

Georg Fertig: A peasant way to economic growth: The land market, family transfers, and the life cycle in 19th century Westphalia

It is a commonplace of agrarian history that the introduction of full property rights in land was a prerequisite for the growth of agrarian productivity that made the industrial revolution possible. Peasants have lived on Europeans lands for centuries, but it took the early 19th century to discover that ‘Landwirtschaft ist ein Gewerbe’—agriculture is business. Consequently, much of the literature attributes agrarian modernization to owner-occupiers in contrast to peasants. Property rights, commercialization, individualist income strategies and macroeconomic growth are closely linked in this widely accepted view. The land market, enabling an optimal allocation of one of the basic input good in agriculture, plays a central role in linking property rights to the rest of this argument. I will use Westphalia as a test case for this model: a region in the northwest of Germany where the gradual abolition of manorial co-property rights and the upswing in agricultural production fell into roughly the same time period during the middle of 19th century. I will argue that property rights were in fact less important to this upswing than they are usually understood to be. Agrarian growth could be brought about by rural producers who were not full and individual owner of their agricultural businesses, who were embedded in some markets (particularly for credit, labour and output) but who did not organize all of their productive and reproductive activities through markets.

In order to test if growth, property rights, and the land market were interrelated elements of agrarian modernization, I have chosen to study three parishes in Westphalia, situated in contrasting ecotypes. Our research group collected data on the level of individual land transactions and embedded them with prosopographical data from family reconstitutions spanning the entire local population. In much of the current literature an impersonal pricemaking market is contrasted to systems of familial reciprocity. Consequently, a major aim of my study was to identify the both the share of market transactions and the degree to which the circulation of land was influenced by a sense of mutual solidarity among kin. Using classical trias of market, redistribution, and reciprocity, it turns out that while a land market in the sense of formal economic theory did exist, it was not very liquid, and could not perform any pricemaking function. Wider systems of kinship relations, on the other hand, did not work as a major influence on land transactions, either. What remains is the redistribution of land

within the nuclear family. Westphalian peasants managed to participate in modern economic growth by using markets for their output, while remaining passive in terms of markets for input. Thus, Westphalia can serve as an example for a peasant way to growth.

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