

Sociétés Rurales
Scientific report

The State, government and rural societies : the choices of the State
L'Etat, le gouvernement et les sociétés rurales : les choix de l'Etat

Université du Maine
September 29- 30, 2006

Coordinator : Nadine Vivier, Université du Maine, France
Scientific board:
Gérard Béaur (F), Jürgen Schlumbohm (D), Rosa Congost (E), Georg Fertig (D), Peter Moser (CH), Gilbert Noël (F), Socrates Petmezas (Gr)

The first meeting of the **WG 4** devoted to *State and rural societies*, focused on the **decision making process in European states** (see the extract of the call for paper included hereafter)

The CFP was distributed through two canals: H-Rural, and the members of the COST MC, and the latter proved to be the most efficient. I received from E.C. twenty answers to the call for paper, and two additional ones from America. Sixteen proposals were selected, taking care to maintaining the necessary diversity of the countries and a strong coherence of the workshop. Two participants cancelled one month before the meeting. Eventually, eleven countries were represented (see the program): in spite of many attempts to find contributors from Eastern Europe, only one participant came from there (Hungary). This was the first year of action A 35, and we may expect a progressive broadening of the panels.

The fourteen papers perfectly addressed the issue of the workshop, focusing on the 1760-1960s period. Among these papers, five are excellent, very rich and raising general questions. Six other papers are very interesting, each dealing with one particular aspect of the issue; they have been handed out in a short version and have to be finalised. The three others need more work.

The discussions were active and constructive. Socrates Petmezas, coordinator of the WG4, Georg Fertig and Peter Moser who will organize the next workshops of WG4, accepted to act as discussants, and this should lead to a consolidation of the achievements of our WG4.

A first view on the achievements of the meeting. The papers being rich, it will take some time to achieve a comparative synthesis . Here are briefly underlined some of the main points.

What were the major concerns of the State ?

Modernisation, meaning an increase in land productivity, was usually during 19th c. expressed as the main driving force, justifying State intervention. It often aimed at forging a new society. This was obviously the case in nineteenth-century's states -until 1870-, influenced by the enlightened theories and the choice of a liberal economy. At the end of the century, there was a shift, state's intervention increased due both to the Great Depression, and to a widening of vote which triggered electoralist stakes. It seems that in all countries, the government continued following the previous objectives, nonetheless it basically aimed at securing peasant's political loyalty: this was obviously the case in more or less democratic states looking for electoral support: Prussia , Spain as well as Belgium, France... More surprisingly, this was also a basic concern of the dictatorships of the 20th c., Salazar and Franco as well as in the communist Hungary.

But how does a government appreciate the needs and desires of rural societies? Those can be expressed by the wealthiest landowners: the understanding of the mutual influence of farmers and government is one of our major issues. The government also acts according to a model of society it wants to promote. This could lead to a complex policy which associate technical modernisation with cultural and religious traditionalism and social isolation, as it occurred in Belgium and France during the Great Depression, and in the dictatorships of Spain and Portugal. Thus, the representations of rural societies given by the government have to be questioned.

Was the State the main agent of modernisation, according to what is usually said? And were peasants reluctant to change? Several examples show that independent farmers, social groups or associations were not at all passive; on the contrary, they imagined solutions which were then sometimes supported by the state.

Beyond some differences, a general trend of an increased involvement of the state can be observed, and this is shown by the creation of numerous authorities in charge of agriculture. Several milestones of this increasing involvement have been studied: the use of new tools -the statistics and enquiries from 1760 onwards-; the creation of a division of agriculture within a

ministry (home secretary or economy) and then a ministry of agriculture with its own administration; the establishment of chambers of agriculture and other consultative agencies; the state support to local banks to help the land reforms and technical progress; the creation of the body of agricultural engineers and of the schools for men training.

For a better understanding of the decision making process, **men training** was the focus of a session. What were the respective roles of the state, the landowners and the farmers? Did the initiatives come from the state or from the bottom? The landowners initiated most of the model farms in order to train supervisors (Cosimo Ridolfi in Italy, Mathieu de Dombasle in France, Edvard Nonnen in Sweden): a model adapted to big farms employing day-workers or to share-cropping system (*mezzadria*). In the 1840ies, the state became involved in men training, funding mainly the institutes for agronomic research (Italy, France, Belgium and Germany). While this involvement generally increased, disengagement can be noticed in Sweden during the middle of 19th c. Afterwards, it deepened, like everywhere, because men training was considered as an help to farmers during the crisis of the end of the century. But, in all countries, landowners usually proved to be very reluctant to a large schooling of the peasants. Since they had the power as representants in the assemblies, they often voted against fund raising for agricultural training (from Spain to Sweden). Small farmers were said not to be interested in schools, and to find practical training sufficient. Often, the schools met recruitment problems. But was the training well adapted to the needs? It seems doubtful: the state acted according to its model of agricultural system which was not adapted to the reality.

What was the importance of this agricultural education? In fact, education is only a small part of the training which was completed by the apprenticeship of young men and women in big farms, the advisory services created by the state (like agricultural teachers, plant-breeding stations in Germany) or by the associations, private advices (technical staffs of various firms of ancillary industry -machines, fertilizers), and the agricultural media (reviews, almanacs, and films). Since the agricultural industry in Western Europe has been dominated by small farms, some part, if not most of the process has usually required the involvement of the state and its agencies.

In conclusion, we believe we achieved the aims of the COST action: active and constructive discussions leading to comparative perspectives within European countries, papers worth a publication. The participants envisioned the creation of a European association of rural history.

