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Gemeinheitsteilungen in Europa. Die Privatisierung der kollektiven Nutzung des Bodens im 18. und 19. Jahrhundert

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Abstracts

I. Abhandlungen und Studien

Stefan Brakensiek, *Gemeinheitsteilungen in Europa. Neue Forschungsergebnisse und Deutungsangebote der europäischen Geschichtsschreibung*

Abstract

This volume documents the proceedings of the summer conference of the German Association for the History of Agrarian Society, held in June 1999, which dealt with the theme of enclosure during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. A number of studies, published over the past years in England, France, Switzerland, Germany, Sweden, Denmark and the Netherlands, have contributed to reshaping our understanding of the success of "agrarian individualism" (Marc Bloch). Up to now these new perspectives and findings have been largely situated within different national traditions of historiography. The focus of the conference was an international comparison so as to reconsider conceptions and to scrutinize a range of empirical findings in an international perspective. Enclosure provided for a fundamental change of the agrarian economy, it transformed the landscape and interfered with ecological systems. It provoked severe consequences through an intensification or softening of social inequality. It changed the political lives of villages and was both the cause and result of mutations in the culture and mentalities of country dwellers. Recent research mostly assumes an actor-oriented point of view, i.e., it tries to place the phenomenon of enclosure in a specific regional and temporal context, to relate it to the material and ideal interests of the participants and to investigate the cultural moorings of the promoters and opponents of the practice. Change is explained through the modes of action followed by the numerous persons involved, whereas older research emphasized the role of mighty outsiders (such as enlightened legislators or office-holders, reform-oriented lords of the manor) or tended to deploy arguments resting on the role of anonymous powers (such as the state, market, capitalism, modernization).

Gérard Béaur, *Über eine mehrdeutige Diskussion. Gemeinheitsteilungen, Eigentumsfrage und agrar-ökonomischer Fortschritt (Frankreich im 18. und 19. Jahrhundert)*

Abstract

A Confused Debate: Commons, Access to Property and Agricultural Progress (France 18th - 19th centuries). In France, during the middle of the eighteenth century, a debate marked by contradictory pulls arose over the issue of common lands, a dispute which continued over the next century, the French Revolution notwithstanding. Advocates of a partition of common lands confronted the defenders of collective land-use. Whereas the former argued that a privatization of the commons was necessary to increase agricultural production, the latter responded that such a measure would lead to a pauperisation of the rural population. This paper discusses three aspects of the question. Did the abolition of the commons pave the way for the growth of modern capitalism? Were the consequences of this measure really disastrous for the poor? Did it form a precondition for the expansion of peasant holdings?

The article tries to bring out the ways in which an interaction of economic interests, individual strategies and social constraints determined the varying decisions in different rural communities. It offers an explanation as to why a national legislation failed to satisfy differing needs within French society, and it suggests that the privatization of the commons was in itself an inadequate measure for the removal of economic difficulties or the resolution of social problems in preindustrial France.

Nadine Vivier, Politische und soziale Hemmnisse gegen die Aufteilung der Gemeindegüter in Frankreich (1750-1914)

Abstract

In the past, historians, both conservative as well as Marxist, have attributed the survival of the commons to the archaic practices of the French peasantry. Their opinion was based on an investigation of exclusively economic factors. This paper aims at demonstrating that social and political constraints were of equally great importance as factors governing the division of the commons. From 1760 onwards, while the French monarchy encouraged economic progress, members of the old regime feared the social consequences of the abolition of the commons. So the commons as the patrimony of the poor was enforced, in spite of prevailing local customs which did not provide for a large-scale use of the commons by the lower classes. Eventually, in 1793 the revolutionary convention enacted a law that provided for an equal allotment of a share in the commons to all citizens. With a view to evading the dangerous political implications of this issue, the state authorities, throughout the nineteenth century, refused to effect a division of the commons; instead they encouraged the local communities in the practice of leasing particular plots to private agriculture. As municipalities struggled for their autonomy, the preservation of their landed property was part of this fight against a centralized state. Using maps, the article seeks to fine-tune this general description and to emphasize the diversity of French regions.

Kerstin Sunderberg, Der Walt und die Gemeinheitsteilungen in Schweden und Dänemark. Privatisierung und soziale Veränderungen in der Agrargesellschaft

Abstract

This paper deals with private and common land-ownership, especially with the changes in the use of woodlands and forests. Based on certain local case-studies of conflicts in the early eighteenth century, it discusses the motives of different actors such as the state, landlords, peasants and cottagers. In Sweden the process of individualisation and privatisation within rural society received an impetus from the agrarian reforms of 1757, 1803-07 and 1827. The shift, however, was rather slow, and it was not till the early twentieth century that the old agrarian system, based on the common use of meadows, woods and forests, had really changed. The Swedish case follows certain specific patterns which need to be highlighted. Firstly, it must be noticed that peasants had a rather strong influence on the process of change, owing to a system which gave them political representation, both on a regional level at the so-called "Thing", and on the central level of parliament, where peasants formed their own estate. Secondly, the state-authorities were able to work quite effectively. Representatives of the administration worked in close association with members of the local society, as, for instance, land-surveyors, who intervened in resolving conflicts among the land-owning peasantry, or between lords and peasants. It would seem appropriate to interpret this as part of an active political culture of communication and negotiation. In Denmark, the

process of change differed from the Swedish case, owing mainly to prevailing agrarian and social conditions. Rural society in Denmark was characterised by a social system of estates, whose basis rested on the labour of subordinate groups - cottagers and day-workers. This system of manorial lordship was radically transformed during a period of reforms effected between 1760 and 1800. such a top-down process resulted in an increasing proletarianization of the people. What is more, the lower social strata suffered as a result of the division of common lands and the shrinking of common rights. The reforms, on the other hand, contributed to the creation of a new class of land-owning peasants practising individual farming.

Reiner Prass, Die Reformen im Dorf. Gemeinschaftsteilungen im Beziehungsgeflecht dörflicher Gesellschaften

Abstract

While German historiography of the agrarian reforms of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries mainly concentrates on the breakthrough effected by agrarian individualism, it largely neglects the decisive role played by rural communities in this process. In order to understand the nature of agrarian change and the specific role of rural communities in this process, it is necessary to analyse, to begin with, the use of the commons within the traditional economic system. These lands did not serve as pastures alone. Several of them were individually used by members of the community for intensive crop growing and horticulture. Furthermore, the earliest divisions of the commons were initiated by rural communities themselves. It was not till the end of the eighteenth century that the state became the main initiator in the partitioning of the commons. Through this change, the purposes of reform changed too, for they were aimed at abolishing the traditional open field system. The reaction of the rural communities differed considerably, according to the specific economic situation and the prevailing relations of power. It thus becomes necessary to consider the specific interests of different groups within the rural communities in order to understand the varying pace and consequences of the division of commons in different regions. The reforms did not mark an end to the history of the communities and the commons. At the beginning of the twentieth century commons were still to be found in a number of communities; their continued existence was of great importance to the poor, especially to the so-called "Arbeiterbauern" ("peasant-workers"). Furthermore, municipal life continued to influence the economic decisions of rich and market-oriented peasants.

Rita Gudermann, "Mitbesitz an Gottes Erde" – Die ökologischen Folgen der Gemeinschaftsteilungen

Abstract

Not the fertile fields or pastures, but the less productive or barren lands such as heathlands, moors and lowlands, woods and different reservoirs of water and their shores, were used as commons. They served important functions, as grazing area, and as a source of fertilizers, obtained through removing the topmost layer of the soil. In addition, they offered a variety of marginal resources especially for the lower rural classes. They were supposedly the ones who were burdened with the overuse of common areas starting at the end of the eighteenth century. The thesis of overexploitation of the rural poor was an important argument in favour of the partition of common property. No less important was a new attitude towards the agrarian landscape. For the "enlightened" middle-class observer, uncultivated land came to

be regarded as a potential goldmine as well as a reserve for projected increases in agricultural productivity. Control over former barren land was tightened after the dividing of the commons and the overcoming of the agrarian crisis of the 1820s, when traditional agriculture was replaced by the methods of capitalist agriculture. In the wake of its ambitious, wide-ranging projects of improvement, the government, together with a new kind of peasant entrepreneur, discovered water as a resource instead of merely an unchangeable medium, like wind or the weather. Former barren lands thus underwent a process of drainage and irrigation with enormous consequences, not only economic and social but also ecological. Former wetlands were transformed into fertile fields, heathlands could be turned into meadows by irrigation and with the help of artificial fertilizers. This fits into a process of a general drying out of the Central European landscape and the loss of wetland vegetation and wildlife. The area under cultivation was extended greatly. At the same time, the newly created pasture and arable land was - and still is - dependent on constant water management. The appearance of today's cultural landscape is the result of a struggle which grew increasingly embittered towards the end of the nineteenth century, when conservationists entered the arena and fought for their vision of protecting spaces of nature against capitalist agriculture, as a kind of aesthetic commons.