

The Scandinavian 'Bonde' in Early Modern Times

The Early Modern period had ambiguous consequences for the Scandinavian *bonde*. On the one hand it is a period where *bønder* emerged as a sort of rural middle class, above a still more numerous class of landless cottagers. On the other hand they were not perceived as such. At least for Denmark and parts of Sweden *bønder* were more than ever seen as a large grey mass at the bottom of society, and for many townspeople the solid peasant farmer and the landless cottager were nonetheless both *bønder*, and in that of another and lower kind of people than urban dwellers. This paper will look more closely at this development.

In his paper Bjørn Poulsen discussed the changing semantic and social formation of the category of *bonde* from the viking age to the end of the middle ages. At the end of this development, both the remaining freeholders and tenants had largely merged into a broad category, for which the old word *bonde* was used. Still a more specific usage signifying freeholder existed as in the wording “kronens bønder og tjenerne” (*bønder* and tenants of the crown), but it was waning. The broader usage was dominant.

What exactly was the *bonde* by 1500? The *bønder* were the fourth estate of society, comprising the whole, unprivileged, resident rural population, excluding only the higher estates on the one hand and the rather few itinerant poor on the other. The broad use of the word ‘bønder’ coincided with the development of rural society. In the high middle ages there had been agricultural units of very different sizes and different formal categories of tenants. By the end of the only middle ages the only remaining formal distinction was that of freeholder and tenant. The all-dominant rural unit was the family farm, in later time describes as the *bondegård* – ‘peasant farm’. We can define this farm as a unit large enough to feed a family and produce a surplus beyond that, but not so large as to make the farmer primarily a manager. At the Scandinavian ‘peasant farm’ the farming family was it-self doing physical farm work, and farm work was performed by the family and possibly one or a few unmarried in-house maids or farmhands, living as part of the household. By 1500, not only was this kind of farm the dominant rural unit, but families living on such farms also made up the vast majority of the rural population. The only notable exception was the Schleswig marshes. But even in the rest of the Duchy of Schleswig, no doubt more economically advanced than the rest of Scandinavia, only about a third of households had paid in-house farmhands in the early 16th century, and cottages with too little land to provide for a family only made up 5-10% of rural dwellings. Hired labour thus mattered far less than family labour.

Thus, by 1525 the word *bonde* both had the implication of unprivileged rural dweller like the word peasant and of someone holding a farm like the word farmer. Distinction was unnecessary as anyone being either tended to be both. That was to change. But it was not to be fully reflected in semantics.

Farms and cottages

The general word for farm was gård. Whereas farm has a linguistic root denominating larger rural units, gård means fenced yard. In the early middle ages, a gård could be anything from a normal family farm to a royal seat, and even in early modern time lordly demesnes and seats were mainly described with words derived from gård, mainly hovedgård (curia principalis in latin documents, literally ‘capital farm’). Still, gård implies something containing both dwelling, husbandry, and fields.¹ In early modern time, a gård was always of some size. There was no formal line, but in practical usage rural dwellings are only called gård, if they could (as a rule) feed a family and keep their own draught force. Rural houses with no or less land were generally described with other terms, most notably just hus (‘house) in Denmark and Norway or torp (‘satellite settlement’) in Swedish.

Derived from the names of these minor dwellings, were special words for their inhabitants. The most general word in Denmark and Norway for heads of such households was *husmand*, literally ‘house-dweller’. In Swedish the common word was *torpare*, from torp. The Duchy of Schleswig had a whole variety of term, partly due to German cultural influence. Further specific categories could be mentioned. Important is the fact, that it was such group for which specification was seen necessary. For those holding a family farm, more specific words also existed, but they were rarely used.

This dual meaning of the word became more both more important and less obvious as the identity of the group of family farm holders and rural society as such diminished. Rural population had been rising already in the 15th century, but the rise continued, for Denmark till ca. 1650, when a backdrop occurred, for the other countries more continuously. Structurally rural society reacted in two ways.

One solution was the division of existing holdings. On freehold farms it was a logical reaction to an inheritance law that gave all sons equal shares and all daughters half shares, but it also happened more or less informally on tenant farms in some regions. Divisions were, however, influenced by the existing settlement and property pattern. In Norway and some areas of Northern Sweden and Western Denmark, single farms dominated, while villages with open fields were dominant in most of Denmark and Sweden. In either case, what happened was division of farms in shares, not alienation of specific bits of land. This was probably the consequence of on the one hand the open field system or geography of single farm areas, on the other the balance of power between landlords and tenants.

In the open fields areas it has to do with the fact that the property rights of the individual farm was already measured in shares rather than plots. Surely, each farmer grew grain on individual plots, but the formal property right was attached to a share rather than specific bits of land, and grazing rights, rights of

turf etc. where purely share rights. If a farm held the rights of e.g. 4 *otting* in a 24 *otting* village, it was quite easy to subdivide into two 2 *otting* farms, but much more difficult to do it in more uneven ways. In single farm areas distances between farms made alienation of plots to farmers living elsewhere largely irrelevant. Here, farms had often outfields that were used collectively after the division, and therefore some kind of share system was practical. Still, other solutions would have been possible as can be seen from the development in other countries.

The other and perhaps more decisive explanation lies in the property distribution and balance of power between tenant and lords. The initiative to divide holdings came from the rural population itself. There is very little evidence that landlords deliberately subdivided holding, but so much more to suggest that peasant families did so, mainly to give room for two siblings, as the family system was the north west European one where two married siblings meant two different households. A series of royal and ducal mandates actually tried to stop divisions of freehold and royal tenant farms in Schleswig and Denmark, but for long rather unsuccessfully. Still, the general property rights regime and landlord control was strong enough to largely prevent alienation of single plots. Each landlord retained his rights if his farm or farms in a village remained separated from those of other landlords. Whether two families shared the rights and dues of such a farm was less important to him.

The tendency to divide holdings was stronger in areas with weakest landlord control. Particularly the latter seems important. On the Danish island of Sjaelland where peasants were almost all tenants, where a strong legal control over peasants was established, and where the crown, the church, and high aristocrats had controlled almost all land already in the late middle ages, subdivisions hardly happened, whereas subdivisions were much more common in Sweden, Norway and Western Denmark with more freeholders, more scattered estates, and weaker formal landlord power. Quite characteristically peasants in much of Jutland were regarded as the owners of their buildings giving them a strong *de facto* control over succession, Sjaelland peasants were not.

Division of farms was not the only way of making room for more families. The other solution was a dramatic increase in the number of cottages – dwellings with little or no land. Now their numbers rose so much that cottagers became a notable social group.

The dual development can be illustrated from the royal district of Haderslev, the northernmost part of the duchy of Schleswig. Peasants in the district were either freeholders or tenants of the crown. 1543 the district contained 1.159 formal farms that were in reality farmed by 1.439 families. This is a result of informal *de facto* divisions undertaken by peasants themselves, but not formalized by the administration. If we assume that the 1.159 farms (roughly) reflect the real situation at a point in the second half of the 15th century, subdivision had given room for an extra 24% families. This had given room almost for everyone. In

1542 only 85 people paid the special – and very low – due from cottagers. Even if all these 85 cottages were new, they had given room to three times fewer people than the division of farms.

For the next half century this picture changed. By 1597 authorities had formalized many previous divisions, so the formal number of farms had risen to 1.366, but as divisions continued, the number of farm holding families had now reached 1.865 – a further rise of 426 or 28%. But it was surpassed by the rise in the number of cottages, which had risen to 539. In short, before 1542 division of farms had given room for almost all new families, but for the period 1542-97, further divisions and the creation of cottages each covered half the growth.

Very probably something similar had happened in Skast *hundred* around the later city of Esbjerg, in the southern part of the kingdom. Here were by 1688 447 formal farms, used by a total of 750 families, plus ca. 200 cottages, making up a total of ca. 950 households. Here it can be assumed that the number of households had roughly doubled over 200 years, of which roughly a little more than half the extra families had gotten shares of farms, the other part cottages. On the Island of Sjaelland, on the other hand, the number of farms remained not only formally frozen, but also informal subdivision was almost unknown. In stead, the number of cottages rose particularly steeply here. In the late 17th century cottagers made up a third of all families in Sjaelland, but only 20-25% in Jylland.

In many areas landlords had both direct and indirect influence upon the building of cottages. Some landlords built cottages close to demesnes – or turned farms into cottages when they appropriated their lands. Indirectly they furthered cottages where they prevented division. But it is important that the number of cottages also rose in areas of weaker lordly power. Here some affluent peasant farmers set up cottages to have an income from rent and/or to have cheap labour at hands. Less fortunate peasant farmers may have established cottages for a child if they regarded the farm to be too small to divide.

In Denmark and Schleswig, further subdivision of farms largely stopped in the course of the first half of the 17th century. It must be ascribed to stronger lordly power and state intervention, as both landlords and governments preferred holdings of a certain size. In areas of labour service, landlords clearly favoured farms large enough to have four horses and a farmhand. But much indicates that peasant society agreed. A farm was something big enough to keep four horses and provide for a family – indeed in many areas the standard farm would also have a maid and a farmhand. Whether functionally or culturally determined, such a farm unit fitted the kind of farming done. It made it possible for each farm to have the necessary tasks done with own draught and workforce. In Norway and Sweden divisions also largely stopped at a point where a farm could fully support a family, keep its own draught animals, and often also maids or farmhands.

In Denmark development after 1660 became as a whole more directly controlled by landlords. Their ideal was largely a division into on the one hand farms of rather uniform size, on the other more or less landless cottages. In the eastern parts of the country, farms were equalized at a level slightly above the previous average, and in some western parts with much previous subdivision there was a tendency to reverse that and create units of a size like in the east. This meant a moderate reduction in the number of farms, while that of particularly landless cottages continued to grow. In royal districts of the Duchy of Schleswig, the most striking thing is extreme structural conservatism after 1660. In Norway and Sweden the general tendency was much like in Schleswig.

Common to Scandinavia is the development of a quite clear both semantic and real distinction between *gårde* (farms) and *huse, torp, kåd* (cottages). Within the category of *gårde* differences of size clearly existed in 17th and 18th century Scandinavia, both between and within local societies, but largely they remained within the limits of the extended family farm.

Peasant economy

Throughout the period any farm produced products both for household consumption, redistributive deliveries in kind, and the market. The balance is, however, very hard to tell as very little quantitative material survives from peasant households. Particularly from Sweden there are good public registrations of peasant livestock and a very rich tithe material which is being used considerably in new research these years. For Denmark and Norway the situation is considerably worse. On a very general level some things can be said, though.

Firstly, almost all Scandinavian farms produced the bulk of the food consumed by the household. Apart from some areas in the far north of Norway and Sweden, almost everyone tried to grow grain enough for consumption at the farm, and virtually everyone had cows and sheep providing milk, meat, and wool. In northern Sweden and much of Norway the choice of grains was limited to barley and oats, and even though ways were found to produce bread from that quite large areas were dependant on imported grain coming from the Swedish plains to the Swedish mining districts and from Denmark and further south to Norwegian fishing areas in the north..

As tithes and rents were also mainly paid in kind in the 16th and 17th centuries and to some extent even in the 18th, yet another important part of the production of the peasant was not directly for a market. The rent portfolio of a farm tended to be conservative, but some changes occurred. Basically rent products were selected by landlords on the basis of local production possibilities, but also some reaction to market options, even though such were slow. In most of Norway, butter was the main rent, but in the North fish was the key product, in the southeast barley. In Denmark and Sweden the picture is more complex, but a

choice is still clear, and it is obvious that rents were mainly due in products for which conditions were good on the spot – or for which the lord had a specific preference. In Denmark, grain was by far the most important form of rent, even in most marginal areas, but in those the proportion of husbandry products typically rose from 10-20% in the fertile plains to 30-50% in forested or sandy areas. In Sweden this contrast was stronger yet.

In much of the 16th and early 17th century the necessity for cash production was fairly limited for most peasant farmers. Some state taxes levied at irregular intervals were due in cash, and every household needed to buy some necessities such as salt or iron. The direct need for cash was the highest in the fishing and iron districts in the far north of Norway and Sweden where even basic food was bought in larger quantities.

Market orientation of 16th century peasant farmers was higher than dictated by such necessities. In Denmark, peasant farmers bought consumer goods produced outside the village, and parts of the internal relations between peasant farmers became monetized. Inheritance and loans created a system of credit obligations, and quite a few peasant farmers had either considerable debts or considerable financial assets. On top of already existing specializations, a market oriented oxen production became of great importance, even though the peasant farmers would mostly feed the oxen to a point and then sell them to their landlord, who kept them a last winter on a better fodder.

Danish peasant farmers were seen as having a fairly solid economy in the decades around 1600. Rents and taxes were duly paid, and the negotiable entry fines payable at the start of the lifelong lease, could equal several years' rent. Clearly these peasant farmers sold considerable amounts of grain and husbandry products for money, but in most areas this fully monetized part of the production must have been smaller than those taken up by consumption in the household or rents and tithes in kind. Exceptions can be found in highly monetized areas such as the Schleswig marshes, the island of Fehmarn and possibly some more. Scandinavian and particularly Danish farms were neither subsistence farms, nor fully adapted to the market, but both at the same time.

In the course of the 17th century pressure on peasant households rose dramatically. Above all state taxes rose very steeply, and they were mainly to be paid in cash. In certain parts of Denmark and Sweden there was also a quite marked increase in the labour service to lordly demesnes, and there was a tendency to convert rent in kind to rent in cash – but then also to reduce real value of it. Clearly the pressure to get cash increased. Those demands were not easier to meet as prices fell and in some parts the number of horses and farmhands grew to meet labour service demands – and thus reduced the marketable surplus from the farm.

Did this increase the market orientation of peasant society as assumed by theories claiming that only such pressure could turn self-sufficiency oriented peasants to market production? Clear evidence is lacking, but there is little to suggest that production rose much before 1750 compared to 1620. Certainly, Danish agricultural exports did not. There is also little to suggest that the specialization of the basic agriculture changed much. Where clear growth can be seen, it is merely in non-agrarian productions: timber and forest products in Norway or woolen socks and pots from a couple of districts in western Denmark. But such productions rose mainly in low-tax areas, indicating that the positive effects of the pressure are not obvious. Instead of seeing these increases in 'alternative' productions as reactions to tax demands, it seems just as probable that the rise took place exactly in areas where tax demands were low enough to leave benefits from the extra production in the households themselves.

Certainly market orientation of peasant farmers was *reduced* in some ways. Their consumption of foods, textiles etc. bought from outside clearly fell, and the internal credit economy in peasant society diminished. Consequently, Danish provincial towns stagnated.

The negative development was worst in those areas that were in other ways the most prosperous: the grain-growing plains of Denmark and central Sweden. These areas still had the highest population density and no doubt also the highest total production per 100 square kilometers. They were not like certain other fertile regions in Europe split up in small holdings – on the contrary they had the biggest farms measured in grain production or according to tax registers. But they also had the most crisis ridden farmers. In eastern Denmark, most peasant farmers were more or less constantly in arrears with rents or taxes. Quite a few were evicted, but many allowed to keep their farms as landlords experienced that more successful farmers were hard to find. On the sandy soils of Western Jutland such problems were fewer as taxes were lower and secondary productions more important, and in much of Norway where tenants in reality had gained a comprehensive control over farms, a lease for life was often sold from an older to a younger peasant for considerable sums.

To some extent this change was caused by the market in the form of low grain prices, but most significantly the pressure from the state and the landlords was hardest in the grain-growing plains. They were no doubt harder taxed than other areas – also relative to income – and it was here that labour service obligations rose the most.

The social reality is thus in many ways ambiguous. In the greater part of Denmark fairly large family farms of typically 15-20 hectares of arable, at least four adults in the household, and typically 6-8 horses and 3-4 cows dominated, and they were clearly distinct from cottages with normally no land or at most 1-2 hectares of arable, but exactly here farmers were economically in dire straits and under strong lordly control. Something of the same can be said about the Swedish plains. Peasant farmers tended to be

more independent and affluent in less agrarian and more marginal regions with a more mixed economy and lower taxes and weaker feudal control, but generally their grain production and total livestock was lower here. Who is peasant and who is farmer?

The concept of bonde in the 18th century

To Scandinavian contemporaries no linguistic distinction existed. They were still all *bønder*. The word had retained its double meaning of both rural dwellers at large and more specifically peasant farmers. In either case it was the most common word, though other words existed. The word *landmand* (agriculturalist) became rather popular in the 18th century, but it mainly described people above normal peasant farmers – landlords who were farming themselves, estate managers, demesne tenants, or even agriculturally engaged clergymen. Only much later should this word largely replace the word ‘bonde’ as description of the average farmer. Some words were specifically describing the holder of a farm – *gårdfæster* (tenant of a farm), *gårdbruger* (user of a farm), *gårdejer* (owner of a farm). These words are specific terms for the standard peasant farmer – but remained technical terms, mainly used in formal cadastres, church registers etc., not colloquial words.

Even though there could be rather sharp contrasts between peasant farmers with three or four in-house employees on the one hand and the landless cottager on the other, the former had not conceptually risen above the latter. For the elite and for townspeople non-privileged rural dwellers were largely seen as a (grey) mass, covered by the word *bonde*. They used it for rural dwellers alike, but also especially for peasant farmers. They were much more likely to have a specific word for the landless group than for the landholding.

Bønder was used in all kinds of situations. In Sweden the diet consisted of four chambers of which the fourth was for the *bondestånd* – the ‘estate of peasants’, which in this connection meant prominent representatives for freeholders and crown tenants. A Danish top aristocrat as Count Adam Gottlob Moltke talked about *bønder* in several ways. When rumours ran that a dozen country boys selected for special training would be sent to the colonies, he wrote to his juror: “I love my *bønder* far too much to do so”. Here it clearly meant all his ‘subjects’ on his vast estates. But he also talked about *bønder* when he described how some of his tenants – reluctantly – started copying methods introduced by him at the demesnes. To townspeople, *bonde* simply meant a rustic, someone from the countryside, but it was also applied specifically for the peasant farmer.

Particularly in Denmark, connotations of the word *bonde* were largely negative in other groups. To the elite and to townspeople, *bønder* were simple, primitive, ill-behaved, uneducated. Most landlords and many clergymen complained that the *bønder* were conservative, idle, and conspicuous, and to townspeople they had primitive manners and were unsophisticated in language, clothes, and other

appearance. Again, the view was most negative concerning the peasant farmers of Sjaelland even though they ran the largest farms. Much of the view of peasant farmers in Jutland was also negative, but they were more often described admiringly as industrious and enterprising. In Sweden a similar distinction can be seen between the view of the 'peasant of plains' and the 'peasant of the forests'.

Highest in esteem was probably the *bonde* of Norway or the Schleswig royal districts. Both were praised as industrious, proud, and well-off. There was a difference, though. At least seen from Copenhagen there was also an air of positive folklore over the Norwegian *bonde*, of something original, and close to nature.

The harder the peasant farmer was burdened with taxes, labour service, and feudal control, the less was he in the esteem of those higher classes who could not do without his taxes and labour. Also peasant farmers were lowest in esteem, where the social and cultural differences were greatest – on the great estates of the high aristocracy and close to the metropolises of Copenhagen and Stockholm. In Western Jylland towns were small and landlords fairly poor, in much of Norway neither really existed. Over large tracts of Norway, the local vicar was the only one competing with major peasant farmers about the role as local leader for miles and miles.

But over the late 18th and early 19th century positive connotations of *bonde* were to become far stronger and more widely accepted. In Danish discourse, the predominant image of the stupid, idle, conservative, and ill-mannered *bonde* was still more challenged by views claiming that such elements of character were the result of oppression, not of the nature of the *bonde*. Danish reform policies of the late 18th century furthered the economic performance of the peasant farms, but also protected him from stronger demands from lords and partly also the state. With romanticism and nationalism growing, the *bonde* became more and more the backbone of the nation. And as the esteem of the *bonde* rose, the term became more and more reserved for the peasant farmers, who often used it themselves in their political organization.

Conclusions

The concept and reality of the *bonde* is central to Scandinavian history. It describes a large group of family farmers, who are above the smallholding being able only just to provide for a family, but below classical commercial farmers in many other parts. Such farms were dominant at the age of the middle ages, and they remained so more or less ever after. A rising population meant the creation of a class of landless below them. The group of peasant farmers was not socially absolutely homogenous, but compared to much of e.g. southern or western Europe still fairly so. Only in the 19th century were they a privileged minority (though still a large one) of rural population. Else they remained the majority, but a dwindling one in the course of the 18th century.

Perhaps this relative homogeneity and the fact that peasant farmers remained the majority of rural population in most places for most of the time helps explain the conceptual development of the word of *bonde*. It is at all comparable to peasant or farmer, the concept of *bonde* in its early modern meaning is a kind of 'peasant concept': it stresses the idea of a rural common people, unprivileged, under somebody else, and it does not single out the rural middle class. It sees the rural population consisting basically of such peasant farmers, from which the rural poor are more or less clearly singled out. In this understanding, the peasant farmer is not a special group in rural society, but its basic normality.

Of course we need not follow contemporary terminology. We can insist that it is wrong to put peasant farmers and landless cottagers in the same mental box. It has been an important part of Scandinavian historiography to stress, that rural population did not just consist of peasant farmers, such as the *bonde* concept easily leads one to think – very and often lead people to think earlier.

But then on the other hand the *bonde* concept does tell us something important. It reflects the real existence of a large group of reasonably homogeneous family farmers, and it reflects a social order where they were seen largely as inferior to and different from not only top aristocrats and large tradesmen, but virtually everyone outside the villages. Peasant farmers were not a 'rural middle class' in the minds of neither themselves nor townspeople, but something special. They were *bønder*. In the 19th century they were to largely adopt this view, but turn it around and insist that they were something special, but something special of value. Both their great numbers and this view had clear effect for the great role of *bonde* parties in Scandinavian 19th and 20th century political history.