

XIV INTERNATIONAL ECONOMIC HISTORY CONGRESS

SESSION 21

Property Rights, Land Markets and Economic Growth in Europe (13th-19th Centuries)

Common lands and agricultural transformations : the Ardenne between 1750 et 1900.

Paul Servais

Catholic University of Louvain

Abstract

In Belgium during the XIXe century, the question of the commons' management arises especially for Ardenne and Campine. Which impact does it have on the real properties market, the structures of the property, the farm productivity and the regional development? To try to answer these questions, this study relates more particularly to the part of Ardenne which is located near the area of Liège.

This part of Ardenne is influenced by the industrialization of Liège and its periphery, but also by the comparison with close agricultural areas. Hesbaye and the Country of Herve have an very developed and modern agriculture without commons; Condroz associates commons and large farms. The situation of Ardenne is specific: rainy and cold climate, broken relief, poor soils, subsistence agriculture, farming by the owner, small property, small-scale farming, very large commons...

The legislation of 1847 on the clearing and the sale of the commons is justified by the will to develop the production and the productivity and by the conviction of the inefficiency of communal management. It encounters a very hard opposition in Ardenne. Nevertheless, thousands of hectares of commons were sold between 1850 and 1890.

For the faming concern as for the property, the modifications do not seems major, maybe because the emigration of the Inhabitants of the Ardennes towards the cities limited competition on the real properties market. All in all, but the nuances at the local level are numerous, the small property, resulting on the one hand from the accession to the land, on the other hand of the physical division of inheritances, that is to say two rather different logics, is increasing. Also clearly, but without being able to identify a very concentration mouvement, a perception which was supported by Emile Vandervelde at the end of the XIXe century, the property of more than 30 hectares is also in slight growing mouvement. This affects only marginally the size of the farm, the number of owners living outside the area - except if they are descendants and heirs of emigrants of the generation which precedes them - the share of the farming by the tenant finally.

A systematic confrontation of cadastral information, Registration's data and population's registers - in progress - would be essential to however identify precisely the ties which may exist between the short electric shock inflicted at the real properties market by the sale of commons, the accession movements to ownership, the property division or concentration factors, in particular successional, and the final or temporary migrations movements. In term of micro-social or micro-economic dynamics, it would be also necessary to analyze in details the characteristics of the purchasers of the first and last deciles of the commons sales ones carried out, for example in 1855 in Sart.

On the other hand, regardin the production and the productivity, the evaluation is appreciably different: the increase is general. But is it directly ascribable to the commons sale and development? Undoubtedly very partially and even indirectly.

For the contemporaries, the increase in the production is primarily ascribable to the use of new methods of amendment and enrichment of the soils, singularly the intensification of the

use of lime and the development of the phosphate-enriched fertilizers. But these evolutions are not born from nothing: they accompany, then compensate, the commons sales themselves. The slip of the agricultural "speculations" of the culture of cereals towards more profitable forms of breeding is also underlined.

As for the calculation of a gross regional product, it would undoubtedly highlight a very appreciable increase under the impact of all of the factors: culture, breeding, forestry, and with the participation of all the economic actors of the area, as well public as private. The objective of a better land use sought by the commons sale was thus obtained, but not for the price of a capitalization of the Ardennes agriculture, nor for a loss of identity reference marks. At the end of the XIXe century, the commons always are part of the geographical and mental landscape of the Ardennes area. The law of 1847 and its series of accompanying measures, to some extent, played the role of a detonator for a total improvement of the commons management. In many cases, the commons became an essential part of the improvement of the local living conditions.