

## **First Workshop of Working Group 3 – Peasant Societies**

# **Scientific report**

*Agrosystems and Labour Relations in European Rural Societies  
(Middle Ages -20<sup>th</sup> Century)*  
Retz (Austria), Hotel Althof,

**September 1-2, 2006**

### **Co-Ordinators:**

**Erich Landsteiner, University of Vienna,  
Ernst Langthaler (Institut für Geschichte des ländlichen Raumes, St. Pölten – Austria)**

The first workshop of working group 3 took place on Sept. 1-3, 2006, in Retz (Austria) and was organized by Erich Landsteiner (Dept. of Economic and Social History, University of Vienna) and Ernst Langthaler (Institut für Geschichte des ländlichen Raumes, St. Pölten – Austria). Paper-giving participants came from seven European countries (10 papers: Austria 2; Czech Republic 1; Germany 1; Hungary 1; Italy 1; Norway 2; Spain 2); invited experts came from Switzerland (2) and Germany (1) (see the workshop programme enclosed). Four participants invited to give a paper (from France, Poland, Greece and Japan) had to cancel their participation out of personal or professional reasons. The time period covered by the contributions stretched from the Late Middle Ages to the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The workshop intended an assessment of the articulation of ecological and socioeconomic factors in the structuration of European rural societies during the last millennium through the prism of labour relations. Since in the call for papers labour relations were proposed as the crucial link between agrosystems and rural households as the basic units of production and reproduction the papers revolved around three sets of problems:

1. Agrosystems and labour relations within households
2. Agrosystems and labour relations between households

### 3. Agrosystems and labour relations beyond households

In the first session, headed by Anne-Lise Head-König, labour relations in Mediterranean agrosystems were discussed. Antoni Furió and Ferran Garcia-Oliver presented a paper on household composition, land holding patterns, recruitment of extra-household labour and labour migration in the countryside of Valencia during the Late Middle Ages, where the peasant tenures were generally composed of plots of dry and irrigated land and the agrosystem was therefore marked by fight for or against water. Ramon Garrabou and Enric Tello centred on the balance of time between the labour requirement of different farming systems and the labour availability of the peasant households based on a very elaborated reconstruction of the socio-metabolic regime in the Vallès county (Catalonia) during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Exchanges of labour between farms that need to hire external labour force and those sub-peasant family units that had a labour force surplus to offer into the labour market were analysed by them in the context of the institutional framework, land ownership pattern, and labour or land contract systems.

In the second working session, headed by Erich Landsteiner, three papers on Central European agrosystems were discussed. Josef Grulich gave a description of the agrosystem and labour relations on the manor of Chýnov in Southern Bohemia during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries which sparked a controversial discussion on the role of the seignorial economy in this part of Europe. Peter Pozsgai presented results of his ongoing research on labour relations, household composition and labour exchanges between households in North Eastern Hungary (present-day Slovakia) in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, based mainly on census lists. In this case the discussion centred on methodological issues connected to the delimitation of households and the study of labour relations between them. In Margareth Lanzinger's paper on domestic role assignments in an alpine peasant society the gender division of labour and the constraint to supplement roles in rural households came to the forefront. Lanzinger based her investigation on records of dispenses for marriages within the kin group in the dioceses of Brixen (present-day Northern and Southern Tyrol and Vorarlberg) during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Since the dioceses encompassed regions with differing inheritance practices and property

structures questions about the frequency and motivation of consanguine and affinity marriages related to agrosystemic constraints were raised.

The third session, headed by Jürgen Schlumbohm, was devoted to household structures and labour relations in rural proto-industrial societies. Hermann Zeitlhofer's paper connected the agrosystem of a Southern Bohemian region during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries where flax cultivation played a major role with the local and regional division of labour in this area. Whereas yarn spinning was integrated with the production and processing of flax on peasant farms, weaving took place in adjacent regions on the basis of a marked division of labour which Zeitlhofer related to differing property structures and agrosystemic contrasts. Herdis Kolle's paper on labour relations in proto-industrial textile producing community in the province of Moscow (Russia) during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century centred on the integration of agrarian and craft production, the division of labour within the rural households and the power relations between gender and age groups conditioned by this economic structure.

In the fourth session, headed by Ernst Langthaler, Frank Konersmann presented a paper on 'peasant merchants' combining agrarian production, industry and trade in South-western Germany in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries based mainly on the analysis of private account books. By comparing regions with different agrosystems he investigated the importance of these rural entrepreneurs for the development of rural labour markets. Ottar Brox's paper on "Fishing farmers in arctic Norway", combining subsistence farming with market oriented fishing, drew the attention to the role of politics in the development of a peculiar kind of peasant economy in a Scandinavia frontier region in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Finally Rita Garstenauer compared the combination of agrarian production with off-farm wage labour by family farmers in two regions of Austria in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. She concluded that the extent and seasonal distribution of off-farm wage labour was closely related to the labour requirements of the different agrosystems of the two regions.

The workshop concluded with a general discussion which centred on the articulation of ecological and institutional features within particular agrosystems and how these articulations conditioned the different paths of intensification, economic growth or involution of the rural economies and societies under consideration. What does the great variety of agrosystems, household structures and agro-economic systems presented and discussed during the workshop mean for our concepts of peasants and “peasant society”? Is it possible to integrate these micro-narratives into a general story of the evolution of European rural societies?

In retrospect, two months after this lively workshop which all participants seem to have enjoyed, it turns out that the seemingly so obvious relationship between rural households, labour relations and agrosystems is not as easy to come to terms with as first imagined by the organizers of the workshop. Most participants either centred on labour relations, household structures or agrosystemic features. Before we can integrate these perspectives and attempt a synthesis out of these case-studies there is still a long way to go in the development of an analytical framework. We can only hope that the workshop has advanced this project by raising relevant questions.