. Ecosystem-approaches with their emphasis on self-regulation, homeostatic mechanisms, energy streams etc. often suppose a kind of closure which may, if at all, apply to ‘primitive’ communities closely or exclusively dependent in their reproduction on the colonization of their natural environment, but hardly to European rural societies during the last millennium. Agrarian history and related fields of historical studies, on the other hand, have not systematically taken into account the constraints and possibilities resulting from different ways of the colonization of natural environments by human groups. Research on farming systems, agricultural technology, agrarian production and productivity, prices, the social structure of rural communities and households, agrarian contracts and manorial regimes etc. has mostly been conducted without paying close attention to the embeddedness of agrarian formations in specific natural environments.

The notion of *agrosystems*, defined as production systems based on the ecological and socioeconomic relations involved in the reproduction of rural societies, seems to be a useful concept for linking these perspectives. Coming from agricultural economics, the term originally stands for local and regional arrangements of land use, livestock, technology, and farm management. By broadening this rather narrow meaning, the concept of agrosystem integrates the whole complex of ecological, economic, political, social and cultural relations relevant for rural production and reproduction. We intend neither to focus on the ecological aspects (material and energetic flows, degradation of natural resources, biophysical aspects of agriculture etc.) nor to discuss agrosystems as a whole from a socioeconomic point of view. What we intend is to assess the *articulation of ecological and socioeconomic factors in the structuration of European rural societies during the last millennium through the prism of*

labour relations. The organization of labour is the *crucial link between rural production and reproduction*. Therefore, the *rural household as the basic unit of production and reproduction* will be the focus of the intended assessment of agrosystems. With respect to this point the question arises if the changes in ecosystems as well as political-economic systems have so fundamentally altered the conditions of agriculture in Europe up to now that peasant family farming will disappear (if it is no longer sustained by state policies).

The workshop will be organized with respect to three sets of problems:

1. *Agrosystems and labour relations within households*: Problems that could be questioned are annual cycles of agricultural production, intensity of land use, farm size and technology, household size and composition, division of labour etc.

2. *Agrosystems and labour relations between households*: Problems that could be questioned are recruitment of extra-household labour, division of labour between households, stratification of local and regional society, articulation of agrarian and non-agrarian activities, patterns of labour migration etc.

3. *Agrosystems and labour relations beyond households*: Problems that could be questioned are property rights, manorial regimes, technological change, rural labour markets, state intervention in labour relations etc.

These and related problems will be the subject of a workshop organized within the framework of the *Programme for the Study of European Rural Societies* (PROGRESSORE, funded by the *European Concerted Research Action* COST A35), from 1-3 September, 2005 in Retz/Austria (approximately one hour from Vienna by train). Now we invite contributors to propose micro-level case studies from all parts of Europe in order to cover the widest possible range of different agrosystems. After the evaluation of the proposals by the scientific committee, 15 contributors will be invited for a presentation of approximately 30 minutes in English. All presentations will be pre-circulated to the contributors two weeks before the workshop. Contributors are therefore expected to submit a draft of the presentation until the end of July 2006. Reimbursement of travel and accommodation costs is possible only for contributors from one of the 19 signatory states of COST A35 (listed at www.cost.esf.org/index.php?id=233&action_number=a35, max. 2 contributors per state). We hope to publish the papers in the *Rural History Yearbook* (*Jahrbuch für Geschichte des ländlichen Raumes*) volume 2007. The submission of the final drafts is therefore expected

until the end of October 2006. Further information on the workshop will be updated at www.ruralhistory.at (Link PROGRESSORE workshop).

Proposals for contributions should be sent to the organizers in form of a one-page abstract until January 31, 2006:

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