

Markus Cerman, Hermann Zeitlhofer, Hrsg. *Soziale Strukturen in Böhmen: Ein regionaler Vergleich von Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft in Gutsherrschaften, 16.-19. Jahrhundert.* Vienna: Verlag für Geschichte und Politik, 2002. 317 pp. (broschiert), ISBN 978-3-486-56657-4.



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Early Modern Bohemia Joins Post-Communist Central Europe

This sober-sided social-scientific study stages the burial of early modern Bohemia's Communist Rural Man and his precursor Nationalist Rural Man. Communist Rural Man was the suffering hero of a cold-war Czech historiography which, adapting Friedrich Engels's script for "east-Elbian Europe," designated the period from the Thirty Years War to the late eighteenth-century agrarian reforms of Joseph II's Enlightened Absolutism as the age of "second serfdom." In this view, the Habsburg regime and magnate nobility degraded a peasantry previously possessing individual freedom and good legal tenures into personal serfdom, so as to engross village property, ratchet up feudal rents, and dragoon youth into compulsory service as manorial laborers. Nationalist Rural Man, suffering hero of an earlier Czech nationalist historiography, endured this same hard fate, though his chroniclers put at center-stage the eclipse of Czech political freedoms by a re-Catholicizing German Habsburg state and nobility. Either way, the century 1650-1750, on which this book focuses, was an age of darkness (*temno*).

These essays report the findings of a well-coordinated and institutionally well-funded nine-person team, mainly of Austrian and Czech historians but also including British historian Sheilagh Ogilvie. Their col-

lective agenda focused especially on seigneurial power over villagers' socio-economic and personal fortunes, on property rights and transfers among the villagers, on demography and family structure, and on commerce, industry, and proto-industry. They analyzed a common set of state- and church-generated quantitative macro-surveys of the Bohemian countryside, but each from a micro-historical angle enabling them to pair these sources with archival documentation drawn from one or another large-scale Bohemian lordship, whether in crown, noble, or ecclesiastical hands. This yielded a set of local studies methodologically tied both to a common source base as well as drawing on a range of representative settings in the countryside, mainly villages but including also some small towns, and not ignoring manorial direct-demesne production sites.

In an earlier review, Rebecca Gates of the Library of Congress usefully reported at length on this project's organization and its several authors' findings.[1] Here I concentrate on the broad conceptualization that emerges in contrast to the older narratives which this project retires to the historiographical old-folks' home. I emphasize too the relation of the book's findings to German history in the narrow sense. The new picture pro-

jected here shows the system of commercialized manorialism (*Gutswirtschaft*) and the judicially strengthened post-feudal manorial lordship (*Gutsherrschaft*) subordinating subject villagers to seigneurial economic interests to have arisen, not in consequence of the Thirty Years War, but in the aftermath of the late medieval demographic and economic crisis, which shattered the previous feudal rent regime. Responding to recovering markets of the long sixteenth century, land-rich Bohemian lordships—like their counterparts in east-Elbian Germany and Poland (as the German and Polish historical literature has confirmed)—renegotiated terms of tenure and rent with their villagers.[2] The villagers gained much-improved hereditary titles to their farms, making them freely saleable, while older death-duties ceased. The seigniorial authorities gained valuable new rents, notably in the form of subject farmers’ gradually but cumulatively extended unpaid labor services and a levy on the villagers of unmarried youth to serve for exiguous pay as full-time manorial laborers. Cementing the new rural regime was a legal dependency (*poddanstvi*) which the older literature stigmatized as personal serfdom but which the authors here translate as “hereditary subjection” (*Erbuntert  nigkeit*) or “intensified hereditary subjection” (*versch  rfte Erbuntert  nigkeit*).

The book’s neglect of judicial history leaves the important question unanswered whether subjection *followed* from farm possession and liability to feudal rent or was a condition all commoners born into seigneurial jurisdiction suffered and could not unilaterally escape through emigration from one lordship to another. Still, the model offered here of commercialized manorialism’s rise assimilates Bohemia to a broader pattern of central European developments, both before and after the Thirty Years War, stressing conjuncturally varying market conditions and trade-offs among landlords, villagers, and state authorities instead of the older literature’s stress on seigniorial omnipotence. The Bohemian subject farmers’ acquisition and retention of saleable property rights positioned them favorably in European-wide comparison as hereditary leaseholders (*Erbzinsbauern*). They benefited too from minimal early-modern engrossment of “rustic” village into seigneurial direct-demesne or “dominical” land. These features the authors contrast with a post-1648 weakening of property rights and willful seigneurial enclosures in north Germany, though they misinterpret the emergence there of “usufructuary” (*lassitische*) tenures as abolition of hereditary succession, when most such tenures admitted it.

The population losses that seventeenth-century war

and enforced religious exile occasioned have lost nothing of their grimness. In 1648 some thirty percent of Bohemia’s prewar population had vanished. Yet this book emphasizes rapid resettlement of ravaged communities and high demographic growth in the 1650-1750 period, so that by its end rural landlessness and land-poor status afflicted from one-quarter to two-fifths of all villagers. Seigneurial interest vetoed subdivision among heirs of the full- and halfholding farms that rendered labor services with draft-teams, so that country people excluded from land inheritance either gained cottage holdings carved out of seigniorial forest or village commons or faced lives as lodgers. Rural society grew richer in social extremes.

Communist-era historians had already challenged entrenched views on economic darkness descending after 1648, and this book stresses the rapid reestablishment of long-distance trade in agricultural products and textiles, and a vigorous eighteenth-century advance of proto-industry. But the older view that European proto-industry stimulated earlier marriages and formation of landless households finds no confirmation. Instead, it required the emergence of a cottager class out of the social dynamics of farming villages to deepen proto-industrial entrepreneurs’ labor pool.

Though the book invokes the importance of capturing “the subject villagers’ everyday experiences,” it concentrates on organizing its quantitative findings comparatively so as to yield a macro-picture permitting generalization about the whole country. Its chief goal is to present a new conceptualization of Bohemian rural economic and demographic history in the early modern period, stressing—in a manner consistent with post-communist interest in market economies—growth over stagnation and the common people’s agency over aristocratic-monarchical domination. Yet the book’s account of shifting money values, weights and measures, and other metrological equivalencies so crucial to an exact understanding of economic history is of very little use to scholars outside the Bohemian field.

Only in Sheilagh Ogilvie’s essay, based on seigneurial court transcripts, do Bohemian villagers come extensively (and entertainingly) to voice, demonstrating—though it is mainly theory-befuddled social “scientists” of “peasant society” who are still inclined to think otherwise—that they well understood the categories of opportunity cost, profits, and wages which modern economics imputes to the rational actor. No doubt this volume’s individual authors will publish monographs on

their respective lordships highlighting the social, cultural, and political context of economic and familial behavior. Meanwhile, they have accomplished an important service in replacing politically driven older views with a conceptualization, convincing in terms of present-day western European and Anglo-American research techniques, of early modern Bohemian economic and social history.

Notes

[1]. Rebecca Gates, Review of Markus Cerman and Hermann Zeitlhofer, eds., *Soziale Strukturen in Böhmen. Ein regionaler Vergleich von Wirtschaft und Gesellschaften in Gutsherrschaften, 16.-19. Jahrhundert*, HABSBURG, H-Net Reviews, March, 2003.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=103461050945955>, accessed August 26, 2005.

[2]. See Daniel Chirot, ed., *The Origins of Economic Backwardness in Eastern Europe: Economics and Politics from the Middle Ages until the Early Twentieth Century* (Berkeley: University of California, 1989); Tom Scott, ed., *The Peasantries of Europe from the Fourteenth to the Eighteenth Centuries* (London: Longman, 1998); William W. Hagen, *Ordinary Prussians. Brandenburg Junkers and Villagers, 1500-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); see H-German review at <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=218291062173190>.

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