Rural Economy and Society in North-western Europe, 500–2000

Social Relations: Property and Power

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Cover illustrations
Top illustration: the castle of Scheldeneke, a small village in Flanders near Ghent (Belgium) (photograph E. Thoen, 2007). The castle dates from 1854–5 and is built in neo-gothic style. The site and the castle garden are the direct successors of a large medieval manorial and seigneurial centre called since the thirteenth century the 'Land van Flode', a powerful seigneurie that dates back to the tenth century In the twelfth century the castle was owned for a long period by the Plassart family who played an important role in the politics of the village as mayors of Scheldeneke.

Bottom illustration: (Un)scrita et st bruns. Illustration in the 'Veel boere', an inventory of the estates of the land of Pamelie (Oudenaarde, Flanders, Belgium) written around 1275. Royal Library of Brussels, Ms. 1175, fol. 14v.

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10 North-west Germany, 1750–2000

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10.1 Ownership, power relations and the distribution of property

Types of landowners

Beginning in the 1770s and continuing through the nineteenth century, liberal reforms freed the rural population from serfdom (Bauernbefreiung), and abolished all feudal dues and services (Lastenaufhebung). Concurrently, the partition of common lands (Gemeinschaftsbestande), enclosures (Verkoppelungen), and the abolition of rights of usufruct (Servitutenaufhebungen) terminated all cooperative claims over the soil. Taken together, these reforms established a system of unconditional landownership. From 1850 and perhaps earlier, agriculture in the north-west of Germany has been dominated by farmers, who owned and occupied their holdings in servality, whilst forestry has become an enterprise of the state. Only in some regions (mainly Holstein and the east of Lower Saxony and Westphalia) have great estates owned by noble or middle class entrepreneurs remained of significance. In contrast to other parts of western Europe, urban capital never dominated the rural economy. Throughout the nineteenth century, the countryside in the north-west of Germany was overwhelmingly in the possession of peasants who were progressively turning into farmers.

Changing social property distribution

The demise of the Holy Roman Empire in 1806 led to a second wave of secularisation under Napoleonic rule. In the end, Prussia incorporated the forests, and some ecclesiastical demesnes, into its state demesnes, but the properties of the dissolved ecclesiastical institutions were mostly sold at auction to a range of new proprietors. It depended on the local situation whether an industrial investor or aristocrat acquired a whole estate or whether peasants and smallholders bought it in parcels. In some regions, mainly in the south and east of Westphalia, manorialism was strengthened. One can plausibly argue that the liberal reforms not only put in place the legal foundation for a rural society of owner-occupiers, but also completed social developments which had been underway since the later Middle Ages.

Table 10.1 is suggestive of the distribution of arable and forest in the Kingdom of Hanover in 1816 between the state, the royal Klosterkammer (an endowment established in the course of secularisation to provide for the support of schools and the University of Göttingen), privileged estates which gave their noble owners the right to vote for the diet, communes, Protestant churches and schools, and private landowners. The table demonstrates the economic and social predominance of the peasantry, because the
peasant owners of substantial farms held the larger part of the arable, meadows and gardens in the possession of private landowners. Noble estates were quite common but were normally relatively small. It is possible to identify 956 manors, but they had a medium size of only 128 ha. The arable of these comparably small estates was often located in scattered parcels alongside those of peasants, so that leasing it to villagers was the most profitable way to exploit the land. The table also shows the dominant role of the state in forest economy, particularly as communal woods were increasingly controlled by the government’s forest administration.

The rise of the peasant owner-occupier was equally characteristic of these regions which had been dominated by manors since the sixteenth century. In Schleswig-Holstein for instance, from about 1750 onwards the so-called Bauernfreunde (friends of the peasantry) dominated public opinion, so that the Danish authorities, who had traditionally favoured the path of English agrarian capitalism, performed a dramatic about-turn. Between 1764 and 1798 Danish state demesnes were dissolved completely, leaving the peasantry with only moderate obligations. In 1797 the nobility decided to manumit the remaining bondsmen on its estates within eight years. In the end, the Danish government terminated all forms of peasant dependence in 1805, stipulating that the former bondsmen could buy or lease the land they had tilled since time immemorial on easy terms. In the district of Anglia 75 per cent of the land belonging to the estates of the nobility was placed in the hands of the peasantry, so that the social structure of a district which had been characterised by manorialism for 300 years rapidly became dominated by a substantial peasantry. This was typical of the German north-west (Dipper, 1980: 71–74).

Throughout the nineteenth century, the owners of medium to large farms formed the backbone of the socio-political order of the countryside in north-west Germany.
Due to the prevailing custom of inalienable inheritance, the number of substantial farms remained stable. With a drastic rise in rural population, the number of smallholdings increased rapidly, so that in most villages the majority were not able to live solely by husbandry. The question arises of from where the new smallholders acquired their land. There is no single answer because conditions varied from village to village. In the second half of the eighteenth century state authorities pursued a policy of facilitating new settlements on heathland and moors (the so-called *Pensionierung*) which had a considerable impact on some parts of Lower Saxony and Westphalia. During the Napoleonic era the secularization of ecclesiastical institutions and the dissolution of state demesnes also boosted the number of new smallholdings. In some localities the agricultural crises of the 1830s and 1870s resulted in the bankruptcy of the owners of manors which were subsequently sold in parcels. The privatization of the commons, mainly accomplished in the first half of the nineteenth century, offered opportunities for the acquisition of small parcels of heathland, because farmers and estate owners were inclined to sell the remoter parts of their allotments. Finally, time and again individual heirs of a farmstead leased a small parcel of their patrimony to a younger sibling in order to meet their obligations to kin. All these phenomena resulted in an impressive process of internal colonization which by 1890 had deepened the social order of the countryside and the landscape itself. One can plausibly argue that the growth of smallholdings provided the basis for the dramatic agrarian intensification which took place between 1780 and 1880, and which was mainly based upon increased employment of labour (Koopmans, 1996).

This expansionary period ended between the 1840s and the 1870s according to region. The limited opportunities for rural paupers to earn their living by daily labour, by spinning and weaving flax, hemp or wool, pea-cutting, or undertaking migratory labour, all proved to be insufficient to support an ever-growing population. Therefore, sections of the rural population migrated to either America or to the booming industrial regions and commercial centres within Germany. But although population stagnated in most villages of the German north-west after the middle of the nineteenth century, farmers remained a minority.

Table 102 provides a review of the rural structure in the early twentieth century in a number of different districts within north-west Germany. It is based upon statistical data that the Prussian authorities collected in 1907. The monopolial tradition in the eastern parts of Holstein and Lower Saxony can be easily identified, as a greater number of large holdings continued to exist in the districts of Schleswig-Holstein. But here, much as everywhere else, peasant farms cowering from 5 to 100 ha owned between two-thirds and four-fifths of the area.

In the twentieth century an accelerating process of consolidation occurred. From 1900 until 1910, the number of small farms decreased rapidly. Their acreage was predominantly acquired by middle-sized farms of 5–20 ha. For example, in the south of Oldenburg, the share of these farms rose by 7 percent from 1925 to 1933. The agrarian crisis of the late 1920s and the early 1930s slowed the consolidation process because it mainly affected larger farms (50–100 ha) whose numbers declined by 16 percent in Oldenburg between 1925 and 1933 (in the whole of Germany by 5 percent) (Böckmann, 2000: 34–38). The pre-war years showed a rise of the peasant farms holding an acreage from 10 to 50 ha, as intended by the Nazi regime (Minkel, 1996: 14). Generally, for the first half of the twentieth century, one can discern a strong decline in the number of smallholdings (with an acreage of less than 5 ha), a moderate decline in small farms (5–10 ha), a strong rise in the number of substantial peasant farms (10–100 ha), some increase of large farms (100–200 ha) and a decline of agricultural establishments comprising more than 200 ha (Wilde/Barnstedt, 1964: 191).

The most striking structural change in German agriculture did not commence until the 1950s. The increasing ease with which smaller farmers could find well-paid jobs encouraged them to give up unprofitable farms. The land of those farms was generally not sold but leased to neighbouring farmers. At the same time, the outflow of the agricultural workforce into urban occupations made mechanization necessary, but to operate a mechanized farm effectively required increasingly larger acreages. What is more, since the 1960s, the establishment of "profitable" farms was the aim of both domestic and European agrarian policies (Vock, 1991: 45–46). Accordingly, by 1980 the number of farms still under 20 ha was reduced to a threshold for a profitable farm in Schleswig-Holstein, whilst in 2003 the corresponding figure was more than 100 ha. The number of farms decreased from 34,426 in 1949 to 17,664 in 2003. During the second half of the twentieth century the average farm size there rose from 2.8 ha to 5.7 ha (Agrarbericht Schleswig-Holstein). Similarly in Lower Saxony the number of farms was reduced by two-thirds between 1960 and 2001, whilst their average size increased from 13 to 44 ha. Since 2003 only farms with more than 100 ha of arable are continuing to increase in number (Agrarstatistik Niedersachsen).

**Systems of tenure**

Tenancy has been neglected by German agrarian historians who have been preoccupied with the social figure of the peasant. In fact, in the nineteenth century leasehold contracts for medium sized farms were rare. Nevertheless, leasehold gained a growing importance in the rural society of the German north-west as a flexible instrument by which land, capital and workforce could be allocated. Column c in Table 102 provides an impression of how frequently all social strata of rural society supplemented their possessions with some leasehold. Leases had traditionally been used by aristocratic and bourgeois owners when letting entire manors to middle class tenants. This remained the case throughout the nineteenth century. Accordingly, Table 103 indicates that at the end of the nineteenth century larger properties were still commonly held on lease. It remained unusual for peasant farms, but was frequently used for smallholdings where the rural proletariat rented a parcel of land from an estate or a farmer. As estates had dismantled their traditional peasant corps, their owners often tried to pay their farmhands in kind (with housing, garden plots and payment in natural produce).

A similar sort of leasehold relationship can be identified in the rural industrial areas of Minden-Ravensberg, Tecklenburg, Lippe, and in parts of Osnabrück where the rural linen industry was a notable employer. Here the landless took leases from peasants, some as contract workers (Heuerlinge) who paid a considerable part of their rent...
in labour, or as lessees (Zeitpächter) who paid in cash. In the districts of Halle, Herford, and Bielefeld in the 1820s, leases of the Heuerlinge accounted for at least 73 per cent of the total acreage, Zeitpächte for another 7.4 per cent (Moos, 1984). Despite public criticism from the early twentieth century onwards, the Heuerlinge system survived and in 1923 was even sanctioned by a Landwirtschaftsgesetz, albeit after lively political discussion. But in the middle of the twentieth century the area cultivated as Heuerland was very small. In 1949 it formed only 0.6 per cent of the farmland in Lower Saxony, in 1960 a mere 0.2 per cent in Westphalia. Heuerlinge disappeared in the 1960s because of the superior employment prospects offered by industry (Theis, 1991: 314–26; Böckmann, 2000: 164–70).

Today, the situation has completely changed, and leasing is the most important way to acquire agricultural land. Already in the 1970s it played the most important role in changing the occupation of property in Schleswig-Holstein, accounting for 40–45 per cent of the total turnover. Between 1971 and 2005 the share of leased arable increased from 30 to 51 per cent. In Lower Saxony, as much as 65 per cent of the agricultural land was leased in 2005. The acreage of the additional parcels leased by farmers from their neighbours in order to extend their holdings is definitely larger than the total acreage of entirely leased farms. As a rule, the proportion of leasehold is significantly smaller in regions where imperable inheritance is practiced than in those regions with a tradition of parcellar inheritance. And it is widely used in the vicinity of towns. A further increase in the amount of leasehold can be expected given the tendency for farmers to leave agriculture (Welnet, 1987: 17–30; While/Barnstedt, 1964: 191–93; Thissen, 1988: 172, 267–69). Hence, structural change in agriculture has generated a new category of landowners: former farmers or farmers’ heirs who lease their land. But these lessees do not form a new rural leisure class because their income from rent is normally insufficient to make a living.

Notes: Reg. Bez. Schleswig-Holstein and the duchy of Lauenburg; Reg. Bez. Hanover, i.e. the former counties of Hoya and Diepholz; and the principality Calenberg; Reg. Bez. Oldenburg, i.e. the former prince bishops of Oldenburg, the principality of Konstanz, and the Eichsfeld; a part of the former bishopric of Mainz; Reg. Bez. Lüneburg, i.e. the former principality of Lüneburg; Reg. Bez. Stade, i.e. the former principality of Benthen-Verden and the Land Hadeln; Reg. Bez. Osnabrück, i.e. the former prince bishopric of Osnabrück, the counties of Bentheim and Lingen and the northern part of the prince bishopric of Münster (so-called Niedersachsen); Reg. Bez. Aurich, i.e. the former principality Ostfriesland; Reg. Bez. Münster, i.e. the southern part of the former prince bishopric of Münster (so-called Obersachsen), the counties of Tübingen and Steinfurt and the Vest Recklinghausen which had belonged to the archbishopric of Cologne; Reg. Bez. Minden, i.e. the former principality of Minden, the county of Ravensberg, the sovereignty of Rheinau, the county of Hadeln and the prince bishopric of Paderborn; Reg. Bez. Arnsberg, i.e. the former duchy of Westfalen, the county of Mark and the Imperial City Dortmund.

The economic and cultural value of land

Whereas the second half of the eighteenth century saw a continuous rise in price of land, in the early nineteenth century, the liberalization of land markets, the supply of seceded estates for purchase, and the pan-European agricultural depression caused a significant decline. But even then, the high demand for land on the part of smallholders and landlords prevented a deep fall in prices. Because of the scarcity of land for sale in the crowded industrial regions, leaseholds were very expensive there. For instance in the County of Ravensberg in the 1820s the landlords poor had to find annual rents ranging from an extortionate 18.8 to 23.6 Taler per ha in its most fertile parts, and even 3.2 to 8.8 Taler per ha in the sandy districts (Moosser, 1984: 477).

During the 'golden years' of German agriculture, which lasted from about 1830 to 1870, the value of smallholdings, farmsteads and estates rose steeply. But peculiarities of land markets continued even in these years of economic liberalism. A recent study based on the careful investigation of three differently structured Westphalian villages (Lohne, Oberkirchen and Borgeln) comes to the conclusion that until World War I, village land markets remained seller's markets. Between 1850 and 1866, sales of land affected 2.5 per cent of the total acreage of Lohne per year, in Oberkichen 1.6 per cent, and in Borgeln a mere 0.8 per cent (Fritz, 2007: 79). The supply of plots available for sale was so tiny that the price they obtained did not follow normal economic rules. Social relationships often determined who had the opportunity to buy land.

Because tenancy agreements react more quickly to the price movements of agricultural products than the price of land, the number of leases reflects changes in agricultural profitability. Thus, following the terms of trade, a rise in the number of leases is found until 1870 after which it slows down, to rise again after 1900. Between the World Wars it reacted with the rapidly changing economic cycles. From 1936 to 1944 an exceptional rise of leasing rates by 32 per cent could be detected (Abel, 1967: 181-96). Land leases rose from the middle of the 1970s to 1980 and stagnated or even dropped afterwards until 2006. Prices in Lower Saxony and Schleswig-Holstein stayed below the national average, but this is influenced by the prevailing high prices in southern Germany (Kindler, 1995: 70). Currently the rising prices of agricultural commodities and the appearance of crops dedicated to make biofuels has led to a rise in both lease and land prices (Bruns, 2008).

From the 1870s until today investment in farmland could not compete against other strategies of capital investment because the rates of return have always been disappointing. Thus, the purchase of agricultural land was, and is, deeply linked to the social rationalities of a specific rural way of life. Farms and estates were normally not purchased but inherited by their proprietors, who increasingly sought to enlarge the lands they owned with additional leasehold land. This trend depended on a multitude of socio-political and economic factors, amongst which state intervention proves to be crucial. In recent decades the prices of farmland and leases were determined by the demand and price for agricultural products on the one hand and by the level of agricultural subsidy interventions on the other (Möhl, 2006).

Traditionally, social status within the village was conferred by the possession of property. This allowed fine distinctions to be drawn through, for instance, lifestyle,
attitudes to leisure, or conspicuous consumption at family feasts (Troßbach and Zimmermann, 2006: 212). If there was little interest in the acquisition of farmland by outsiders, there was nonetheless a belief in the cultural superiority of the peasantry and country life which can be traced from around 1870 to the middle of the twentieth century. Above all, political conservatism was associated with an agrarian romanticism which valued the peasant as a bulwark against modernity. Industrialisation and urbanisation were held to upset modern man. To counter this, the preservation of a politically reliable and economically solid peasantry was vital. This ideology justified governmental initiatives which supported the peasantry, e.g. prohibitive corn-tariffs, settlement policies, cheap rural credit, and at a later date agricultural subsidies. The collective experience of hunger during World War I and again in the post-war crisis from 1945 to 1948 fostered the esteem with which the peasantry were viewed well outside conservative, nationalist or racist circles. So it comes as no surprise that this positive attitude towards the peasantry as a stabilizing societal element continued into the early years of the Federal Republic of (West) Germany. In opposition to the collectivisation of agriculture in East Germany, in the West landed property, mainly the peasant family farm, received an extraordinary degree of support from the state.

This was insufficient though to halt the slow decline in the esteem which rural property held attached. As we mentioned, landed property had traditionally established social reputation within the village. The farmers' standing evaporated with the progressive loss of economic significance for agriculture, the shrinking incomes of farmers, and the dependence of agriculture on state subsidy. This started in the 1960s, and accelerated during the 1970s. A survey of a number of Westphalian villages demonstrates how the owners of substantial farms had dominated the municipal councils up to the 1970s, but then quickly lost their purchase (Esner, 1997: 131, 265–64). Today, even in the smallest villages, the possession of landed property no longer carries any social cachet.

10.2 The occupiers of the land
Peasant ownership of land

In north-west Germany between 1770 and 1850, the traditional rural order was completely overturned. Liberal reforms released the peasantry from its dependency on lordship. The so-called Bauernbefreiung (peasant liberation) terminated personal subjection but in order to become full owners of their farms, peasants were obliged to make redemption payments to their lords. In the course of this Lastenabführung (commutation of obligations) it was possible to make a single payment but this was rarely done; instead, payment in instalments prevailed. It must be emphasised that, in contrast to the eastern provinces of Prussia where peasants had to cede valuable parts of the farmland to their former lords, the peasants in north-west Germany normally kept the whole acreage of their farms.

The agrarian reforms were part and parcel of a comprehensive reorganisation of both state and society driven by bureaucrats who saw reform as an answer to the challenge posed by the French Revolution. In essence, they aimed for an enhancement of productivity by eliminating 'feudal' obstacles to agricultural innovation, so that in the long run tax revenues could be raised. But apart from these financial objectives, agrarian reforms advanced the project of transforming traditional corporate society into a modern society of property owners. Furthermore, the intermediate power of privileged persons and corporations was abolished, so that a legally egalitarian union of subjects could arise. Locally laws were unified, manorial courts were abolished, and rural municipalities were integrated into the hierarchy of the state administration.

The German states implemented these reforms at different rates according to the differing political preferences of princes and governmental elites. In general, three phases can be distinguished. First, in the second half of the eighteenth century the 'agrarian movement' emerged. This set an agenda for liberal reform which was implemented in some, but not all, regions. Then, in the period from 1794 until 1815 reforms were broadly implemented as a reaction to the revolutionary impetus, partly as a result of French occupation, partly because a comparison of the traditional and the revolutionary order proved the fiscal and military superiority of the latter. Third, in the reactionary political atmosphere of the 1820s and again from the late 1830s to 1848, reform stagnated, but the reform agenda was finally implemented as a concession to the revolutionary movements of 1830 and 1848.

In north-west Germany three regionally distinct patterns of development can be discerned. First, in Schleswig-Holstein the traditional rural order was abolished by the Danish crown extremely early in 1850, on very advantageous terms to the peasantry. Feudal bondage was abolished without compensation. Peasant dues and services were purchased by a single payment of only 50 per cent of their value; this sum was lent to the peasants by the royal credit institute. As a result, a class society rapidly emerged, with a stable group of wealthy estate owners and farmers on the one hand, and a growing number of landless rural workers.

Second, in Lower Saxony liberal agrarian reforms had been launched by the French empire in the first decade of the nineteenth century, but these were only sporadically implemented, partly because of legal difficulties, partly because in 1811, following its restoration, the Kingdom of Hanover rescinded all these measures. It was only in 1831, under the pressure of widespread peasant unrest and violence riots in nearby Braunschweig, that the second chamber of the diet passed a redemption law despite the resistance of the conservatives in the upper house and the state bureaucracy. Here, as in the neighbouring princehood of Oldenburg and Braunschweig, the commutation of obligations started in the 1840s. All in all, peasants had to redeem their obligations at 25 years' purchase, but payments were divided into small amounts which continued to be paid until the new bounty in the agricultural economy of the 1850s and 1860s made their redemption easier. Again, public credit institutes were established which functioned as a buffer between peasants and the mainly aristocratic recipients of redemptions (Kulhawy, 2008).

Third, in Westphalia, the Napoleonic 'model-state' of the Kingdom of Westphalia, at the moment of its creation in 1808, decreed the abolition of peasant servitude which was regarded as a vestige of feudal barbarity. But strong words were followed by
half-hearted legislation, because peasant rents and services, as the most valuable part of the state's property, were needed to support the Napoleonite elite. The only obligations which were abolished were those which were perceived to be a sign of personal obedience, such as the obligatory services owed by adolescent bondsmen, heritors in case of succession and marriage lines for the spouse who married into a farmstead. The bulk of peasant dues remained unaltered as they could only be discharged by a lump sum payment of 15 times their value. So, until 1815, redemption laws remained of little effect because of the insecure political situation, the deteriorating terms of trade for agricultural products, and difficulties peasants faced in securing a loan. When Prussia secured Westphalia after the Treaty of Vienna, it decided to accept the Napoleonite legislation because Westphalia had been amongst the transitory states which had been recognized by the Treaty of Tilsit in 1807. The Prussian agrarian legislation of the 1820s and 1830s followed the same lines which made it of little value to the peasants. In the Prussian province of Westphalia during the 1830s and 1840s, peasant redemption payments started mainly when the former lords of the manor sought payment. Instead, the Prussian agrarian authorities urged the commutation of tithe, tithe, rents and services to perpetual rents. Therefore, the redemption of feudal obligations was not a burning issue for either the landlords or their peasants. In the former prince-bishopric of Paderborn, the payment of redemption was made easier by the creation of a public lending institution in 1836.

But the majority of the Wesphalian peasants waited until the middle of the nineteenth century to apply for redemption. Although the revolution of 1848 failed in a political sense, it resulted in a reduction of peasant redemption payments to 18 years' value. Whilst it has traditionally been argued that peasants were unable to make their redemption payments without the help of a public bank, it has recently been pointed out that by continuing to pay permanent annual rents, peasants acted rationally so long as they were less expensive than their redemption payments. Even in the second half of the nineteenth century, only a minority of the peasants harkened back to the amortisation schemes offered by the newly founded public ‘Provincialrentenbank’, but preferred to obtain private credits which were more flexible and usable at the same time.

Communal land use systems, their adaptation and disappearance

From the late eighteenth century onwards, most state authorities promoted the privatisation of communal land (Fränge, 1971; Brakensiek, 1994). Taken together, Gemeinheitslehen (partition of common lands), Verkoppelungen (enclosure) and Serdulatausleihungen (the abolition of rights of usufruct on specific plots of land or forest) should have terminated all communal claims over the soil. The first legal regulations designed to encourage privatisation, to standardise the procedure to be employed and provide guidelines, were enacted in the last three decades of the eighteenth century. In many regions a few partitions took place at this time, but the reforms did not gain pace before the 1820s. The initiative of the state authorities had to be backed by local actors if it was to be implemented. Due to the varying degrees of willingness to cooperate on the part of the local communities affected, the reform process lasted from 1820 to 1890. Different regional patterns of development can be traced; these run across borders and indicate patterns of change other than those initiated by the legislators.

The reform saw early success in those regions where agrarian individualism was of long standing and where market access was readily available, as in Holstein and northern Westphalia, comprising the principality of Tecklenburg, Osnabrück, Ravensberg, and Lippe. In Holstein, the governmental elite (the educated state officials and courtiers, Protestant pastors, professors and teachers, and so on) who advocated indemnities for the division of common lands, enabled a minority of estate owners to enlarge and modernise their manors, this was not compensation for their loss of authority over land and people.

There can be no doubt that the peasants gained most from the reforms. While the abolition of personal bondage meant that the peasant became a full member of civil society, the acquisition of full property rights in his land provided him with the material means to use his newly-acquired freedom. Within a short time, from 1770 to 1848, the peasants advanced from being regimented and often despised subjects to being respected members of an order which, as we noticed, many contemporaries considered to be guarantor of social stability at a time of widespread upheaval (Gagliardo, 1969).

The dominance of peasant land ownership which was the outcome of the reforms of the nineteenth century has endured until today. Nowadays, the largest share of the agriculturally used acreage is in the possession of 'natural persons', either individuals or couples. In Westphalia 95 per cent of the acreage belonged to individuals in 1979, whereas only 7 per cent of the arable was owned by the state, the church, cooperatives and enterprises (Thissen, 1988). The share of large estates owned by aristocratic families has been estimated to have been about 5 per cent in Westphalia in the 1970s, while about 12 per cent of the arable was possessed by city dwellers. These shares vary by region: in peripheral areas noble families and peasant farmers hold significantly more property. But one has to point out that throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, agriculture in the German north-west was mainly a family business conducted by peasant farmers.
the dissolution of the traditional rural order in the late eighteenth century could count on sections of the nobility and the whole of the peasantry for support, for both were eager to expand their export-oriented agriculture. Here, government reforms were completing an enclosure movement which had been underway since the sixteenth century (Prange, 1971).

In the northern quarter of Westphalia, the partition of common lands was achieved early on account of the coincidence of several favourable factors. The common wastes and grazings were fertile enough to make cultivation worthwhile; scattered settlement patterns and the individualised organisation of the fields did not pose any insuperable impediments, as communal crop rotations and compulsory collective farming were unknown. The domestic linen industry offered an alternative source of income to the agrarian sector. At the same time agriculture and the linen industry were so closely intertwined that the agrarian sector benefited from the growth in population: the labouring poor demanded flax and food, and simultaneously provided the workforce to cultivate the privatised heathlands.

But in other parts of Lower Saxony and Westphalia, the attempts of reform-inclined bureaucracies to privatise the commons faced serious difficulties. In the area of nucleated village settlement covering the south-eastern part of the region, open-field farming was usual in the eighteenth century and incremental agricultural reorganisation the norm. The order of the fields and the use of common lands were an important material foundation for the political and social unity of the village community. If any individuals sought to disrupt this unity, this was infeasible. Besides, lords of the manor were usually entitled to graze their flocks of sheep on commons and open fields. They therefore sought to impede enclosure until overwhelmed by the peasant upheavals during the revolution of 1848 (Prass, 1997).

In the wide coastal plains and the Westphalian Münsterland, the partition of common heathlands did not commence until the beginning of the nineteenth century and was generally completed by 1850. Actually, the extensive moorlands were not privatised or transferred into state ownership until the 1880s: the cultivation of this land had not been worthwhile at an earlier date. Here, a conversion of the peasant holdings to a more profitable agricultural system was impeded not so much by the existing field system, but by the severe limits which the nature of the terrain and the climate set on all attempts to increase yields. In large parts of north-western Germany, cultivation of the moors could not be undertaken until modern technology - steam ploughs, drainage and artificial fertilizers - made it possible.

The privatisation of the commons both fostered and cushioned social and political change. Certainly, the local power of aristocratic estate owners was weakened by the abolition of their sovereignty over the local courts that had traditionally administered the complex commons called Marken. And certainly, the economic, social, and political position of the wealthier peasants was strengthened because the largest part of the privatised common lands fell into the hands of this group. But after the revolution of 1848, the struggle between nobility and peasantry was definitely at an end. Exceptionally profitable market conditions enabled the commutation of peasant obligations and, together with the partition of common lands, provided the material basis for the truly 'historic compromise' between peasants and their former manorial lords. The compensation the lords received took the heat out of the struggle for land between nobility and peasants.

The losers in the division of common land were the rural proletariat. Although their use of common pastures and woods had never been a legal right, it was ultimately impossible to exclude the small man from grazing some animals. The privatisation of the commons terminated this aspect of their household economy. So, it was the landless people who felt the full force of the reforms, which aggravated the social differences between peasants and the rural proletariat. That this did not erupt into open conflict reflects the particular form that enclosure took. As it was required by the state, to all intents and purposes the common lands, an essential element of the 'moral economy' of the proletariat, were destroyed - whether allegedly or genuinely - by powerful outsiders.

The exercise of power within the village

The local power of the peasant elite culminated in the nineteenth century. Liberal reforms weakened the traditional influence of the lords of the manor, but the states did not rush to establish local bureaucracies which in the twentieth century would increasingly permeate the rural society. Until about 1890 the state authorities preferred to operate by the long-established system of 'indirect rule' by central legislation, through strict budgetary controls, and powers delegated to local village courts which were normally dominated by the proprietors of substantial farms. Landed property and the exercise of local power were nearly connected. In those regions where Ultramontane piety or Lutheran revivalism were well entrenched, the Catholic and Protestant clergy were able to exert moral authority over village affairs by controlling the schools, charities and relief institutions which elsewhere were organised by the secular authorities.

From the late nineteenth century, the emergence of rural cooperatives and the growing self-confidence of workers living in villages close to industrial centres led to the appearance of a new balance of power within the village in which farmers lost some of their control over the allocation of resources. But it was the Third Reich which thoroughly undermined the power base of the landowners inside the villages, despite posturing as being strongly sympathetic to the peasantry. Communal autonomy was sharply reduced. Instead of landed property, membership of the Nazi party, or at least conformity with the national socialist system, became essential in order to secure local power. As a consequence, many people from the lower strata of rural society were appointed to local offices.

After World War II those members of the landowning groups who had not cooperated too closely with the Nazi party reclaimed their traditional authority for a short period. But in the 1960s landed property finally lost its claim to local influence. Global economic and social change, the rapid improvement of the infrastructure, migration and better education made landed property and kinship ties redundant as criteria for
Peasant organisations

Agricultural organisations are found at the point where agricultural producers, commercial interests, government influence, power relations among different social actors, and scientific expertise all come together. The first agricultural societies (Landwirtschaftsgesellschaften) were founded in the eighteenth century as a form of enlightened sociability committed to the development of the public weal. The first one in Germany was the Königliche Landwirtschaftsgesellschaft in Celle which was founded in 1764 by a circle of dignitaries, namely district administrators, scholars, and public officers of the Hanoverian regime. They aimed to advance agricultural improvement by maintaining a library, organizing competitions on agricultural theory and practice, publishing leaflets which would inform the 'simple' peasant about the cultivation of new fodder-crops, and sending members to England to investigate which agricultural innovations could be adapted to conditions in north-west Germany. The Landwirtschaftsgesellschaft in Celle came to play a role advising the Hanoverian government, notably in the very late eighteenth century when its chairman, Albrecht Daniel Thaen, distinguished himself as the leading agricultural expert in Germany. Members of this association wrote the basic ordinance of 1802 laying down the procedure for enclosure and they participated in its implementation. Nevertheless, their impact was limited, since it was an elitist association which failed to make much impact on the peasantry (Ulbricht, 1985).

By the early nineteenth century agricultural experts were well aware of the peasantry's disinterest in their innovative ideas. They interpreted as a reflection of their educational shortcomings. Perhaps this was so, but very often the peasants declined to follow the advice they received because of its impracticality. However, experts and governments established regional institutes to assist the local farmers' associations which were founded in numerous villages from the 1810s onwards. The main objective of such a local Landwirtschaftverein was the promotion of peasant education. There is only one detailed study of the work of a farmers' association, that of Badbergen, founded in 1839 situated in the Oombrucker Artland (Pelzer, 2002). The survey shows that the membership of the association consisted of the owners of farms, local craftsmen and manufacturers of agricultural machinery. They quickly shed the influence of the bailiff and the pastor who initiated its foundation. Indeed, peasant education through reading and lectures was an important objective, but it was completed by entertainment and the circulation of news. The Landwirtschaftverein of Badbergen showed its utility in the 1870s and 1880s when the cultivation of grain ceased to be profitable. It engaged an expert to advise on the improvement of meadows and its members instructed each other in how to improve stock breeding. Their machinery was improved by local manufacturers who copied British, Belgian and German examples from images in the agricultural journals to which the association subscribed or machines displayed in regional exhibitions. In 1889 members of the Badbergen peasants' association founded a dairy cooperative. One can assume that Landwirtschaftvereine generally supported the change in peasant attitudes, from the traditional subsistence orientation, to contributing to the regional grain trade in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and then to full integration into national and international agricultural markets after the middle of the nineteenth century.

The long-established agricultural associations had a reputation for being under the surveillance of the authorities. From the 1860s onwards they were viewed sceptically by both peasants and aristocrats, especially in those parts of Westphalia with a majority of Catholics. Hence it was a Catholic nobleman, Burghard Freiherr von Schrader-Als, who founded the first independent peasant association (Bauernverein) in 1862. In his judgement the rural population was given insufficient attention by either the public at large or the state, both of whom were preoccupied with rapid urbanisation. He argued for a strong and autonomous association to represent the professional interests of agriculture and the welfare of rural society in a world undergoing rapid urbanisation and industrialisation. His initiative was overwhelmingly successful. In 1871 the Westfälischer Bauernverein was founded which quickly embraced hundreds of local associations and tens of thousands of individual members. Along the way, the peasant associations and other forms of rural sociability formed a public platform for the enhancement of the image of the aristocracy, turning it from a privileged order into a social elite (Reif, 1979).

Although it was originally rooted in Ultramontane Catholicism, the movement found adherents among Lutheran peasants. Prima facie, the Bauernverein eschewed party politics (a condition of their tolerance by the state). They organized winter schools for the education of adolescents as well as agriculturalists, and provided mutual insurance against hail, fire and cattle disease. Their members founded thousands of local and regional cooperatives with different functions, purchasing fertilizer, machines and feeding stuff, operating dairies, securing financial investment and credit and establishing cooperatives for the sale of agricultural products. But apart from these progressive self-help activities and its lobbying, the Westfälischer Bauernverein was instinctively hostile to urban modernity. This was true of most rural organisations from 1870 to 1933. They were modern in respect of their organisational structure, their encouragement of agricultural progress, and their use of mass media, but were politically and socially retrogressive, and mostly anti-Semitic. The traditional rural elites and the 'simple' farmers were deeply angered by the worsening terms of trade for grain and cattle from the 1870s, the migration of rural labourers into the growing urban centres which offered better wages, and declining relevance of the rural sector to German society. Whenever taxes, prices for fertilizers or railway-tariffs were on the verge of being raised, rural unrest arose.

In the late nineteenth century this was perceived as a serious threat to the social and political order by the government of the Reich. In response, the authorities founded
Landwirtschaftskammern (Chambers of Agriculture), inclusive institutions which all agricultural producers were compelled to join. These institutions inherited the functions of the old-established agricultural societies. They were channels of communication between state and farmers, they promoted improvements in agricultural practice, and they enhanced agricultural education. Unlike their colleagues in Schleswig-Holstein and the provinces in the east of Prussia where chambers of agriculture had been founded in the late nineteenth century, farmers in the western provinces of Westphalia and Hanover were initially opposed to these government initiatives. They suspected that they would be a tool in the hands of the Prussian Junker who dominated the powerful Pressure group, Band der Landwirte. It was only in 1899–1900 that Landwirtschaftskammern were created in the western provinces. Peasant fears proved to be baseless: the chambers complemented the autonomous institutions of peasant self-help by publishing agronomic literature, establishing experimental stations, and after 1920, taking over the agricultural schools. Even if they were not the Junker who dominated the chambers, the owners of larger farms were over-proportionally represented on their executive boards because they were elected by the Kreisstag (county council), whose composition depended on the Prussian three-class system which favoured the wealthier voters. Not until the Weimar Republic could lessees and smallholders participate in the chamber elections and agricultural workers only after 1949. Until their abolition in 1933 the chambers commented on agrarian politics; after 1949 the re-created Landwirtschaftskammern were obliged to be non-political (Albers, 1999; Fohlenstein, 1996).

As mentioned before, after the late nineteenth century agricultural cooperatives became a driving force in agricultural development, but their contributions differed according to regional structures. In south-west Germany, the owners of small and middle-sized farms founded credit unions to avoid extortion and over-indentations. In northern and eastern Germany, the owners of more substantial farms and estates primarily used cooperatives to try and solve their supply and marketing problems with the help of cooperatives. They drew on credit unions to obtain loans and to make investments until the inflation of the 1920s. After that time the connection between cooperative activities and local solidarity lost its significance, with the consequence that the distinctions between cooperative and private banking have almost vanished.

With the foundation of the national socialist Reichsbahn in September 1931 all existing agricultural organisations, associations and cooperatives were abolished. When re-established after World War II, strongly centralized cooperatives dominated the marketing of cattle and dairy products (Bückmann, 2000: 152–53; Albers, 1999: 117, 169). Due to the progressive deglairization of post-war society, the re-founded peasants’ associations lost their significance, although they did maintain their influence over agrarian politics (Hemming, 1988: 141–43, 160–69, 208–209; Lohmann, 1964: 15–44).

Forms of peasant resistance

In the late eighteenth century the traditionally ‘quiet’ north-west of Germany experienced a number of local peasant uprisings. Even if some of these incidents were encouraged by news from France, they should not be interpreted as revolutionary actions but viewed as a continuation of traditional conflicts. The long phase of extraordinarily favourable prices for grain, flax and other agricultural products in the last third of the eighteenth century prompted some lords of the manor to raise peasant dues. Peasants reacted as they had always done: with litigation and, if that should fail, with violent forms of resistance (Hauptmeyer, 1985).

Things changed thoroughly during the early nineteenth century. Wherever lords of the manor attempted to maintain their traditional privileges, they were confronted with fierce peasant opposition in the revolutionary years of 1830 and 1848. This was especially the case where manor courts had survived the sea change in landlord-tenant relations around 1800 and were still used to punish subordinate peasants. Such behaviour was considered to be anarchistic and provoked considerable resentment. In central and south-west Germany these quarrels between lords and peasants were a crucial stimulus for the rural revolutionary movement, but in the north-west of Germany this was only the case in the south-eastern periphery of the region. Elsewhere something completely different occurred: peasant owner-occupiers and aristocratic estate-owners found themselves allied against the rural proletariat. In 1830, and again in 1848, those who had lost badly in the liberal reforms demanded affordable leases and the right to participate in local politics. Initially, the authorities and local peasant leaders made tactical concessions, but when the revolutionary movements lost their impetus, local power relations were restored. So, the political calculations of liberal reformers were proved to be correct: peasants acted as a pillar of the social and political order in the countryside. They saw themselves as the owners of their farms and as the legitimate masters of the labourers and poor, and wholly rejected egalitarian ideas (Driel, 1996). This attitude remained until at least 1914. Even widespread discontent among peasants in the Wilhelmian era never resulted in them adopting left-wing positions.

The prosperity of the peasantry

A tour through north-west Germany shows the informed observer the built legacy of the economic cycles of agriculture during the last 250 years. The impressive great and comfortable farmhouses built during the last decades of the eighteenth century demonstrate that this must have been a time of considerable peasant prosperity. Indeed, a rural consumer society emerged during this boom time in a number of market-oriented regions (Oertjen, 1990). This period of prosperity was followed by severe difficulties caused by the Napoleonic wars and the agrarian depression of the 1820s. The decades from 1850 to 1870 — the ‘golden years’ — were characterised by low wages, high prices and increasing incomes. During this phase the peasantry was able to extend cultivation over large parts of the former common wastelands, to intensify its husbandry in order to meet the growing demands of the urban markets, to erect numerous brick stables and barns, and simultaneously shoulder the redemption payments to the Lords of the manor (Kopisch, 1996; Bracht, 2006). In contrast, as all over Europe, the last decades of the nineteenth century were very difficult. German agriculture was increasingly integrated into the globalising market-economy and proved to be unprepared to compete with overseas grain production. But this crisis was weathered more easily by
peasants than estate owners. Farmers could rely on family labour when they intensified their agriculture by increased livestock breeding, by the cultivation of potatoes and beets, or in the vicinity of urban centres, by dairy farming and market gardening. Traditional peasant charity was replaced by a growing readiness to alter production to meet changing markets.

From World War I until about 1950, agriculture could remain detached from society in a more or less permanent state of emergency. During wartime, most adult males were in the army, the supply of foreign animal feed collapsed, and chemical fertilizers were in short supply, with disastrous effects on agricultural production and farm income. On the other hand, there were advantages to being in an agricultural profession. In times of war, post-war dislocation or inflation, farmland provided an insurance against being either hungry or homeless.

In both post-war periods, state-regulation stifled initiative and peasants were forced to exploit the flourishing black market in ways that poisoned the relationship between them and urban consumers. Even the deflationary effects of the depreciation of currency in 1923 and 1948 did not last for long. In the late 1920s and again in the late 1950s, farmers and estate owners carried a heavy burden of debt because investment was necessary after long periods of underinvestment in wartime (Theine, 1991: 62, 60; Bergmann/Megerle, 1989: 208–211).

The crisis of the inter-war period had regionally different impacts. Agriculture in northern Germany suffered most whilst Westphalia was least affected. In the Mindenland, the income of farmers with 20–50 hectares was comparable to the salaries of employees and even small farmers did better than workers (Theine, 1991: 60–67). In the south of Oldenburg smallholders with a farm of up to five hectares achieved the average income of workers' households, whereas a farm amounting to 20 to 50 hectares guaranteed an income at the level of an artisan, salesman or mid-ranking civil servant. The owners of substantial farms of 50 hectares and had incomes comparable to those of high-ranking civil servants (Böckmann, 2000: 144–156). Schleswig-Holstein was affected by the crisis most severely; indebtedness caused massive protests in the late 1920s; agricultural incomes reached their nadir in 1932.

The attractive promises of the Nazi regime made to the peasantry were only partly implemented. At first, until 1935, agricultural incomes increased by about 20 percent, but as the price of purchased inputs (seeds, fertilizers, pesticides and machinery) were not regulated, the increase did not continue beyond 1936. The higher prices for agricultural goods during World War II allowed peasant incomes to increase again, at least until 1942 when the control of the economic activity was tightened. Over the whole Nazi period, agricultural revenues stagnated (Münkell, 1996: 111, 128).

After 1948 the dissociation of peasant revenues from the general development of incomes strengthened, resulting in a massive abandonment of small and medium-sized farms. For instance, from 1950 to 1975 the income of all people working in agriculture increased nine-fold, whereas workers' income rose fifteen-fold (Fleming, 1988: 278).

Over the whole period from 1914 until today, the improvement in farmers' income and hence the increase in their standard of living has fallen short of that of industrial workers and professionals.

10.3 Government and public policies

State policies towards farmers and rural society

From 1810 onwards legal and social tutelage for the peasantry was a characteristic trait of state policy in Germany. This might sound curious in the light of the liberal reforms which freed peasants from servile bonds. But on closer inspection it may be seen how the state tried to replace traditional lordship with supervision by the state authorities. This was surely the case under the restored regimes in Hanover, Oldenburg and Brunswick, although the Prussian government initially followed a course of economic liberalism. But in the Prussian provinces of Westphalia, the regional authorities took the opposite approach. Ludwig von Viecke, governor from 1866 to 1884, held that the 'experienced' peasants were not mature enough to withstand the seductions of their new freedom. He backed by a conservative public discourse which feared that peasants who were free to sell parcels of land, mortgage their properties, and to share their holdings amongst their children would inevitably bring about the atomisation of their farms and the decay of the 'sound order of peasants'. Above all the free saleability of the soil would benefit the Jews who, allegedly, were keen to exploit peasants. Recent research has proved what sober contemporaries always knew, than all these ideas were fantasies, but of enduring impact (Rouette, 2001).

After Prussia annexed Hanover in 1866, the old debate was renewed. Should peasants be allowed to sell, lease, divide and mortgage their property? Plans to abolish the traditional Hanoverian Ackerwirtschaft which enforced the inconvertible inheritance of farms came under fire. As a compromise, the Hofgesetz of 1874 allowed any farmer to voluntarily register his farmstead in a 100-hectare Hofgut, after which it had to be bequeathed to a single heir. The German Civil Code (Bürgerliches Gesetzbuch) of 1900, which decreed egalitarian inheritance to be the norm, specifically excluded peasants so they could maintain their practice of imperable inheritance. But an obligatory Ackerwirtschaft for all peasants, as sought by an agrarian lobby in the 1920s, could not be realized (Henrici, 1964: 121; Thiessen, 1988: 27–28; Hohenstein, 1990: 145–150).

Elements of the peasant Ackerwirtschaft and the aristocratic Fideikommiss (estates entailed in the male line) were incorporated into the Nazi Erbhoftgesetz, which drastically curtailed the owner's rights of disposal. Farms of between 75 and 125 ha, which had to be listed in the register as Erbhoftgut, were not to be sold, burdened with debt or divided. Women's rights of inheritance were greatly reduced. Poor husbandry or a lifestyle incompatible with National Socialist moral precepts could be punished, even by the seizure of the peasant's estate. In the traditional areas of imperable inheritance in north-western Germany, many more estates were subject to the Erbhoftgesetz than in other parts of the Reich. For instance, in 1939 in the district of Stade (near Hamburg) 38.0 per cent of the peasant holdings were Erbhoft, whereas the average for the Reich as a whole was only 21.6 per cent (Münkell, 1996: 112, 192–206).

Even in the post-war years in the British zone of occupation, the Landbewirtschaftungsgesetz (law of land use) provided for the enforced transfer of a peasant holding to a trustee in the event of the owner's mismanagement. Even today
in the federal states of Nordrhein-Westfalen, Schleswig-Holstein and Niedersachsen farmers can still opt to register their holdings to subject them to impartible inheritance (Hohenstein, 1990: 146-63).

Traditionally agriculture had been more heavily taxed than other occupations. This inequality was overcome during the second half of the nineteenth century at a time when public debate was concerned with protective tariffs. Not until the era of the Weimar Republic was the taxation of agriculture once more a matter for discussion. The trigger was the increased tax burden caused by the Steuernotverordnung (emergency decree on taxation) of 1923 that aimed to re-establish the liquidity of the state but at the same time drove many farmers into debt because their tax burden was raised to levels 15 to 20 times higher than pre-First World War levels. But with the tax reform of 1925, the agrarian sector became fiscally privileged. Exemptions and a favourable system of assessment reduced the total tax burden on agriculture by a third, whereas national tax revenue rose because other economic sectors were charged with higher taxes. As a result, from 1931 onwards, most farmers in Oldenburg, for instance, were tax free. Subsequently their income improved, and by 1936 a proportion of farmers were again liable to pay tax after their tax allowances were halved. Again, after World War II, taxes were reduced for farmers by cutting income tax and by establishing a number of tax exemptions for agricultural producers. In 1971 only 15 per cent of the farmer's income was liable to income tax and 75 per cent of the farmers paid no income tax at all (Theine, 1991: 75-83; Böckmann, 2000: 121-25; Bundesministerium der Finanzen, 1988: 61-24; Becker, 1990: 210-45; Abel, 1967: 322-33).

Another area of state intervention was the Kaiserschiff's land settlement policy which was given a new impetus in 1917 by Hindenburg's promise of plots of land for returning soldiers. This was consciously an attempt to strengthen the peasantry as a bulwark against socialism. (In addition, new settlements in the eastern provinces of Prussia were also directed against the growing demographic weight of the Polish population and thus had ethnic-political aims.) (Henning, 1988: 145, 200; Ditt, 2005: 77). These policies had little agricultural impact, and were even less important in the north-west of Germany where no large vacant areas remained which might be settled. In Schleswig-Holstein between 1916 and 1933, 5,000 farmlands were founded, mostly on land parcelled out of former estates and another 3,700 in the province of Hanover, mainly in the marshlands (Theine, 1991: 149-50; Böckmann, 2000: 49).

There is continuity of conservative conceptions of the peasantry which saw them as protecting the German people from the destructive and malign effect of modernity. This reached its highest elaboration in the National Socialist Blut-und-Boden ('blood and soil') ideology which proclaimed the 'elevation' of the peasantry as part and parcel of their racist mission. In this perspective, the aim of policy was to guarantee the succession of generations of 'Aryan' peasant families. The individual peasant was of no great interest except for 'honest' behaviour as defined by Nazi ideology was a prerequisite for the disposal of property rights (Minkel, 1968: 115). These ideas had been circulated before 1933 by eugenicist and social-Darwinist authors, who argued that the conservation of the peasantry was the main task of a 'renewed nation' (Henning, 1988: 212).

Public regulation of the countryside

In general, the process of agricultural intensification had a profound impact on the landscape. In the late nineteenth century and particularly since the 1930s, drainage and improvement of wetlands allowed the cultivation of large areas of wasteland, so that moors and heaths rapidly vanished. At the same time, the layout of holdings was radically altered by the so-called Flurbereinigung (consolidation) which established larger parcels of land and provided a better network of field paths. Since the new Flurbereinigungsgesetz of 1953, a rapid consolidation of fields has taken place. Between 1945 and 1961, 18 per cent of the agricultural area of West Germany was reorganised. Whereas before 1950 these activities aimed to increase agricultural production by the improvement of farmland, the Flurbereinigung in the second half of the twentieth century has been aimed at enabling mechanised agriculture by enlarging fields in regular shapes, levelling land, straightening of rivers and brooks, and by hedge clearance. This has resulted not only in a desolate landscape, but also one which is ecologically impoverished. Consolidation was promoted not only by administrative means, but also by the subsidies which encouraged mass production. As a reaction to the ecological awareness which has emerged since the 1970s and to the fiscal problems posed by over-proportion, plans to 'renaissance' parts of the landscape have been put into effect: wet meadows have been created, land set aside, and grassland used in a more extensive manner. Even though these measures have been successful, they only affect a small percentage of the landscape and, in view of the current boom in biofarms and the rising prices of agricultural products, the tendency to reduce the area used by agriculture might soon be reversed (Ditt, 2001: 85, 93-96, 113-14; Deck, 2001; Ipsen, 2005: 129, 134).

Government encouragement of trade and markets

In the nineteenth century, farmers had no problem selling their produce into rising markets. In the late 1870s this long-term trend came to an end, as international competition led to a decline of prices (Theine, 1991: 12). A debate on protection resulted in the implementation of grain tariffs in 1880. This marked the beginning of an era of agrarian protectionism, which can be differentiated into three periods. In all three the problems political forces faced in establishing a consumer-oriented policy can be discerned (Langthaler, 2005: 11-15). In the first period, 1880-1914, the agrarian sector was still strong enough to resist the new conditions caused by globalisation (Mai, 2007: 478). So, in the 1880s and from 1902 to 1914, consumers were put at a disadvantage by high tariffs which guaranteed farm-gate prices above the global market level (Theine, 1991: 12). During the First World War, agrarian markets were regulated: between 1919 and 1925 all tariffs were cancelled by allied decrees (Böckmann, 2000: 177). The second period of agrarian protectionism, which lasted from the later 1920s to 1936, was prompted by the double crisis in the late 1920s. Strict tariff protection was reckoned to be an inefficient way of dealing with this crisis, which had its origins in overproduction and underconsumption.
After a period of low taxes, a policy of high tariffs followed in 1929, which caused domestic grain prices to rise to double world market levels. This stimulated renewed overproduction and a decline of consumption, especially of animal products and, as a consequence, declining prices which could not be stabilized by state intervention in the market. The tariff policy of the Weimar Republic was characterized by the conflicts of interest between the estate owners in eastern Germany, who demanded high grain tariffs, and the farmers, especially in north-western Germany, who sought low prices for imported animal feed (Langthaler, 2005: 11-12; Thieß, 1991: 133; Böckmann, 2000: 177-215).

With fixed prices, the National Socialist market regime attempted to guarantee a stable income to the farmers and steady prices to the consumers. Interventions such as the prohibition of direct marketing and on-farm food processing, the increasing reliance on quotas and delivery obligations, diminished the farmers' autonomy to an unprecedented degree after 1934. After 1936 agriculture was integrated into the four year plan and subordinated to the interests of the arms industry, and from 1939 onwards war economics totally controlled all sectors of the economy and especially agriculture (Münkel, 1996: 94, 166-20, 326-37).

In the post-war period the conflict between agriculture and industry was almost resolved. Nevertheless agriculture remained subject to state planning (Langthaler, 2005: 14; Mui, 2007: 475). The controlled economy of the first post-war years was followed by a third period of protectionism in the 1950s which sought to satisfy demand for food by stabilizing the structure of agricultural holdings. Because of the socio-political objective of maintaining a solid class of farmers and the economic task of supplying non-rural consumers, the government did not want to apply free market principles to agriculture. In the early 1950s a system of market regulations was again erected. Production was stimulated by guaranteed minimum prices and by avoiding international competition. As a consequence, the basic food supply was guaranteed, but it was only achieved by increasing the funds allocated for its support. The agricultural law of 1955, the Gründer Plan (Green Plan), connected the objective of stimulating productivity with that of stabilizing the standard of living of people working in agriculture at a level compatible with those working in other sectors. This was only possible through permanently fixed prices and - in the long run - by reducing the agricultural labour force. The economic union of West Germany, France, Italy and the Benelux countries in 1957 and the establishment of the single European market exposed German agriculture to competition, but guaranteed standard prices and product sales by transferring German market regulations to the other European countries. By the 1970s, the consequence of this policy was structural overproduction. The 'Mansfeld Plan' (1968), named after the Dutch agrarian politician, introduced the principle of 'growing or vanishing': the removal of small farmers and consolidation of big agricultural holdings. At the same time the policy of price intervention in which high prices were supported by subsidies delayed a more thorough-going structural change (Ditt, 2001; Kluge, 2003a: 36-67; Kluge, 2003b).

By the end of the 1970s, the disadvantages of European agrarian policy could be seen very clearly. The guaranteed sales and prices and the protection against imports caused a massive surplus of products which brought increasing costs. Nicknames such as 'butter mountain' or 'milk lake' demonstrate how critical public opinion was of this policy. The first attempts to reduce the costs provoked massive protests by farmers. Hence agrarian policy had to solve the task of reducing overproduction and subsidies, which took an increasing share of the European budget, whilst still maintaining the comparability of agricultural and industrial incomes. Increasing intensification by high-output farms was seen as the answer to these problems. New subsidies aimed to encourage small farmers to leave agriculture and big farmers to increase mass production. But this policy succeeded in neither reducing overproduction nor levelling of income between sectors. On the contrary, production grew from 1971 to 1980 at 1.6 per cent per annum, whereas consumption was growing only by 0.5 per cent. In addition, the subsidy policy provoked trade conflicts, especially with the US and Canada, and led to problems of pricing agricultural products in the developing countries. Since the 1980s the reduction of prices, more extensive agricultural methods, the use of set-aside land and the early retirement of farmers have aimed at stabilizing the cost of the common agricultural policy. The objective to equalise incomes was abandoned (Kluge, 2003a: 40-45).

In the late 1980s overproduction, the inability to compete in global markets, continuing technical progress, the expense of agrarian policy, the ecological problems caused by agriculture and the loss of the next generation of farmers, all indicated the inherent necessity for structural change. These problems led to a paradigm shift in agrarian policy. Already in the 1990s, pressured by the GATT negotiations, the price of grain and beef was cut, and direct payments to the producers to compensate for the loss in income were introduced. From 1999 the cutting of prices continued without compensation. In spite of more extensive methods, yields continued to increase because of progress in breeding and technology. In 2005, faced with the WTO negotiations and the planned expansion of the EU into eastern Europe, the European ministers of agriculture decided abandon the agrarian policy which had formed the basis of the Community since its foundation: they broke the link between production and payment, but related the payments to aspects of environment and animal welfare. The consequences of this reform of agrarian policy and the Community's expansion will be seen in the future (Mahlerwein, 2008: 47).

Peasants and farmers as a political force in national politics

From the late nineteenth century, the process of deagrarianization was impeded by the demands of the agrarian sector for involvement in decision making, especially in the 'Caprivi years' (named after the Leo von Caprivi, Chancellor 1890-94, who pursued a low tariff policy after 1891), and again in the agrarian crisis of the late 1960s. Debates about the cutting of grain tariffs led to a rapid increase in the number of agrarian associations. In 1893 the Bund der Landwirte (BDL) was founded, which demanded high tariffs. Because this association was suspected to represent only the interests of the big east-Elbian Protestant landowners, competing associations were formed: in Catholic regions Christliche Bauernvereine (Christian Peasant
In rural areas, the Deutsche Bauernbund. Influence over agrarian policy was guaranteed by the prominence of a number of its leading members in parliament and by the enormous interest the public took in the association's affairs (Henning, 1988: 163–66). Because of economic and confessional differences, the development of the agrarian associations differed regionally. The Bund der Landwirte was established only in the old-Prussian Protestant regions including the (later) Lower Saxony, but in largely Catholic Westphalia, the Westfälischer Bauernverein was predominant, and this was linked to the Zentrumb (Catholic Centre Party). Where the Bdl. pressed the interests of the east German big landowners, the Westphalan Bauernverein sought low prices for animal feed and grain (Lohmann, 1964: 26; Albers, 1999: 15–16; Hofenstein, 1992: 10).

In the Weimar Republic, the agrarian associations could continue much as in the era of the German Empire and try to influence legislation, not least through their influence over the Chambers of Agriculture, but until the late 1920s their impact on agrarian policy remained limited. In 1921 Reichsbund was founded as a union of the Bdl. and the Landbünde. This continued the lobbying policy of the Bdl., but it was also politically connected to the right-wing Deutschnationale Volkspartei (German National People's Party) and opposed the democratic system. The Bauernvereine remained allied to the Zentrumb, even though the demands of the associations for the abolition of the post-war controlled economy and the reintroduction of protective tariffs after 1924, were fulfilled, their influence over these developments was small (Theine, 1991: 141). In 1929, in response to the developing crisis, the associations united at a national level to form the Grüne Front (Green Front), but they remained separate competing entities at the regional level.

The associations were placed under pressure by an agrarian protest movement which first emerged in 1925, grew stronger in 1928 and which tried to influence agrarian policy by militant action, including the bombing of finance offices and the homes of civil servants. Significantly, no association was established at a regional level in Schleswig-Holstein, which was a centre of the radical opposition, so the barely organised Landvolkswegung (Land peoples movement) became entrenched in this crisis-ridden region (Bergmann/Megerle, 1989). From the very beginning, the Landvolkswegung was influenced by the radical right. Whereas the Reichsbund and the chambers of agriculture were infiltrated by national socialists (or its members became national socialists), the Bauernvereine remained allied to the Zentrumb. It was only in 1931–2, that the new president of the Westphalian Bauernverein began to cooperate with the Nazi-controlled Landbund, which shows how the policy of the Zentrumb and its agrarian faction was now shifting to the right. The failure of the last Weimar government was caused not least by its unsuccessful agrarian policies and the radical opposition of the agrarian sector, which was deeply influenced by the Nazi party (Kluge, 2005: 23–26; R–2; Henning, 1988: 208–12; Bergmann/Megerle, 1989; Lohmann, 1964: 29; Theine, 1991: 141–42; Böckmann, 2000: 234–39; Albers, 1999: 44–47).

From 1930 the policies of the agrarian associations became subordinate to the National Socialist agrarian agenda. From 1931 agrarian representatives were active in the agrarpolitischer Apparat (agrarian political apparatus) of the NSDAP, and, from 1935, in the National Socialist agrarian organisation Reichsbund, into which all the existing associations were merged. Nevertheless, soon after the seizure of power in 1933, the influence of the agrarian sector on Nazi policy was diminished and agrarian policy was subordinated to the power-political interests of the regime (Milinski, 1995: 88–98).

During the war and the first post-war years, the Reichsbund continued as an executive organ of the managed economy. From 1947 the re-established chambers of agriculture took over the representation of agrarian interests. The influence of the chambers over agrarian legislation was guaranteed by their institutional role and by the fact that many lobbyists of the associations were also members of the chambers. From 1948 the Deutscher Bauernverband exercised great influence over agrarian policy; in 1955 it insisted that the equalisation of the living conditions between agricultural and non-agricultural sectors should be one of the main aims of the new agricultural legislation. The Bauernverband remains one of the most influential lobby groups in Germany despite competing groups and the increasing Europeanization of agrarian policy.

The social standing of the peasant

The diminished economic significance of agriculture has changed the social standing of the peasantry since the late nineteenth century. Debates about the future development of Germany as an agrarian or as an industrial society were prominent in public discourse around 1900. Whereas statistical evidence of the increasing urban and the diminishing rural population encouraged politicians like Chancellor Captivi to align their policy with the interests of urban-industrial consumers, the spokesmen for agrarian society continued to have great influence over public opinion. In the tradition of the nineteenth-century agrarian romanticism, they emphasised three functions of agriculture and rural society, firstly as being fundamental to all economies, secondly as a provider to the whole nation and thirdly as a guarantor of continued population growth (Wepert, 96–103; Wehler, 1995: 677–99). As shown above, the Nazi 'blood and soil' ideology adopted these arguments, but the rural world continued to decline in importance during the Nazi ascendency. After World War II the agricultural population was still considered to be a socially stabilizing element within society. But from the 1950s onwards, even in small villages, farmers became a social minority and since that time industrial society has set the cultural norms and values. Paradoxically, the income of workers and wage earners, who in the past had been considered as dependent lower classes by the peasantry, now became the benchmark to which farmers aspired (Hagedorn, 1996: 401). During the last decades the public perception of agriculture has been formed by the debates about subsidies and their consequences for the national budget, about overproduction and its problems for international trade, by the negative ecological effects of an 'industrialized' agriculture, and by crises like BSE (Kluge, 2004: 47–56). Farmers increasingly suffered from their poor image (Becker, 1995: 170–186). But recent surveys show that the reputation of agriculture is changing for the better, mostly because of the more positive image of organic farming (Das Image, 2007).
Bibliography

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