

Toruń, 01/10/2007

COST A35 – Programme for the Study of European Rural Societies

PROGRESSORE

Working Group 3 – “Peasant Societies”

workshop

Wealth and Poverty in European Rural Societies from the Middle Ages to the present day. Standards of living, material culture and consumption patterns

Toruń, September 21-22 2007.

Scientific report

This conference, ‘Wealth and Poverty in European Rural Societies from the Middle Ages to the present day. Standards of living, material culture and consumption patterns’ was held as part of the COST programme, under section COST A35 Programme for the Study of European Rural Societies PROGRESSORE. It formed part of the studies of Working Group 3, ‘Peasant Societies’.

The workshop was hosted on behalf of the Nicolaus Copernicus University, Toruń, Poland, by the Faculty of Historic Sciences, Institute of History and Archival Sciences and Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology of the University, with the support of the Polish Post Office. It took place on 21 – 22 September 2007 in the Institute of Historical and Archival Sciences and brought together participants from across the length and breadth of Europe. The organiser, on behalf of COST and of the University, was Dr Jarosław Dumanowski. Papers were submitted by researchers from Austria, Belgium, France, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Hungary, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Spain and the United Kingdom, and Switzerland was also represented by one of the discussants. The full list of the papers is attached.

This provided a valuable opportunity for sharing research and understanding of European rural societies from a wide range of perspectives. Participants were enabled to compare experiences of richer and poorer country-dwellers from across four centuries and many countries, noting similarities and differences and becoming aware of the impact of changes in social and economic patterns. Since participants’ areas of study included history, ethnography and sociology, it was

possible to create an interdisciplinary dialogue in addition to drawing on the methodology of specific disciplines.

27 participants attended the conference, including members of the organising committee. A total of 21 papers were presented during the two days. The general theme was subdivided into four sub-sections, each of which was considered in turn although the connections between them were also explored in the papers and the general discussion. These sections were:

Panel 1: Property, material culture and consumption as categories of social stratification;

Panel 2: Wealth and poverty;

Panel 3: Material conditions of living, changes in consumption;

Panel 4: Time management.

The sessions were organised as follows. In each panel, chaired by different members of the conference, several papers related to the theme of the section were presented. Following these, the papers were discussed and commented on by a discussant, who brought out similarities and differences between their topics and approaches and also posed further questions relevant to the research behind the individual papers and to the topic as a whole. The session was then opened to general discussion, in which those who had presented papers were enabled to respond and give further information. The chair of the panel then opened the discussion to the other participants, who were able to extend the consideration of the topic by contributions from their own research. The number of papers presented to each panel ranged from four to eight. The largest panel was further divided into two sections of four papers, with comments by a discussant after each section, though the general discussion did not take place until after all the papers had been presented to ensure the continuity of the topic as a whole.

This proved to be a successful formula for the whole occasion. It linked papers relating to research into widely differing European societies and enabled participants to search for common ground in considering peasant societies across Europe, as well as showing distinctive characteristics of societies in specific places and at specific times. The extent of countries represented permitted the exploration of a wide range of contexts and peasant behaviours. The restrictions on peasant diet, clothing and accommodation and the changes in these over time were fully considered. Several less familiar issues of historical significance in early modern Europe were opened up and developed, in particular:

- The migration into and out of towns, which proved to have a range of complex motivations;
- The different meanings and functions of material possessions such as clocks, watches and mirrors in different peasant communities;

- The manner in which some peasants deliberately wore inadequate clothing to escape tax or hide wealth
- The changing significance of furniture e.g. the change from storing clothes in coffers to using wardrobes as a marker of changing social status;
- The existence and use of free time by peasants; this produced a fruitful discussion which some participants argued that 'leisure' could not exist as a concept in peasant society;
- The widespread use of credit across rural societies and social groups in the early modern period, especially in the sixteenth century;
- The notion that poverty could at times be seen as a changing feature of peasant life, i.e. greater or lesser at changing times in the ups and downs of the life-cycles of individuals.

Following extensive discussions throughout of methodology there was general agreement that it was important to think carefully about the use of qualitative and quantitative methods. The value of the study of probate inventories was discussed at length. Discussion among participants flowed freely, both in the organised sessions and during informal meetings over refreshments. One of the features which made the atmosphere productive and positive was the enjoyment of shared meals representative of traditional Polish rural food, in the historic city of Toruń.

The organisation of the conference went smoothly. This allowed participants to concentrate on the papers and discussion. Positive conclusions were reached about the factors influencing the lifestyles and economic circumstances of peasants across Europe in the recent past and the changes which affected them.

Jaroslaw Dumanowski