



Eduard Maur. *Gutsherrschaft und 'zweite Leibeigenschaft' in Böhmen.* Wien: Verlag für Geschichte und Politik, 2001. 246 pp. (broschiert), ISBN 978-3-486-56570-6.



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Bohemia's Special Path to *Gutsherrschaft*

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In the 1660s and 1670s, a new term entered the sociopolitical lexicon of central European peasants, "Bohemian servitude," signifying the imminent threat of bondage to the soil and subjection to the arbitrary power of lords. Its emergence suggests both the vitality of popular communication networks and the prominence of Czech conditions in the political imagination of the Empire's rural populations. No such prominence, unfortunately, can be said to characterize the modern social and economic historiography of the early modern Empire. Correcting this deficit was a principal goal of Markus Cerman and Erich Landsteiner, editors of *Sozial- und Wirtschaftshistorische Studien*, in translating and publishing this collection of six essays by Eduard Maur, professor of history at the Charles University and the preeminent exponent of historical demography in the Czech Republic.

Five of these studies were originally published in Czech journals between 1976 and 1989; a sixth is original to this collection. Together, Maur's studies present a coherent picture of the forces that shaped institutions

of agrarian social life and production from the Black Death to the mid-eighteenth century, especially personal bondage or "serfdom" (*Leibeigenschaft*) and the system of domain economies based on compulsory labor (*Gutsherrschaft*). They also provide instructive contrasts to parallel developments further to the west and east.

Contrasts in both directions are sharpest in Maur's study of demographic development in the pre-Hussite period (1346-1419), the most recent and methodologically most innovative in the collection. Maur analyzes two previously untapped sources, confirmation rolls (*libri confirmationum*) and proclamations of reversion (*HeimfÄlle*), to reconstruct the chronology and shifting foci of plague in the Czech lands and the demographic crisis it induced. That plague mortality was lower in Bohemia than in the West is well-known; Maur's contribution is to confirm statistically the impression given by fourteenth-century chroniclers that not the first outbreak of plague but the third, in 1380, was the most devastating both in mortality and in long-term demographic consequences.

Even then, the indirect evidence of confirmation rolls

shows that the general mortality rate in 1380, while sufficient to provoke population decline, was still lower than the western European rate in 1348-1349. Maur attributes the belated arrival and relatively low mortality of plague to Bohemia's isolation from river trade routes along which the disease traveled most quickly. Otherwise, he presents a familiar chain of consequences: stagnation in agriculture; village desertion; labor surpluses in cities and towns; and the attempts of landlords to contain rural flight by offering greater legal security to tenants and by reducing or abolishing death-duties.

Beginning with the second essay, Maur develops his case for the primacy of local market relations and against world-system explanations for the origins of *Gutsherrschaft* that emphasize the importance of long-distance trade. Why, he asks, should *Gutsherrschaft* have developed so slowly in Bohemia, where socio-political preconditions—weak cities, noble-dominated Estates, a near perfect correspondence between seigneurial authority and local jurisdiction—were so favorable? Maur's answer is that the proliferation of *Gutsherrschaft* was driven primarily by factors that enabled large estates to gain competitive advantage over small peasant farms, including wage and price movements and the ability of nobles to control consumption. Until the late fifteenth century, these encouraged the parcelization of estates and, up to the late sixteenth, the expansion of fish production (*Teichwirtschaft*); only after 1530 did grain price inflation begin to encourage the expansion of *Gutsherrschaft* and a gradual shift toward cereal agriculture. Even then, the productivity of small holdings precluded the transition to full fledged "second serfdom." Instead, the early expansion of *Gutsherrschaft* was supported by wage labor; wage movements only began to favor a shift toward increased use of Robot labor after the turn of the seventeenth century. In all this, the role of international markets was minimal: *Gutsherrschaft* in Bohemia was fully developed before *Gutsherren* entered the grain market, and even then production remained overwhelmingly for local consumption.

Also more important than long-distance trade was the extra-economic power of lords, specifically their ability to constrain peasant action. In Bohemia, this manifested in restrictions on subjects' freedom of movement and their right to petition sovereign authority directly. In his third essay, Maur attributes these developments to the monarchy's fiscal dependence on the noble-dominated territorial Estates and its consequent failure to intervene in lord-subject relations. Without attacking royal prerogatives directly, the Estates had by 1585 effec-

tively criminalized supplication and clipped the mobility of rural poor. It is a testament to the power of nobles that the revolts of 1547 and 1620 produced no significant curtailment of their authority over subjects.

Thus, Maur shows, the socio-economic and legal foundations of *Gutsherrschaft* were laid long before the external shocks of war and agrarian depression prompted the transition to full-blown "Bohemian servitude" after 1650. In this connection, Maur argues against an excessive emphasis on the effects of war. As he demonstrates in his analysis of "Bohemian Society and the Consequences of the Thirty Years' War" (chapter six) the immediate consequences of war cannot account for the population losses the kingdom suffered; population decline had already begun twenty years before 1620; and in any case the total loss—about 30%—was smaller and restored sooner than had been estimated previously.

Maur makes a similar point about agrarian depression: its conjunctural ingredients, he argues, were already present before the shortages of labor and capital made themselves felt and before the drop in demand for agricultural goods prompted sharp increases in the Robot and dulled the competitive advantages that peasant small producers had enjoyed earlier. The crucial variable, in 1650 as in the preceding century, was not long-distance trade but the profitability of large-scale production for local and regional consumption. The difference was that now lords could constrain labor markets and consumption in ways that complemented each other.

As Maur shows in chapter five, the royal fiscal administration deployed a wide variety of methods to steer local consumption toward goods produced on the domain. But in the final analysis nothing enhanced the competitive advantage of *Gutsherrschaft* like Robot labor and the reductions in personnel costs and purchasing power it facilitated. There can be little doubt about the profitability of these devices. As Maur shows in chapter six, profits from domain production—including industry—was several times greater after 1650 than from money and natural rents combined.

What of the human consequences? In the fourth and most original essay, Maur uses emigration permits from the Pardubitz estate to track the pace at which nobles built up "Bohemian servitude" from its sixteenth-century legal foundations. At Pardubitz, the number of permits issued declined throughout the seventeenth century, reaching a nadir in the 1680s, when only 98 were given out, down from 230 in the 1660s. Significantly, no permits were issued in the 1680s to tenants; and because

a large proportion of them were issued to young women seeking to marry outside the estate, Maur concludes that bondage caused a great contraction of marriage markets.

But was this a general trend? If so, parish registers should reflect stricter enforcement of a lords' right to approve marriages, and indeed evidence from Podiebrad indicates that 64% of grooms and 90% of brides were native to the estate. We should also expect efforts to compensate for the contraction of marriage markets through pronatalist policies. Sure enough, the gender imbalance at Podiebrad may reflect the impact of positive inducements for male colonists to settle on favorable terms. But as Maur also shows, the roster of policies included the obligation, incumbent on male tenants, to marry by a certain age. Forced marriage reached its apex, Maur indicates, in the 1670s, just as fears of "Bohemian servitude" were spreading to the west.

Bleak as all this sounds, Maur is careful to chart the limits of *Gutsherrschaft*. As Heinrich Kaak's recent synthesis confirms, the terms of compulsory labor and the constraints of serfdom were milder in Bohemia than in parts further east and north. [1] For Maur, these patterns also stem from the balance of forces in complex regional market relations. Bohemia was not as urbanized as regions further west, but richer in towns than Poland or the Baltic lands, and as he argues in chapter two, the presence of large, wage-based urban economies, as well as the existence of iron and glass manufactures, made it difficult for lords to neutralize labor market forces altogether. Consequently, the actual *Robot* did not exceed two or three days per week, though nobles claimed the right to elevate the servile burdens arbitrarily. Finally, the local orientation of domain production meant that lords could depress peasant incomes only so far.

These essays were originally published before the revival of historical scholarship on *Gutsherrschaft* and servile bondage in early modern Europe, and it is a pity that none of the articles chosen for this collection addresses these newer studies, with their microhistorical focus on the tension between legal norms and practices of rule and resistance, on the balance between consensus and conflict, on symbolism in the experience of domi-

nation, and on the self-perception of subjects. [2] In a tantalizing passage, Maur notes that resistance to "second serfdom" was intensive, especially in the sixteenth century when conjunctural circumstances still favored it, enabling subject populations to defend "ancient rights" against the new demands of lords and officials. To press their case, Bohemian peasants typically appealed directly to the Emperor; one wonders how much this tendency, and the conception of order behind it, informed negotiations over the right to petition. What, by the same token, were the contours of self-perception after "second serfdom" had taken hold? Maur's meticulous explication of market-related opportunities and constraints leaves one wondering how the peasants themselves experienced possibility and negotiated risk. But Maur is not a cultural historian, and these are quibbles with an exceptionally learned, nuanced, and remarkably thorough inquiry into the social and economic foundations of "Bohemian servitude."

Notes:

[1]. Heinrich Kaak, *Die Gutsherrschaft: Theoriegeschichtliche Untersuchungen zum Agrarwesen im ostelbischen Raum* (Veröffentlichungen der Historischen Kommission zu Berlin 79, Berlin: de Gruyter, 1991).

[2]. Jan Peters, ed., *Konflikt und Kontrolle in Gutsherrschaftsgesellschaften: Über Resistenz- und Herrschaftsverhalten in ländlichen Sozialgebilden der Frühen Neuzeit* (Veröffentlichungen des Max-Planck-Instituts für Geschichte 120, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1995); Jan Peters, ed., *Gutsherrschaft als soziales Modell: Vergleichende Betrachtungen zur Funktionsweise frühneuzeitlicher Agrargesellschaften* (Historische Zeitschrift, Beihefte N.F. 18, Munich: Oldenbourg, 1995).

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