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Second Workshop of Working Group 2
The management of rural land

“Agricultural specialisation and rural patterns of development”

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Agricultural specialisation and rural patterns of development

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Second Workshop of Working Group 2 (The management of rural Land)

This conference was organized within action COST A35 (Program for the Study of European Rural Societies)

It was the second Workshop of Working Group 2 (The management of rural Land), and was devoted to the topic of agricultural specialization and rural models of development from Middle Ages to the present day in different European countries (Agricultural specialization and rural patterns of development). It followed the conference which was held in Saragossa in 2006, organized by Vicente Pinilla (The impact of markets in the management of the rural Land).

1- Topic

Agricultural specialization is usually seen in a positive way by historians, as a transition from a rural peasant society based on subsistence-orientated agriculture to a market dependant economy.

Implicitly, the idea behind this is the following : first, there is mixed-farming for supplying the peasant household and, secondly, agricultural specialization.

Socially, agricultural specialization is connected to growing of markets and to the fact that peasants are free enough to produce what they want and to sell goods on markets.

But recent questions about productivistic agriculture and, on the other hand, interest for alternative agricultures bring us to revalue the question of agricultural specialization.

So,

the aim of this conference was to speak about the way historians deal with agricultural specialization in different social contexts and technical environments.

2- Papers

We gathered 19 papers from 11 countries and 6 discutants from 4 countries.

Papers came from : Germany - Austria - Belgium - Bulgaria - Spain - Finland - France - Portugal - the United Kingdom - Sweden – Tchèque

3- Questions

During this conference, we tried to focus on following subjects :

- what features allow us to identify an agricultural specialization ?
- how do specialized agricultures work?
- how do farmers choose one kind or specialization instead of an other ?
- what is the balance of public policies or individual resolutions in the choice of an agricultural specialization ?
- how do specialized agriculture begin to run ?
- why do different ways of specialization fail ?
- are there alternative models to agricultural specialization ?
- what is the social impact of specialization ?

4- Scientific assessment of the conference

These questions were approached in different ways during the conference.

1 - Spaces

First, they were approached from very different areas :

- French Atlantic shores : agro-littoral areas
- Countries of Northern Europe : dairy and forestry systems (Sweden, Finland, Denmark)
- Europe of the North-West : complex old agricultural systems (Flanders, Belgium and also England, north of Germany (Brunswick))
- Mediterranean Spain : the Huerta of Murcia
- Central European countries: within the framework of demesnes and serfdom in early moderne time south Bohemia), but also in post-Communist period (Bulgaria)
- Wine producing areas of Europe (Austria, Portugal, France)

2 - Periods

In these various spaces, different situations were observed, accordingly traditional periods we used to observe some evolutions : Flanders in the Middle Ages, Sweden and Central Europe during 16th and 17th centuries, England and Portugal during 17th and 18th centuries, Germany, Northern Europe countries and south of Spain during the 19th century. And for the 20th century : Finland and England during the 2nd WW and post-Communist Bulgaria.

3 – Methods : macro and micro

Methods were also very different, so it's quite difficult to summarise all these papers.

- Various scales of observation were used, from the country to individual exploitation, from macro scale to micro scale. The call for papers had left the choice of the scale of observation.

- Various methodological approaches were used, according to the sources and the specialities of the authors : micro-level with maps (P. Nilsson : she looked for hop fields in Sweden during the 17th century); or with agricultural accounts (R. Hoyle, M. - T. Pérez) ; macro-level with economic models (J. Bronwen for England in the 2nd WW, E. Landsteiner for the Austrian vine growing of 16th at the 19th century) and also many analytical approaches carried out from various data (P. Servais, A. Kulhawy, C. Martins...)

I- General remarks on specialization

Several interesting points were evocated, answering questions of the call for papers and increasing the reflexion about the question of agricultural specialization

1 – Specialization / markets, transport availability, state incentives

Some links, which have been described in the past, between agricultural specialization were reaffirmed with the three following topics :

- markets and agricultural specialization

It remains the main point for many papers : there is no specialization which is not closely linked to – or induced by - exchanges. The old question of “the call of the markets” remains essential : markets control agricultural production (vineyards, littoral agricultures, and so on...)

- the question of transports

It is essential for many papers : physical markets are necessary, agricultural productions have to be carried.

The role of the railroad was reaffirmed in a paper about the duchy of Brunswick during the 18th and 19th century (A. Kulhawy)

- the question of the incentives of states (but it was not very important in this conference because it was the topic of another one last year)

2 - Specialization and natural conditions

Old debates were awaked during this conference :

- It began with a paper on the effect of natural conditions in the distribution of agricultural specializations (M. Bohman). This paper showed that geographical conditions remain very important in Sweden to explain agricultural choices of different areas during 18th and first half of the 19th century. Geographical conditions continue to give the main trends of the production even when there is some reorganization. In Sweden for exemple, enclosures do not erase essential differences which exist between woodlands, mixed-farming and corn-farming

- It goes on with a reflexion on the link between agricultural specialization and social-agrosystems (E. Thoen and T. Soens)

3 - Theoretical reflexion

A theoretical reflexion on the concept of specialization and the manner of highlighting it was carried out in some papers

- E. Thoen and T. Soens

They investigated the links between markets, specialization and innovation ; they improved the idea that specialization induces a strong dependence on the market

- R. Hoyle

He emphasized the link between specialization and agrarian-capitalism. It discussed the way of highlighting specialization and he proposed a criticism of the cartographic way which was made in the *Agricultural History of England*. It also doubts that the ratio farmers/farm-labourers is able to give good results to measure specialization. It uses agricultural accounts, those of an English farmer of the 17th century and those of another farmer which emigrated in Maryland. These accounts do not show the same kind of specialization, but the two farmers have something in common : they have strategies which are explained by the search for a maximum profit (or minimum losses according to economic background).

II- Some further conclusions

The renewal of these topics and the discussions which took place during the conference allow us to formalize further conclusions

1 - Specialization and mono-activity

First, specialization does not mean mono-activity. An agricultural system with various productions, on the scale of a country or of a farm, can be looked like a specialized agriculture. It is the access to the market which regulates the ways of specialization (one or more productions)

But agricultural specialization, specially in old times, is very seldom turned towards a single activity.

2 - Rates/rhythms of the evolution

Secondly, the development, in a particular space, of a specialized agricultural activity does not suppose that this model is the only one. It can subsist, apart from these specialized activities, with some other economics models, connected with other economic conditions. Specialization does not touch at the same time all farm-units units of a given area.

Besides, inside one farm, specialization does not touch at the same time all the productions: cf E. Thoen & T. Soens: in Flanders, at the end of the Middle Ages, the peasants of the great fields are obliged to specialize partially to answer the increase in revenues but they preserve a great part of self-subsistence

3 - Forms of specialization

Third, the kind of specialization is different in the same place and at the same time according to the economic level of people and exploitations.

M. Peltonen : in Finland, at the beginning of the 20th century, large owners turned to a dairy production for external market while small ones sold locally wood, labour to have wages, services of carriage.

4 - The link between specialization and technical evolution

Specialization is usually seen as a factor of progress (C. Israelsson : at the end of the 19th century and at the beginning of 20th, the development of living standards on farms of Denmark and Sweden was a consequence of dairy specialization), or at least it is associated to progress (P. Matlas : in south Bohemia, during the 19th century, agricultural development proceeded from draining, new ploughs, fertilizers). But it was not always the case. Specialization is possible in old economies without great changes (J. Grulich : in Bohemia, during the 16th-18th century, we can see the growing of a lot of specialized productions, turned towards the market ; it took place in great domanial demesnes cultivated by serfs and without any technical improvement).

5 - Specialization and social progress

The fifth conclusion : specialization doesn't often bring social progress

M.-T. Pérez-Picazo: in the huerta of Murcia, during the 19th century, the development of specialization did not involve the end of livelihood agriculture nor the improvement of the way of life for farmers.

III What was not treated

To take a fair stock of this conference, it is necessary to reveal the tracks which were not followed and the doors which were only half-opened.

It was essentially about the "how", how does it occur ? How does specialization settle ? How does the change appear ? Who does pay for these improvements ?

(cf. question of a discutant to A. Kulhawy about the spread of sugar beets in the duchy of Brunswick during the 19th century)

One of the questions which was less discussed - several discutants said it during the session - was about the actors of the change and about concrete consequences of specialization in farms

(cf. the example of England during the 2nd WW : within the space of about 5 years, the pre-war system of pastoral farming was replaced by arable farming producing cash crop as wheat and potatoes. How does it was running ?).

Nevertheless it was a very interesting conference.