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Changing power relations in the European countryside: from the middle ages to the present

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Introduction

The present paper is intended to offer an examination of the shifting balance of power and the location of power in the countryside across an extensive period, from the middle ages to the present day and across a broad geographical area encompassing significant stretches of Eastern and Western Europe. It is not, of course, an exploration of all facets of that relationship but rather an attempt to address the theme of power in a rural context, to consider the ways in which may be articulated and, above all perhaps, to examine its changing nature in the countryside.

Power, in this sense, is taken to mean the capacity to exert an influence upon other people or things. In this case, power is treated essentially endogenously, and is perceived as power which can be wielded by one person or group of people in relation to another person or group of people. In this respect, we see power as, in no more small part, defined in terms of property rights. Property rights, broadly conceived, are taken to encompass almost all and any rights which an individual or institution enjoys over property, both moveable and immoveable, but of outstanding importance are those rights concerning land. The consequences of the enjoyment of those rights, which may include, for instance, rights of use, of alienation, of access, will also, of necessity, have an impact upon those others living within and beyond the countryside. Until recent time land has been a means of production unrivalled

by any other, but land is also a limited resource necessary for many other forms of human life from the collection of drinking water to many forms of leisure. Historians have traditionally worked closely with particular conceptions of property rights, and, in fact, direct historical discussion of property rights, especially in terms of competing rights over land, have framed some of the most significant debates in European economic, social and political history. This is especially the case for the classical consideration of changing power relations within the countryside, relations to a considerable degree but not uniquely founded upon rent, its obligation and its exaction. The earliest and, certainly in historiographical terms, most significant elements of this can be discovered in the writings of Marx and in the subsequent debates in the twentieth century regarding the transition from feudalism to capitalism, epitomised by the so-called 'transition debate' and its later echoes in the 'Brenner debate'. For three decades now another significant debate, generated by economists and economic historians, has concerned the relationship between the forms of property rights to land and economic growth, and is identified with institutional economics.

In what follows we will review some of the ways in which power has been considered in the countryside from the middle ages to the present; these considerations reflect, of necessity, long-standing historiographical conventions and represent some of the ongoing debates regarding power relationships and their development in the countryside. It is also important to recognise that the locus of power within the countryside undergoes significant development, or transition, as some commentators would characterise it. This reflects the anticipated changes in power, as for instance the growth in the economic capacity of a labour force or the changing political influence of landlords or freehold farmers. But it also responds to a changing framework, which might be characterised as much for its cultural force as for its economic, social or political import. Thus, for instance, in the present-day countryside a growing emphasis upon, say, the environment or the rights of access for leisure purposes will

serve to redefine debates about power, relocating features of that debate within a new intellectual and 'cultural' framework. In such circumstances it is at least conceivable that new emphases and imperatives serve to redefine the 'landscape of power'; in such circumstances, once significant features in that landscape, such as landlord-tenant relations, may be subsumed within a tide of new preoccupations.

In what follows we will begin with some discussion of what, in historical terms at least, are relatively familiar features of this power landscape. Thereafter we will turn to some of the newer approaches to power and its articulation within the European countryside; this will also encourage us to reflect upon ways in which we might both examine developments in power relations in the modern countryside, but also reassess the nature of power in earlier periods. Is, for instance, our view of the nature of power within the countryside in earlier centuries framed by your own changing conceptions of power? Or, indeed, is our view of power in such contexts capable of some legitimate reassessment encouraged by more recent experiences of power and its framing in the present day? In order to test these issues we will begin with some largely traditional historical examples of power relations before proceeding to consider some, in historical terms, more recent examples. These examples will, of course, draw extensively upon the significant programme of research undertaken on a range of matters in terms of the history of the European countryside under the aegis of the present COST action.

Historical examples of power relations (i):

It all but axiomatic to characterise power relations in the medieval countryside as defined by relations between lords and their tenants. Historians have tended to see the relationship between a lord and his or her tenants as a power relationship of primary importance in the middle ages. One reasonably familiar view of this relationship is to see lords as enjoying

dominion over their tenants, in a power-relationship which was significantly unequal. Crucial to this definition is the sense that the lord had significant, almost total and largely uncontested rights over the property of his tenants. In fact in most places and at most times many kinds of tenant, even those deemed to be all but lacking in rights, did enjoy certain use rights in terms of property. Serfs or villeins who were, *de iure*, the lord's property were held to own nothing 'except their own bellies', as one English lord put it in the thirteenth century.[1] *De facto*, of course, things could be very different and it was the negotiation of rights over property across the middle ages, in a variety of European contexts, which neatly illustrate one important facet of the changing history of power relations in this period. Thus, for example, a series of variables, both endogenous and exogenous, might well drive adjustments in the power relations of the two groups, lords and tenants, as studies undertaken in this Cost Action illustrate. Thus, in medieval and early modern Catalonia, a slow process of tenurial change reflected the desires of both lords and tenants in establishing rights over the alienation of land; the demographic and political crises that devastated parts of rural Catalonia in the middle ages delivered certain opportunities in terms of access to land and improved property rights to those relatively advantaged peasants who remained.[2]

While power relations between lords and tenants may, in historical discussion of the medieval countryside, have once exercised a particular hold over modern views of power and its articulation in such a context, work in recent years, again well represented in the present Action, has tended to stress other, possibly equally significant, factors in the distribution of power and of rights over property. Thus, for instance, the capacity of tenant collectives or of groups identified by place or social group within a particular place, such as village communities, to represent their own expectations and to behave in such a way as to achieve

[1] P. Hyams, *Kings, lords and peasants in medieval England. The common law of villeinage in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries* (Oxford, 1980), p. 19.
[2] L. Ferrer Alos, 'Mechanisms for the creation and reproduction of a land ownership structure in central Catalonia (fourteenth to nineteenth centuries)'.

these expectations has been become an important theme in the discussion of rural past societies. This is, for example, evident in work on commons and common rights, where, as we shall also briefly consider below, there were significant ideological and real clashes over contesting rights of property. In a different context, co-operatives and Farmers' unions, created at the end of the nineteenth century in France, Belgium and Germany, were often dominated by the great and established land owners. Lobbyists within their own representative institutions, they were created for such limited syndicalist purposes and were strongly associated both for political reasons and for the beneficial services they offered to agriculturalists (including the production of dairying products, the circulation of commercial information, and so on).

The same can also be said for work on the role of family and of kin, where, for example, differing expectations as to access to property rights, including inheritance but also more basic access rights, or entitlements, determined a changing distribution of resources in European countryside. Thus, the right to consume part of the households surplus, to be housed, to enjoy benefits according to status, gender, age and so on can all be presented as important rights over property and have been the subject of varied and significant study. That said, in nineteenth-century Westphalia, as in other instances across this broad period, it was the insignificance of familial ties relative to other factors determining access to rights in property which was the most striking feature of observable power relations.[3]

A phenomenon especially, though certainly uniquely, associated with discussion of the modern, i.e. post-1750, countryside, we can also conceive of power relations in the European

[3] G. Fertig, 'A peasant way to economic growth: the land market, family transfers, and life-cycle in nineteenth-century Westphalia'.

countryside as mediated through and redefined by the state. This can include direct intervention by government, such as regulation over property rights in the countryside or the exaction of taxation.[4] It can also involve, as more than one commentator for the COST project has noted, an interaction between state policy and an intellectual debate concerning the management or government of the countryside or some aspect of it. The input of agronomists and theorists into state policy relating to the management of the countryside's resources has become an important theme in academic work on rural society and economy across Europe, a combination of intellectual, economic and political history. This is especially the case in discussion of the debate over the future of the commons and the attempts made to reduce common land to private ownership in order to promote economic growth and efficiency.[5] In similar vein, in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Portugal, reformist governments sought to remove obstacles to greater mobility in land, again with a view to freeing up an important resource for the local and national economy, though not without unintended consequences.[6]

The influence of the state is also seen in agrarian reform policies with the deliberate goal of redistributing property rights, seen in waves of reform and revolution in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries largely tranferring property rights from landlords to (former) tenants, but also in the more recent change of property distribution in Eastern Europe. In such processes both groups

[4] On the impact of taxation in the countryside and its consequences for land use and land management, see M. Morell, 'Property rights and growth in Swedish agriculture in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries'.

[5] See, for instance, A. Antoine, 'Common Land Use in the *Coutume de Bretagne* from the Fifteenth to the Eighteenth Centuries'; N. Grüne, 'Individualisation – privatisation – mobilisation: the impact of common property reforms on land markets and agricultural growth in Germany – a comparative view of Westphalia and Baden (1750-1900)'; L. Lorenzetti, 'Property relations, socio-economic change and the state: the Valtellina in the nineteenth century'; also, especially, N. Vivier, 'The interventions of the French state in rural society. The major concerns of the state, mid-18th to mid-20th centuries', in N. Vivier, ed., *The state and rural societies. Policy and education in Europe*, *1750-2000* (COST A35: Brepols, 2008), pp. 57-76.

[6] J.V. Serrão and R. Santos, 'Land Policies and Land Markets: Portugal, late eighteenth and early nineteenth century'. For similar interventions in Sweden, see P. Svensson, 'Land Market, Property Rights, and Agricultural Transformation in southern Sweden 1680-1870'. Similar developments have been observed for Spain in the same period, J.M. Lana Beraisin and J. de la Torre, 'Land markets and credit on the road to capitalism: Navarra in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries'.

within and without the countryside have again exerted a strong influence upon government politics. In Scandinavia, for example, the influence of farmers has been strong for much of the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Of major importance also in the changing dynamic of power in the European countryside was and is the impact of the town. The direct investment by townsmen and merchants in the countryside, above all through the purchase of land, has, as numerous studies have shown, helped to determine and to redefine property rights. Incursions of an urban bourgeoisie into the Ardennes in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries helped to extinguish poorer rural dwellers rights to commons in the region.[7] Research has also shown the changing relationship of essentially urban institutions with the countryside, including, by the modern, banking and financial systems which helped to establish new modes of dealing within the countryside, from where their clients came. Interesting in this and other contexts is the inequality in power relations established through the extent to which an individual or group has access to information and particular knowledge; in the modern and pre-modern European countryside, access to knowledge, be it information on price, available credit, legal advice, administrative 'know-how', created its own opportunities and the capacity to establish rights in property, as, for instance, investigation of a professionalised administrative body employed by the Spanish nobility in the early nineteenth century usefully illustrates.[8]

We can also witness that same impact of the town in the countryside in other ways, illustrative also of a changing distribution of power, as for instance in the pull of urban economies in past societies, drawing a labour force from the countryside, or in the expectations which urban dwellers place upon the countryside and its producers in order to service their own needs, including the provision of basic resources, most obviously foodstuffs but also water.

[7] P. Servais, 'Common lands and agricultural development in the foothills of the Ardennes, 1750-1900'.

[8] R. Robledo, 'The decline of the Spanish nobility: credit and administration (1790-1850)'.

Historical examples of power relations (ii)

In order to develop these last points a little further, it seems appropriate to examine in rather more detail some more particular instances of a changing power relationship in the countryside whereby landownership, here more closely considered in a modern context, gave way to land usage; in such circumstances, the emphases operating within relations founded upon property rights were adjusted accordingly. Here we have in mind the sorts of adjustments most typically associated with access to the countryside or a redefinition of the use of the countryside. This might, for instance, include ways in which power is redistributed to respond to the expectations of a growing cohort of those who, having established a new agenda for their use of the countryside (access for leisure pursuits, rambling, the 'right to roam' etc), employ that power directly in the pursuit and the maintenance of those rights (through lobby and interest groups, for instance, or through direct representation to the relevant departments of state). Whereas such rights were historically often associated with, for instance, the rights of upper classes to hunt on peasant lands, it is more recently the large majority of the population not owning land of importance claiming and often gaining rights to the leisurely use of land. In large parts of Europe formal ownership of land is concentrated in still fewer hands, but the vast non-agricultural majority of the population strongly both affect the way landowners can exercise e.g. the right to use land for agricultural production and claim other rights for collective use. Here, arguably, power is nowadays not only excercised by landowners upon others, but also but others upon landowners.

Another example of the way also recent time produces very complex systems of property and power relations in the countryside can be found in the very different property arrangements in Eastern Europe after 1989. In Hungary, for instance, formal property of land has been

tranferred to hundreds of thousands of individuals, but the actual usage of it often rests with a few large companies leasing large areas for rather long periods from hundreds or thousands of individual owners. Here we see a sort of inverted version of a classic landlord-tenant relation.

Today, farmers, it might also be suggested, have lost any autonomy, either in economic terms or in institutional ones. The minority in much of the countryside of the north-west of Europe, famers' views count less amongst the decision-makers of the region and their presence is often seen as a no more than a nuisance by those newly moved to the countryside. At the national level, farmers are closely dependent upon markets and upon the decision-making organisations, especially the ministers of the European Union. Low prices for the consumer, and the expectation of the maintenance of the countryside mean that farmers are placed under a multifunctional pressure: keepers of the countryside, direct sellers to the consumer, etc, etc. At the same point the demands of the consumer place enormous burdens upon the countryside and the farmer, demanding a different use of the countryside, and with it tensions and debates over its exploitation and the form of its exploitation (the use of pesticides, the excessive consumption of water, and so on).

The loss of power of farmers has been greatly aggravated by the arrival of huge numbers of town-dwellers; these expect to enjoy the benefits of the countryside in their own terms (walking, cycling, and the like). Their presence adds to a crisis of professional identity for the farmer, the traditional work of whom demands upon a massive investment in time in comparison with the opportunities presented for leisure and a different kind of investment offered by modern labour arrangements and the influx of urban-dwellers.

Conclusion

In this discussion, an attempt has been made to illustrate the changing pattern of power relations and the move from property rights founded upon land ownership, or at least an historical perspective that graces such foundations to power in the countryside, to those where power is located more evidently in what might be considered to be 'usage rights'. It will be obvious from the above and from particular instances cited here, which offer only a reflection, of the multiplicity of varying instances, that there existed across rural Europe from the middle ages to the present, an extraordinary diversity of power relations. We can characterise such relations in quite broad and reasonably accessible terms (as lord-tenant relations or urban-rural exchanges, and so on) but such broad labelling will certainly fail to reflect the subtle distinctions in such relations. The elements that combined to define the relationship between lord and tenant, or farmer and the state, in, for example, late medieval east-central Europe or Catalonia, or early modern France or Spain, could be quite discrete, and the lived experience for the parties involved in such power relations were extremely diverse.[9] Even within the same national, regional or even immediately local context, the identification of an individual or group by its situation in a relation founded upon power and the distribution of property rights (tenant, villager, farmer, lord, estate official, family member, etc etc.) will certainly fail to reflect the nuances of power, or perhaps indeed even the primary power relations operating within a particular context. As historians we are inevitably constrained by the limits of the available material, a decisive factor which undoubtedly explains the persistence of certain historical themes and the relative neglect of others.

Furthermore, it is also vital to recognise that a great deal of the power relations in the countryside in past society, represented best through the distribution and redistribution of property rights, was (and is) a consequence of factors well beyond the immediate control of the main players in any such power relationship. The historical perspective offers both along-

[9] See, for instance, M. Cerman, 'Open fields, tenurial rights and the development of land markets in medieval East-central Europe'.

and a short-term view on the changes in past society and an explanation for those changes; our view of the European countryside has revealed important changes, some of them driven from within and but also, quite evidently, changes that were responsive to factors well beyond the control of those who were subject to them: environmental and climatic changes, dramatic urbanisation, the growth of international markets, and so on. The sorts of exogenous or quasi-exogenous factors, of which we are presently acutely aware in a post-credit crunch world, reveal not only the impact which factors beyond the control of the immediate historical players in any power relationship might exert, but also the real importance of individual and collective responses to such external factors in redefining power relations. The decisions which the parties in power relations make as to, for example, the distribution of access rights to resources, the availability of financial support, adjustments to levels of obligations, and so on, are often occasioned by factors significantly beyond their immediate control.[10] However, the policy decisions which individuals and groups make in response to such circumstances are not; the papers gathered as part of this COST action illustrate only too well the significance which decisions and policies (manifestations of real power relations) had and have on individual lives, even in circumstances where the underlying causes for the choices of actions are beyond the capacity of those involved to control them. In that sense, power resides even in situations defined overall by incapacity and weakness.

[10] See, for instance, B.M.S. Campbell, 'Land markets and the morcellation of holdings in pre-plague England and pre-famine Ireland'.