

COST action A 35 PROGRESSORE
Second meeting of the Working Group 4 (State and Peasants)

'Social networks and institutional change: the limits of state intervention in rural societies'

Georg Fertig, Muenster

The point that informed the working group's interest in the Muenster meeting was whether the state on the one side and rural societies on the other side are (or were, historically) two separate worlds. It is often assumed that rural societies have their own logic, not permeable to modern bureaucracies and opposed to the anonymous markets modernizing states tend to foster. The network metaphor of is sometimes used to describe this own social logic; in a slightly different vein, roles such as the broker, or the village headman, can also acquire bridging functions monopolizing access to the state (and market) for locals, and vice versa. Within the framework of the series of three meetings this working group is organizing, the Muenster meeting focussed on the sub-national level, while the Le Mans meeting studied national politics, and the participants in Berne will discuss market orders on an international, European level.

In Muenster, ethnologists, historians, development economists, and sociologists from 9 COST partner countries, and in addition from Armenia, the USA, and Canada, met to discuss rural societies between the 16th century and the present. Two groups of papers can be identified: Some papers discussed the political impact of networks (e.g. Guzzi, Vari, Langthaler), or how political changes and economic modernization permeated pre-existing social networks (Alfani, Heady, Seiser, Munno). Other papers focussed on the direct or indirect uses of networks for actors, making clear to what degree networks can be used as a substitute to modern states and markets (e.g. Isaac, Fertig, Wolz). It emerged from the discussions that in relation to the state, rural social networks can really be both a substitute (or alternative) and an integrating force (or pathway). In the following paragraphs, the individual contributions will be summarized.

Cristina Munno (University of Venice) dealt with the social relations in a rural community in 19th century Veneto. The relations she analysed show that in the 1830s parents still had chosen influential personage to be their children's godparents and thereby acted according to a social model of clientele. Yet with the growing integration into supralocal economic structures relations were not aimed at a patron but at colleagues and friends, which Munno calls "de-verticalisation", and they were more often supralocal too. In 1850, 800 hectares of pasture in the analysed community were sold by auction and communalised. Munno wondered, whether good good connections paid off in this case, for instance by getting loans for the necessarily high bids. Mainly people from the middle classes and entrepreneurs, but hardly peasants and only a few workers benefitted from these auctions. What was the secret of the former's success? Were they privileged by their network relations? Munno denied this, as locals with very good connections could lose the auctions too.

Like Munno, Christine Fertig (University of Munster) asked, whether and to what (purpose) social networks served historical agents. She analysed godparent relations in the Westphalian parish of Borgeln, which was characterised by a high extent of social inequality and a dense web of market relations. She demonstrated that in 19th century Prussia some types of social relations had lost their function and were replaced by the state. Witnesses for the signing of a contract, for instance, became a mere formality due to the legal apparatus, and notaries chose them indiscriminately. Similarly, it was tutelary law and less so the guardian's personality and kinship relation that guaranteed the children's inheritance. Ch. Fertig opposed the widespread view that in a society of undivided inheritance the persistence of the farm was more important than the endowment of children. This claim had been falsified by the analysis of inheritance contracts. She therefore investigated, whether the creation of social relations such as godparenthood had an impact on the children's social and economic status. In Borgeln further godparents were chosen in addition to the two existing ones, which resulted in a dense web of relations. Two strategies could be distinguished: on the one hand elderly kin were chosen, probably in order to benefit from their status and their relations, on the other hand kin who were younger than the parents and thus provided a highly sustainable network. Popular kin could marry off more of their godchildren to farms. But whoever was looking for many kin for his children, was not able to profit from it, since it apparently did not help them to marry a well-off spouse.

Milada Kasarjyan's study is situated in contemporary Armenia and a collaborative work with researchers from the Leibniz Institute of Agricultural Development in Halle. Kasarjyan described the peasants' current state after the dissolution of the kolkhoz as undercapitalised, lacking lenders for small businesses and having little confidence in institutions. Micro-credits are given to debtor groups, wherein members take responsibility for each other. By that way, existing social relations become the basis of new formal relations and a necessary instrument to gain resources. The researchers used a network analysis which was focussed on the leaders of such credit groups, and they interviewed these with regard to kin, labour and credit relations. Kasarjyan calculated the respondents' network centrality on the basis of their relations. She was able to confirm that the members of the credit groups were particularly involved in networks. Especially the leader of the credit group received information from various sources and passed them on. Kasarjyan concluded that agents were involved in these small debtor groups mainly by family ties.

Marney Isaac (Toronto) aimed at an understanding of farming knowledge dynamics and subsequent farming practices within complex agroforestry systems. Her study focused on describing the structural arrangement of informal communication networks within farming communities practicing agroforestry in the Western Region, Ghana. Relational data was collected on advice networks within four communities and analyzed in order to determine structure and membership predictors. Results suggested a general trend towards a core-periphery structure within these farming communities. Social proximity was not an indicator of core membership, as both settler and indigenous farmers were highly sought. This suggests a lack of homophily within the core farmer group, and possibly leading to a higher likelihood of diverse information. Highly sought farmers are not necessarily well-established

farmer, thus allowing for introduction and diffusion of new techniques from settler farmers, presumably leading to increases in sources information and possibly more productive farms.

Axel Wolz and Jana Fritsch (Halle) studied the economic value of social networks in present-day central Europe (Poland and Czechia) using a regression approach. During the socialist period, agricultural production was dominated by collective and state farms in Central and Eastern Europe with the exception of Poland and former Yugoslavia. With the change of the political regime in 1989/1990, private farms became more popular but not that much as anticipated at the eve of transformation. However, the transformation of the agricultural sector not only involved the organisation of agricultural production, but also the reorganisation of the supporting organisations for the newly established agricultural producers. Both, managers of the corporate farms and private farmers had to learn to organise agricultural production in a market-economic environment. However, among both groups not all of them are equally successful, economically. The authors' analysis was based on the assumption that social capital is an independent production factor contributing to agricultural income, and that this contribution can be measured empirically. Networks were defined in a narrow way, concentrating on passive and active membership in formal organisations. The empirical results based on farm survey data from Polish and Czech agricultural producers confirmed their thesis. It seems that it is not passive membership in formal organisations, but an active one that results in economic benefits. Nevertheless, the findings clearly underline the dominant role of the classical production factors, i.e. land, labour and capital as expected by neo-classical economic theory. Social capital leads to higher incomes among farms with similar factor endowments, but it does not substitute the other factors to a large extent.

In his paper, András Vári (Miskolc, Hungary) studied the campaign of neoconservative aristocrats, county gentry, professionals of agriculture to found village credit coops on the Raiffeisen model between 1887-1898 in Pest county, a highly diverse region in ethnic and religious terms. The campaign was successful across all nationalities and religions. Vári interpreted this success as a result not of stable networks, or the structure of networks, or the mentality of specific groups, but as being contingent upon different level elites coming together, or the activation of networks. He warned however against reifying network structure where the actual use of contacts was rather accidental.

Sandro Guzzi-Heeb (University of Berne) used the case of a convicted money forger from the Val des Bagnes as an opportunity to analyse the networks in the middle of the 19th century, which was a time of political upheaval. His central interest was the cooperation of a group of people which earlier scholars might have described as a class, but which he rather interpreted in terms of kinship ties. The contending political movements (radicals and conservatives) both had their own networks. Partly, they went right across kinship ties. Farinet himself was among the radicals, who maintained rather horizontal relations. His informants were above all the first tourist guides in this region, who speeded up communication by virtue of their mobility. Among conservatives, relations of patronage and clientele were stronger and decisive.

Patrick Heady (London) is currently heading a research group on social networks in eight European countries. He asked to what extent there is an informal exchange of labour and services in today's agriculture, mediated by social relations. First, the networks were defined by interviewing the agents, who were then inquired about rendering and receiving free services. Heady first asked how common informal labour (or services) is in the particular society under investigation. Thus the practice of informal services largely depends on how much people were dependent on their own farming. In a parish nearby Berlin, for instance, it is practically non-existent; however, it is widespread in the Russian counterpart, where households returned to subsistence farming after the collapse of collective structures. Here a household received 100 workdays of informal assistance on average each year. Relatives render services less in terms of reciprocity and more so in an altruistic sense; they do it irrespectively of the degree of kinship.

Hilde Bras (Free University Amsterdam) presented a study on sibling relations between persons born in the rural Netherlands between 1803 and 1837. It was based on 5,000 interviews with contemporaries from the 1803-37 age group. The persons came from three regions with different inheritance systems: In Western Salland undivided peasant property was and mostly is bequeathed, whereas it was divided in Southern Brabant and in Holland. According to Bras, these differences had an impact on the creation of social relations. Siblings often worked on their family farm, maintained vital relations to the heir and to the local network of neighbours too, where undivided property was bequeathed. In this case, kinship was still an important mediator of social relations. In areas with Realteilung small networks were formed, which relied less on kinship. This had to be seen in connection with long-term normative actions; thus particularly positive attitudes towards societies and social contacts were measured in the area with large kin-based networks.

Gertrud Seiser (Vienna) emphasised that even nowadays peasant cooperation is widespread in the economy of the Austrian forest and mill district, where she did ethnological field research. She described historic forms of joint work, in particular the threshing, which brings together several dozens of people. She depicted a current silage cooperation of three farmers, which was based on reciprocity, and in which the use of labour and machines is not accounted for monetarily. The participants in this exchange would think highly of the advantages of such a "inappropriate" system. The main argument is the minimisation of risks, such as a crop not being brought in in time. Seiser presented her results in the context of the different concepts on the notion and the definition of the historical and modern "peasant". Today cooperation was not about to dwindle despite the strong influence by state and supranational subsidies, but more vital than ever, since financial funding often depends on the applicant's ability to mobilise services.

Manuel Silva (Minho) based his paper on data gathered from local historical documentation from the field work in two Minho villages in the northwestern of Portugal. He contends that clientelist mediation was one of the main structuring principles of social action. This explains the predominantly 'passive', evasive and "conservative" behaviour of the residents, the 'peasants' and other rural actors. The dyadic, vertical and asymmetric relations

of mediators with their clients were analysed in terms of the phases of resistance, incorporation, maintenance, dilution or loss of local autonomy to state and municipal institutions and, consequently, of the interchangeable role of the patrons or mediators in the framework of competitive and integrating dynamics mainly through the political parties.

Ernst Langthaler from the Institute of Rural History in St. Pölten (Austria) used network analysis in order to investigate the dissemination of information. He dealt with the National Socialist debt relief scheme, which offered indebted peasants the conversion of private into public loans. This had to be done on application in 1938. By analysing the application periods in three Austrian parishes, Langthaler showed that their course differed greatly. There were significant differences, which can be represented in a S-shaped graph typical of the passing on of information within networks (subdued start, strong peak, long phasing out). Langthaler thought the impact of networks on the application to be only partially significant, because there were economic reasons too. Bank loans prevailed private loans in all three parishes, but in the parish orientated towards the market the earliest applicants had above average high bank and low private debts, when compared with other applicants. The credit burden was particularly high here. In Langthaler's two remote and economically critical parishes those applied for a conversion of their debts first who had private debts as well. To those people the public offer seemed to be a way to get rid of their economic dependence on private creditors.

Guido Alfani (Bocconi University of Milan) showed how the reorganisation of common lands management resulted in a reorganisation of social relations. Poor and rich households in the 16th century, Northern Italian parish of Nonantola disagreed on how to distribute the yields of the commons. The solution of the problem said that each party should have one half of the commons at its disposal. The wealthy households decided to distribute the yields according to property size, the poor ones shared them per capita. Alfani described these decisions as the beginning of the restructuring of the village society. The poor households fixed the shares and institutionalised them as a right, which could be bequeathed from father to son. Since daughters only remained in possession of their share, if they married within in the group, people married increasingly within the parish and within kinship groups. However, the choice of godparents and witnesses to a marriage was not concerned by this demarcation; for a long time they retained their own characteristic (in the case of godparents the choice was vertical and orientated towards authority, whereas witnesses to the marriage were chosen from within one's own class). Thus, while the relations had been multiplex after the institutional change in 1584, the patterns became more uniplex in the long run and led to an extensive seclusion of the group.