

Rural History 2010, Brighton, England, Sept. 13-16, 2010, Session 17.4 Economic organization processes and politicization in European rural societies (c.1850-1940), II

Political Mobilization and Economic Support for Agriculture: Agrarians, Landowners and Farmers in Germany and Austria-Hungary

Draft version, do not cite yet

András Vári, Miskolc University, Hungary

h7506var@ella.hu

1. What is agrarian?
2. Agricultural associations
3. The periods of agricultural/rural mobilization, the launching of agrarian movements
4. People and groups participating in the agrarian surge from the nineties onwards
5. The economic and political ideas of agrarians
6. What were the common and what were the distinguishing features of these movements?

This paper focuses on a less well-known chapter of social and political history of Central Europe. This is the history of the rather popular and effective anti-liberal agrarian movements of late 19th century. One of the reasons for the disappearance of this chapter from modern history textbooks is the multifaceted character of these movements. So we try to tackle them here step by step, comparing first the national and regional agricultural associations of three countries, Germany, and Austria-Hungary from the end of the 19th century to the First World War. Then we proceed to have a look at who participated, what were their economic and political ideas, their common and distinguishing traits?

1. What is agrarian?

The word “agrarian” has a number of different meanings, and to make matters worse, the adjective can be found in nearly identical form in a number of languages. In English, it is associated with three meanings. Wikipedia gives these as follows:

“One refers to a social philosophy or political philosophy which stresses the moral superiority of a rural life based on farming, as opposed to the supposed corruption of city life, with its banks and factories. Thomas Jefferson was a famous representative agrarian.”¹

As opposed to this, a largely contradictory second meaning is given as well: “The term “agrarianism” also means radical proposals for land redistribution, specifically the distribution of land from the rich to the poor or landless. ...

In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England, the word identified any land reform movement that sought to redistribute cultivated lands equally. Today, the word has largely shed this radical political meaning. Instead, agrarianism points to a collection of political, philosophical, and literary ideas that together tend to describe farm life in ideal terms.”²

This seems to all very progressive. However, in the German version of the same encyclopaedia there appears a much more sinister meaning, the result of German postwar

¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agrarianism>, visited 10/09/2010.

² <http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agrarier> visited 10/09/2010.

historiography.³ The noun from this adjective in German, “Agrarier”, will be defined in the same medium as follows:

“Der Ausdruck Agrarier bezeichnet die Vertreter wirtschaftspolitischer Interessen der Landwirte in Deutschland, insbesondere für die preußischen Großgrundbesitzer im deutschen Reich, die sich mit Unterstützungen Bismarcks 1876 organisierten. Ihr Einfluss erreichte seinen Höhepunkt 1893 mit der Gründung des Bund der Landwirte und in der Weimarer Republik im Reichslandbund von 1920. Politisch wirkten die Agrarier auf der äußersten Rechten, gestützt auf die ostelbischen Junker und die preußischen Konservativen. Als Interessenverband kämpften sie für Schutzzölle, hohe Agrarpreise und Subventionen für verschuldeten Großgrundbesitz. Trotz ihrer Unterstützung für Hitler 1932/33 verloren sie im Dritten Reich sehr schnell ihren Einfluss, vor allem an den Reichsnährstand.”⁴

Both quotations, though in the second case more explicitly, picture “agrarians” as people wanting to protect agriculture or rural life. From this it would follow, that these things were thought to be in danger at the time, which indeed the case was. The protective character of agrarianism will be less stressed today, because it is generally taken for granted, that society must change to fit the economic/technological change and not the other way around, and in this perspective the disappearance of agriculture is something absolutely natural. But these were manifestly not the assumptions which the educated public of late 19th century thought natural. Therefore, the protections of rural economy and society, specifically, its protection from huge waves of price changes on the world market and from mobilization, commercialization of landed property provoked fear and resistance. After the end of the seventies, both of these aspects – protection from world market upheavals and conservation of landowning classes, big and small, were constitutive for the “agrarian” mind-set, ideas, movements.

In the first quote, the agrarians are either the champions of a liberal Jeffersonian democracy, or the adherents of rural land redistribution, that is of an equalitarian society, in the second, they are the forerunners of Hitler. The one common feature in the definitions: the coupling of a non-political outlook, one which favours and defends ways and interests of agriculture and of rural society with some sort of an openly political stance, opinion of the agrarians. So these descriptions, though they differ, but describe a thing which is structurally similar in all of its variations: first comes something of a non-political nature, on top of which then there is another thing hoisted on it, which has some direct political relevance. In all of its varieties, there is then a double-decker quality pertaining to agrarianism. No wonder, that undergraduate textbooks cannot handle a matter of such complexity.

2. Agricultural associations

The normal channels of mid-19th century non-sectarian (non-religious) mobilization in Central Europe were different associations.⁵ In the 1st half of the century, these were basically the fruits of the late enlightenment period. They were in no sense corporations, rather loosely knit

³ Cf. Puhle, Hans-Jürgen: Agrarische Interessenpolitik und preussischer Konservatismus im wilhelminischen Reich (1893–1914). Ein Beitrag zur Analyse des Nationalismus in Deutschland am Beispiel des Bundes der Landwirte und der Deutsch-Konservativen Partei. Verlag für Literatur und Zeitgeschichte, Hannover 1967.

⁴ XXX

⁵ Nipperdey, Thomas: Verein als soziale Struktur im 18. und 19. Jahrhundert. In: Boockmann, Hartmut – Esch, Arnold – Heimpel, Hermann – Nipperdey, Thomas – Schmidt, Heinrich (eds.): Geschichtswissenschaft und Vereinswesen im 19. Jahrhundert, Göttingen 1972, 3-44.

Hardtwig, Wolfgang: Strukturmerkmale und Entwicklungstendenzen des Vereinswesens in Deutschland 1789-1848. In: Dann, Otto (Hrsg.): Vereinswesen und bürgerliche Gesellschaft in Deutschland, Historische Zeitschrift, Beiheft 9, München 1984, 13-50.

networks, which served as focal points of learned discussions to find the best ways of serving the public good and, incidentally, to raise the fame and prestige of intellectuals.⁶ In retrospect, these associations seem to have been utterly powerless, which they indeed were. But the student of today can easily miss the respect they commanded and the contemporary expectations of the public, that the learned discourse that these different associations generated, whether on cultivation methods, crime or culture, can actually show a way to public good, to a cultivated existence of human society.

Actually, from the 1840s to the 1870s all of these economic associations were amateur bodies mostly exchanging technical information and undertaking tasks of technical education, a symbolical sort of representation of agriculture in contemporary learned discourse and in a restricted sense, even some interest representation of agriculture. But in the 1830-40s, as great landlords, governments and patriotic movements came to perceive a growing backwardness of Central European agriculture as compared with the best practices of the British (Belgian, Flemish etc.) farming, this general discourse has been in part reformulated. From then on, associations functioned as disseminating agencies of the practices of Northwest European agriculture on the one hand, and as a testing ground of individuals' public mindedness and patriotism as proven through their efforts at just this dissemination work on the other.

This might involve occasional policy suggestions, but looking back from a vantage point of the state of affairs around 1918, these were sporadic, tentative, and rather mild by comparison. But already these en miniature exercises had some political significance – basically because of the governments' efforts to suppress public opinion. Absolutist governments before and after the revolutions of 1848 cracked down on anything smacking of unfettered political public opinion – but not on those organizations and institutions that served non-political aims. So on the one hand, the double-decker qualities of these associations were already evident at the early stages of their development. On the other hand, this situation has projected possibly more of a political significance in the eyes of the public onto these organizations that they had wanted.

But a major change has occurred in this respect in the late the seventies, which will be described below. After this break, past this divide, the associations had acquired substantially larger membership, regular press and an openly assumed role as lobbyists of agriculture in the sense of demanding a role in formulating state legislation and government policy towards agriculture. From a debating society of a couple of dozens of educated people of high social standing these associations have grown into national movements of over 10 000 members with a real voice in economic policy.

The third period began with the nineties. In this third era associations, though still clinging to their ostensibly technical/professional quality, have actually become much more profoundly ideological, charged not just with basic resentment towards the workings of the capitalist world markets, but actually starting to develop ideas of rural corporatism which then only matured during and after the first world war.

For a deeper understanding we need to look at the turning points of the activities of these associations.

3. The periods of agricultural/rural mobilization, the launching of agrarian movements

⁶ Harrecker, Stefanie: *Der landwirtschaftliche Verein in Bayern 1810–1870/71*. C. H. Beck, München 2006

Bruckmüller, Ernst: *Landwirtschaftliche Organisationen und gesellschaftliche Modernisierung.*

Vereine, Genossenschaften und politische Mobilisierung der Landwirtschaft Österreichs vom Vormärz bis 1914. Wolfgang Neugebauer Verlag, Salzburg 1977

Bruckmüller, Ernst 1984: *Strukturwandel der österreichischen Landwirtschaftsgesellschaften im 19. Jahrhundert.* In: *Zeitschrift für Agrargeschichte und Agrarsoziologie* 32: 1. 1–30.

As outlined above, the periodic changes in activities of the associations were connected to two major turning points of agricultural production and at the same time, changes in the framework of economic policy. The first period from the 1830s to the end of the 1870s was an unprecedented stretch of expansion of world grain trade parallel to almost continuously rising prices. There was no injury, provocation to transform the learned discourse outlined above. But then came the first shock.

At the end of the 1870s there were a number of serious drops in the price of grain, although it has only become a trend by the mid-eighties. But all over Europe the cold shower of price fall galvanized the agricultural associations into a more aggressive, demanding operational mode. They organized congresses, held “enquetes” (inquiries), published memoranda, launched campaigns to raise their membership and started regular newspapers. This is their entry point into politics. A number of additional irritating factors facilitated this entry, among others, the mounting state indebtedness, the monopolistic freight rate policies of the railways, perceived unfairness of taxation which weighed disproportionately on real estate, while “mobile capital” went untaxed.

Already at this point we can see the match between the specific agrarian perception of the world and the “real” structures of the world, as seen by contemporary public opinion. Beyond particular associations of agrarians, sectional interest representations of this or that branch of the economy there is a ground-swell of general anti-capitalist and anti-liberal resentment in Central Europe of the 1870s. This resentment had its focus outside the rural world – it centred on the stock exchange crash of 1873 in Berlin, Vienna and Budapest which decimated industries while revealing the true nature of scores of banks as entirely groundless speculative businesses, it targeted the huge state subsidies for railway lines which were swallowed up by great monopolies, it put the soaring taxes and their unjust distribution on the agenda and finally it criticized that the same groups and milieus seemed to be directly involved on all of these counts at the same time. A historical picture of the conservatives and agrarians adroitly manipulating the masses in the decades of 1870s and 1880s in order to preserve their “feudal” power in state and society is only possible if one cuts out the protruding, conspicuous anti-liberal, anti-capitalist and anti-Semitic ground swell of popular resentment among the very same masses.⁷

The first to react were the German agrarian groups. Landowners and members of parliament (Reichstag) held between February 22–24th 1876 in Berlin a founding conference of the Vereinigung Deutscher Steuer- und Wirtschaftsreformer. This new organization demanded tax reforms to ease the burden of real estate and an introduction of tax on stock exchange gains, new regulation on joint stock companies, a system of state railways, a legal circumscription of peasants’ inheritance to make inherited holdings impartible and at the same time limiting their ability to contract debts and thus restricting peasant indebtedness. The new organization became associated with the conservative party, the Deutschkonservative Partei. The original free-trade orientation was gradually abandoned in favour of a protectionist stance by 1879 and the organization co-operated with industrial interests in achieving in 1879, 1885, 1887 a protective tariff for corn, cattle and timber as well as for steel.

This new association might have read the writing on the wall, but would have had difficulties in spreading the message to others – being entirely composed of great landowners and members of parliament. But already in the eighties there was a tremendous growth in the numbers of these agricultural associations and their membership all over Germany. In Prussia, for example, by 1890 there were 2069 associations with a membership (clearly with some

⁷ Alexander Gerschenkron, *Bread and Democracy in Germany* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1943

double entries) of 169 790 and a cumulated size of expenditures of 1 744 000 Mark.⁸ Some years later, in 1899, just in the one Prussian province of Westphalen there were 238 associations with over 35 000 members. One of these, the Westfälischer Bauernverein allegedly had already in 1880 around 20 000 owners of big and medium-sized peasant holdings as members.⁹

But the Westphalian association was by no means typical. The well-to-do peasants could have answered the call to organize because they were already rather successful in modernizing their production and life-style, but they could just as well support the association because they encountered difficulties in the transformation process. Finally, they might have joined also because they were Catholics caught in a victorious Lutheran Prussian state. The same sort of overlapping of identities and attitudes occurs everywhere in Central Europe.

Apart from rich Westphalian peasants the “normal” constituency of agricultural associations in Germany was the rural middle class, but membership did not extend much further downwards than these „middling sort” of people on the land. Where and when did the peasants join? One of the major debts of research on these topics is giving a halfway realistic picture of dispersal of political ideas from the pinnacle downwards and of the representations of the voices of farmers in their far-away villages in the halls of power. We shall return to this point in the next section.

From the seventies onwards Germany had a much wider popular mobilization on the right than either Austria or Hungary – the Socialist mobilization was a different matter, of course. In Hungary, there was a national agricultural association and network of county associations. In 1893, which might be taken as the last year before the mid-nineties mobilization campaign was launched in Hungary, the national organization had just short of 1900 members, the 18 really active county associations together had 16 000 members, if one also considers all of those associations, who were largely passive, the number of members of county associations rises to about 23 000, and all agricultural associations of the country (including specialist ones) taken together might correspond to the number of the members of all Westphalian associations, 35 000.¹⁰ One reason for this belated joining of Austrian and Hungarian rural middle and lower classes into the political fray had long seemed to be obvious: the extent of the franchise – though the Landtage of the individual German states were elected on a restricted franchise, but for the Reichstag every male had the vote. Elsewhere this has come much later, in Austria the first vote on a basis of general male suffrage came 1907, in Hungary 1920.

But formal arrangements might be overwritten by the uses they are put to. Even with universal suffrage, elites can lull voters into passivity and vice versa, restricted franchise does not per se preclude popular political mobilization. Part of the answer to the question, what caused the time lag of Austria-Hungary as against Germany must lie in the way the ruling elites of the day play the political game, another part possible in the mapping of those issues which really force people, masses of normally non-vocal country folk to take a stand. The latter will be considered below, the former aspect here.

It is well known, though not always considered, that the 1879 vote on the new tariff was actively fostered by Bismarck and the resulting new tariffs on agricultural imports were relatively low and provided hardly any protection.¹¹ Not were the agrarians the ones who

⁸ Preuss Stat Jahrbuch 1893, 219-220.

⁹ Albers, Helene: Die stille Revolution auf dem Lande, Münster 1999, 2/3.

¹⁰ Vári, András: Herren und Landwirte. Ungarische Aristokraten und Agrarier auf dem Weg in die Moderne 1821-1910, Wiesbaden 2009.

¹¹ Hardach, Karl W.: Die Bedeutung wirtschaftlicher Faktoren bei der Wiedereinführung

wanted it, but the chancellor for political, and the iron and steel industry for economic reasons. For the agrarians at the end of the seventies agricultural tariffs were only interesting as means which might supply the federal budget with enough revenue so as to make it possible to lower taxes on land.¹² But price drops as well as major animal diseases imported from East Europe continued through the 1880s, so there set in a genuine agrarian agitation for higher tariffs and strict veterinary border control. The decrease of grain prices on the home market was driven down by the price depression on the world market, which was the same for everyone. But the French and German grain producers, having higher costs than their Austrian and especially as their Hungarian or East European rivals must have felt the squeeze earlier. So the German landowning elites had reasons enough to try to organize their smaller neighbours already in the 1880s even though economic policy was not negligent of their interests.¹³ Also, the Germans had a real option – an importing country can actually defend its markets by putting up tariff barriers.

It was the other way around in Hungary of that time, the Bohemian territories standing halfway between Germany and Hungary. In Hungary (and to a lesser extent in the Bohemian territories) costs were lower, and the Habsburg empire and specifically Hungary stayed a net grain exporter till the mid-nineties. Exporting substantial amounts of grain makes a country a price taker – tariffs will not raise the price of grain on the home market, the ceiling is set by the world market price. So although some journalists have been blowing the trumpets of a trade war, it was entirely pointless. What is more, the leading agrarian figures at the helm of the Hungarian national economic organization knew this fully well. So while the German elites were pushing to popularize their economic aspirations and to gather popular support, Hungarians were curiously passive. This again might have been explained by other factors as purely rational economic considerations. The social composition of the leadership of Hungarian (and Bohemian, Austrian) agricultural organizations were much more exclusive, than that of their German counterparts. The plain fact was, that aristocrats with really large holdings were a feature of the Bohemian, Hungarian, Croatian, Transylvanian regions, among the German territories, only Silesia had something similar.

Beyond that, in Hungary the large landholding families had quite a stake in the liberal party, too, which might have very seriously dampened their eventual conservative leanings.

So in this second, transitory phase of popular mobilization of rural society there develops a quicker pace and a rougher and more popular style in Germany, which contrasts with the Hungarian developments.

Things will be more similar in the wake of the 1890-1894 liberal period in both Germany and Hungary. This is then, the 2nd turning point after 1879/80. While the first turning point had launched the up to that point rather elite agricultural organizations on a course towards more popular appeal without actually demanding of them to confess their political allegiances openly, this second turning point posed the same question of what to do with the political challenge with much more urgency. Why did it get so urgent?

der Eisen- und Getreidezolle in Deutschland 1879. Berlin 1967; Hardach, Karl W. 1987: Die Wende von 1879. In: Hans Pohl (ed.): Die Auswirkungen von Zollen und Handelshemmnissen auf Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft vom Mittelalter bis zur Gegenwart. Stuttgart, 275–292.

¹² Pyta, Wolfram: Landwirtschaftliche Interessenpolitik im deutschen Kaiserreich: der Einfl us agrarischer Interessen auf die Neuordnung der Finanz- und Wirtschaftspolitik am Ende der 1870-er Jahre am Beispiel von Rheinland und Westfalen. Stuttgart 1991

¹³ Henning, Friedrich-Wilhelm: Vom Agrarliberalismus zum Agrarprotektionismus. In: Hans Pohl (ed.): Die Auswirkungen von Zollen und Handelshemmnissen auf Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft vom Mittelalter bis zur Gegenwart. Stuttgart, 1987, 252–274.; Rolfes, Max 1976: Landwirtschaft 1850–1914. In: Aubin, Hermann – Zorn, Wolfgang (ed.): Handwörterbuch der deutschen Wirtschafts- und Sozialgeschichte. Stuttgart, II/494–525.

On the German scene, it was the turnabout of Caprivi in the form of the Russian and Rumanian trade treaties, switching from moderate protection of agriculture to its full absence for the sake of these countries dropping their prohibitive tariffs and letting in German industrial exports. This has actually come already at the end of a longer period of irritation and stagnation for agriculture, as outlined above. Though it is obviously true, that all European rural economies profited from technological change and investment, the net effect of fluctuating but stagnating prices, increasing taxation, decreasing size of labour force and substantial structural change within agricultural production away from grain is difficult to ascertain. Liberal historians usually criticize the hysteric reaction of landed interests to the Caprivi policies as something of a macro-economically irrational defence of feudal privilege. But Russian and American rivals of Central European agriculture were dumping their produce in Europe while they kept their own markets strictly protected, so the national economies were not exactly competing on equal terms. The implication – of contemporary free traders and some present-day researchers – that in absence of Western and Central European agricultural tariff protection there had be some sort of a natural structure of international exchange is difficult to square with Russian and American government trade policy at the time. The even more radical implication, agriculture needs to be annihilated in the service of historical progress and sectional interest representation of agriculture per se can be qualified as reactionary while for example, the labour movements' fight serves beyond the sectional interests of labour at the same time quintessential interests of human progress, will not be discussed here.

At the time that these views first emerged, in about 1880 German agriculture was still the biggest employer of labour, ahead of industry and trade, so decreased income in this sector obviously diminished purchasing power for the products of industry, too. Though now it would be possible to get a more balanced picture of the countervailing influences, it is characteristic, how much the strong views of one side were able to dominate public debate and by dominating the past discourse they still provide the arguments for present research.¹⁴

Obviously, there were other mobilization projects running parallel to the agrarians', besides that of the ever-present Socialists, the national liberals drew a picture of greedy, bossing, anachronistic landlord intent on making bread expensive for the urban masses. This campaign of malice and slander against a previously high-prestige group was answered in kind. The call to found the new "Kampfverein" the "Bund der Landwirte" explicitly proposed to employ the political tactics and methods of the Social Democrats – up till then not an obvious role model for the aristocratic and gentry conservatives.¹⁵ To be sure, there was resistance - along precisely those lines, that the Prussian gentry is royalist, does not participate in rabble-rousing, does not beg for state subsidies.¹⁶

The Hungarian experience was similar in economic respect. The economic experts and the large landowners of the country had been long aware of the significance of the American exports, but could not come up with any practicable measure to fend off the danger. So it was, though not unannounced, but still a shock, as the large Hungarian grain exports to Western Europe dwindled almost to nought by 1893-94 while at the same time, Romanian and Russian exports began to flood the Austrian markets, those, that the Hungarians thought would be

¹⁴ For much more balanced statements see the works of Hardach, Henning, Rolfes above.

¹⁵ Tholuck, Hans: *Der Bund der Landwirte, seine Freunde und Feinde. Entstehungsgeschichte, Zweck und Satzungen desselben, nebst Aufruf des Herren Ruprecht-Kansern und den grundlegenden Ausführungen des Herren von Ploetz-Döllingen.* Berlin 1893.

¹⁶ Wussow, Heinrich von: *Die gegenwärtige Nothlage der Landwirthschaft in Westpreußen und der Bund der Landwirthe. Vortrag gehalten im landwirthschaftlichen Verein Bischofswerder Westpreussen am 15. Febr. 1895.* Selbstverlag der Verfassers.

reserved for them, those, which constituted the economic sense behind the 1867 Compromise and the Hungarian acquiescence in the continued existence of the Habsburg empire. Significantly, the Eastern countries used railway links to get to Central Europe, which could be cut by appropriate tariffs or railways transit freight rates. Thus, the Hungarian associations and all sorts of agrarians in all parties mounted a campaign similar to that of their German counterparts against the Caprivi treaties. In the course of this some similar, but not equal measure of a popular mobilization was attained, as in Germany. There is even a wider parallel to Germany – in Hungary just as in Germany the different associations were fighting partly for narrow economic aims like tariff protection, but also for a more generally anti-liberal government policy. Still, the result was different. After a short upsurge of frantic activity in 1895/96, the Hungarian agrarians actually succeeded in getting their economic demands accepted by the liberal government, they even forged a stable understanding with the liberals on the necessity of keeping the Empire reserved for Hungarian agricultural exports. Having reached this understanding by the end of 1895, they dismantled efforts to put up a new, popular agrarian party. Thus, although the period 1895-1914 did bring a more thorough popular mobilization, the German levels were far from being achieved.

4. People and groups participating in the agrarian surge from the nineties onwards

Though we have seen, that in Germany the tendency to bring the agrarian matters closer to the general public and to mobilize rural masses had already set in around the early eighties, the general Central European mobilization of public opinion was a thing of the nineties. By then, we also have more data on the participants of the work of the relevant organizations and might try at least to put the question forward – who participated in this anti-capitalist, anti-liberal mobilization? Some of the peculiarities might find an answer by considering the social background of these movements. Unfortunately, one only has data which comes from the members' own characterizations of themselves, mainly in the registration of the associations' members. So we have a lot of "doctor juris", and "Landwirte" – i.e. "agriculturalists" without knowing anything about the crucial question, to what extent were these organizations built on the owners of landed property and to what extent were they accessible for other groups, or for the wider masses?

There are three characteristic positions in these organizations: leaders, cadre and members.

The leaders of the most conspicuous German organization that of the Bund der Landwirte, were Gutsbesitzer, owners of landed estates.¹⁷ The other associations had, however, a more mixed leadership, with a judicious sprinkling of technical and legal experts and other middle-class figures. This is, however, not as straightforward as it seems. The quick leftist snub at the landed property of these figures does not necessarily make them old-style grand seigneurs, it is rather a misrepresentation of the facts. For one, quite a number of landed properties were much too small to be of service as a stable foundation of the owners' family life, they served to a large degree symbolic purposes. The owners themselves had without an exception university degree, they were mostly trained in law, and had for a stretch of time jobs as employees of banks (Hahn) or law courts (Roesicke). On the other hand, those without landed estates were not necessarily bourgeois intellectuals either – there is more to identity, as the property one holds.

The same is even more conspicuous on the Austrian-Hungarian scene. Here, the leaders were bearers of great historic names, with much more substantial estates, than their German counterparts. This property generated in a number of cases income enough, so that the agrarian leaders by themselves or in groups could even sustain modern newspapers out of

¹⁷ Puhle, Agrarische Interessenpolitik

their personal income. This is aristocracy meddling in parliamentary politics, just as their leftist-liberal critics like to show them. But if one looks at them closely, there appear a number of different groups. Some just squandered their wealth as they pleased, some tried to take their old seigneurial role seriously and be fathers of their peasants, tenants and workers, some have learnt the new operational rules, turned into a capitalist entrepreneur and mercilessly exploited everyone on their estates. Yet others, however, without ever turning on their own class, they nevertheless gradually assumed new social roles, those of professionals and intellectuals.

Actually, this was something of an operational requirement for the cadre of these organizations. For in the nineties, in the third phase of mobilisation the associations have broadened and multiplied their membership and extended their activities. Both of these changes have required larger staff, more cadres, increasing, however, not just their numbers, but their prestige and importance as well. These people were neither landowners nor peasants, but mostly middle-class professionals, intellectuals, lawyers and agricultural experts. This motley lot is difficult to analyse, there were, in spite of the growth of their numbers, maximum two or three dozens of them in a large association, which makes the group too small to analyze with statistical methods, while we seldom know more than the basic events of their lives. However, what we do see in the career of figures like Hahn of the Bund deutscher Landwirte or Bernát or Rubinek of the corresponding Hungarian associations is, compared with their predecessors, a deepening acceptance of these figures by high society. This gradual rise in esteem of the cadre of these associations was a contradictory process. Some part of it was surely generated by the ever more obvious need for more profound agricultural knowledge. Therefore, it was bound up with a general rise of prestige of agricultural experts. But only some part of it. For within these groups, some were experts and others were not. Not at least, experts of animal husbandry or crop cultivation. Rather, their field of expertise was that of editing and managing newspapers affiliated with the agrarians, organizing evening lectures for the faithful to guide them, finding mediators in particular sectors of public opinion, in the provinces or within important professions and institutions, whipping up political support in public opinion. This is not the role of an expert, not of a paid private employee, not of a landlord defending its own proprietary interests – but rather, of somebody living and working in the midst of a “movement”, the nearest structural equivalent would be the Social Democrat, being secretary of a local trade union organization and a number of workers’ associations, and, from the nineties on, getting his pay from the workers’ health insurance governing bodies. Here was a man who lived for, on account of and by the movement.

If that was the case in at least a number of cases among the group what we called cadres (or activists?), then this can be mirrored in their success or failure to turn associations with functions of more or less immediate help and assistance on the one hand and a restricted agenda of discussion on the other into “movements”. Movements we associate with more or less inclusive, all-enveloping world-views. It is sensible then, to have a look at the ideas these agrarian associations or agrarian movements embraced and spread.

5. The economic and political ideas of agrarians

The ideas were not new, original – or, for that matter, very clear. It is a common fate of conservative reactions, commentaries, critical remarks on the state of world affairs to get reproached by those of a more theoretical mind for their lack of systematic elaboration. With regard to the agrarian and anti-liberal movements of late 19th century Europe, this charge has been repeated over and over again. But in this case of “agrarian ideologies”, it is not just the lack in theoretical sophistication and precision which makes it difficult to work with them. For they repeat the double-decker quality of the organizations which propagate them. First, in

the texts of these bodies and associations there appears a number of generalized complaints and criticisms of the modern world, which, as it was said, never nearly add up to a coherent or systematic world view. Then there is a series of concrete suggestions to reform this or that particular institution, but these suggestions are rarely deduced from the more general complaints and it is never clear, how much they can and should change the world at large. However, in this respect there is yet again a bifurcation – some proposed concrete measures of institutional reform could actually function like a metaphor – the particular reform measure functions as a herald of a new economy, society, age to come. Other proposed corrective measures do not have this symbolic quality.

But: of course, all of these variants crop up usually within the same text, interwoven. The texts themselves vary as regard to the succinctness of formulations, a calendar of an association obviously sporting a different style from a scientific contribution or from a speech in Upper House – but the list of topics that crops up at the different levels is much the same. Let us see a couple of examples!

General unease was mirrored in off-hand remarks with respect to “Geldherrschaft”, the rule of money, to the suppression – thorough enormous increase in state taxes, institutional faults and fraudulent practices in the credit system – of agriculture for the sake of an “unnatural”, “artificial” development of industry – with government subsidies and support, and finally, to the resulting loss of population in the countryside and rapid urbanization. Coupled with the alleged artificiality of development went the negation of some sort of a long-term gain of efficiency or affluence for the general public – what seems to be a major gain at present, is a transient phenomenon, in the long run, there is a steep price to be paid for the celebrated “progress” of our days. There are obvious similarities in the structure of the argument of today’s environmentalist arguments. These murmuring were already present in the association press of the 1840s, they have become ubiquitous by the end of the 1880s. This amalgam of wisdom played the role of a theoretical foundation. Accordingly, one could find it in every program or resolution, such as, for example, that of the Bund der Landwirte 1893.¹⁸

Upon these foundations there were concrete proposals. The earliest, already beginning from the fifties came the demands for tax reform, for lighter taxes on land and on agricultural industries such as distilling, the taxing of stock exchange gains. Somewhat later, in the liberal period of the seventies, as usury laws were annulled by the governments in came the demand for their reintroduction and at the same time, for measures to solve the problem of rural credit shortage. Besides the renewing anti-usury legislation there were three more bundles of measures contemplated: first, to disenfranchise peasants in the sense of making it illegal to issue or endorse a bill of exchange. Second, it was proposed that peasant inheritance systems should be defined by law in a way both to prevent morselization, the splitting up of peasant property and to prevent heirs from burdening their property with claims of either their siblings or others. Third, there were a number of suggestions to put up special institutions, municipal savings banks or credit co-ops to provide rural lenders with cheap credit with formalities not too awkward for rural circumstances.

The perceived deepening of the crises of agriculture brought new demands: in Germany, after their reluctance in 1879 from the eighties agrarians warmed to the idea of tariff protection. This was only embraced in Hungary in mid-nineties. By that time, Bund der Landwirte in Germany was demanding a state monopoly of import of corn with a duty to work towards

¹⁸ Wilhelm Mommsen: Deutsche Parteiprogramme. Vom Vormärz bis zur Gegenwart. München, 1951. S.28.

equalizing of prices and keeping a minimum price on the home market, the introduction of the bimetallic (silver and gold) currency and a restriction or prohibition of futures trade in produce.

Again, one can see symbolic demands and economic concepts intermingling, as well as a mix of practicable ideas with sheer nonsense. The mixture, however, was a potent one. This can be shown with four of the above concepts.

Tariffs, for example, were an article of faith – in the negative sense, a free country should not have them, was the general opinion till the 1870s. The turnabout of the German iron and steel industry and of Bismarck has created a new image: instead of the intense trade between countries contributing to international and inner peace, as it was imagined, for example by Constant in 1815, the world trade has come to be seen as a dangerous and whimsical monster, who should be kept at bay, if possible. Beside the mounting concrete problems of the agricultural producers, the radical change is probably also a fruit of the general anti-liberal turn, of the resentment after 1873. Atmospheric charge in the political heights can be and it indeed was here grounded by the down-to-earth economic policies. Though they might have been perfectly rational on their own, but their acceptance resp. popularity had quite a lot to do with generalized fears and hopes of the public. This is shown from the experience of the countries and periods, in which tariff protections would have been entirely useless and this was known to makers of economic policy, but the public pressure was so strong that they had to acquiesce in this phoney medicine.¹⁹

Co-ops were an idea, not a known and accepted practice in the sixties and seventies. Their actual start was in the eighties, their rapid dispersion in the nineties, so the talk about them preceded the reality and mirrored the fascination of the public with the idea. They were advocated with growing vehemence, further, the idea of economic advancement thorough association nicely fitted with the general esteem, in which associations were held. By the seventies, this idea was starkly contrasted with the picture of egoistic, money-grabbing, speculating, for the general public destructive capitalist trader-cum-banker. Indeed, the big grain traders of Central Europe were often engaged in both lines of business, giving them opportunities to influence prices, to corner the market and thus push down the prices of grain. The actual process of this happening was and is difficult to impossible to prove, but the ability of major actors in these markets to undertake such operations is reasonably well-established. The other figure of general contempt was the usurer. Here, the arguments for and against “risk-pricing” of credits on the hand and “predatory lending”, as they are called now, on the other, were known and expounded over and over again. The fact of usury is documented (for example in the form of interest rates over 100%), but its economics is unexplored.²⁰ So there was a tremendous urgency about the rural credit problem, and credit co-ops were held to be the patent medicine for this. Actually, the belief in the credit co-operative was so strong that a wave of scams came up in the 1880s and 1890s, all built around the theme of “we shall found a credit co-operative”.

Again, this is where fact meets fiction. Co-ops, especially of the Raiffeisen-type did often and significantly facilitate credit access of poor, small, backwoods peasant producers. But this was not automatic and depended partly on the social and economic structure of the rural communities, of which very little was known at the time. The German and the Hungarian statistical office collected data on the indebtedness of peasants, asking, among other things,

¹⁹ US agriculture in the twenties also got tariff protection – in the best American tradition, but utterly pointless.

²⁰ XXX

about the way these debts were contracted and what role inheritance customs played in this.²¹ The Verein für Socialpolitik also held an inquiry.²² But by the time these sets of information were available, by the mid-nineties, the co-operatives had built nationwide networks. Since their great success preceded any careful investigation of what they were capable of, it is fair to say that they were clearly carried more by expectations and hopes than enthusiasm over their performance.

While in my first two examples hopes and aversions (irrational factors) actually worked to facilitate rational – though not necessarily correct – approaches to real problems, bimetallism is, on the other hand an example of utter nonsense catching the public eye. Bimetallism was thought to have two effects: first, to enhance the quantity of money and thus contribute to a modestly inflationary period, and second, to provide certain protection for the bimetallic countries from exports from gold-standard countries. We need not enter the economics of bimetallism – for even if the economic proposition would have been all sound, this dogma would still have been an embodiment of irrationality. The plain fact is, that by the 1890s, as bimetallism has become an avowed tenet of agrarianism in Europe, it would have required a series of international monetary agreements for the countries of Europe to leave the gold standard and return to a bimetallic standard, the chances of which were nil. Though these agrarian proposals for bimetallism were argued in strictly statistic and economic terms, giving the impression of serious science, the pure political infeasibility brands this effort as an exercise in hocus-pocus. So the real question is why was it so popular among people, who in other respects were perfectly capable of rational politics, too? The only answer I find is, that the general unease with capitalism has deepened by the nineties into a real fear of the workings of world markets and of world-wide monetary systems. Bimetallism stemmed from this paranoia on the one hand and was an attempt – all the same here, whether it was rational not – to regain control over world wide financial markets which ruling elites were accustomed to.

Grain imports were the harbingers of world market developments and in their first program, the Bund der Landwirte has actually proposed a state agency to control imports and sustain a minimal price on the home market. This was unique, no one else went this far. But a channelling or even blocking the international grain trade thorough the construction, or the non-construction of railways and canals or the appropriate height of the freight rates were always discussed. All this was predicated upon state involvement. So here, sections of the agrarian opinion were carried by their fear of world market development so far as to abandon the one basic common tenet of conservative, landed, old-style elites the distrust of and distance from the state. As a matter of fact, on the level of ideas, this, the relation to the state is one of the great dividing lines between different groups of agrarians, between different associations. We shall look at this question next.

6. What were the common and what were the distinguishing features of these movements?

The agenda, as we have been able to tackle it in all its different national manifestations under the same chapter headings throughout our presentation, seems to have been very much the same in all the countries under review here. It is, of course, characteristic, that the German agrarians embraced protective tariffs earlier, but it had a perfectly rational, concrete reason.

²¹ XXX

²² Der Personalkredit des ländlichen Kleingrundbesitzes in Deutschland: Berichte und Gutachten, 1-2. Verein für Socialpolitik, Berlin 1896.

But within this general similarity of agenda, three differentiating aspects stand out. One is a practical aspect, another one political, yet another one social.

First, let's see the practical differences. In some countries, notably Germany, the extent of concrete economic assistance offered by the associations to farmers was much greater, than in others. The associations functioned everywhere as legal and technical advice bureaus, but the extent to which the German associations went, was unsurpassed elsewhere. The help which the associations were able and willing to extend to their members was also a determining factor for the attractiveness of their economic policy propositions. A wider variety of concrete assistance from the economic associations seems to have strengthened the political message of the associations substantially. Whether this was just the organizational genius of two or three leaders or the peculiar German culture of associations which brought this result is open to question. But it is clear, that political mobilization of peasants is very much facilitated if there are associations which publish weekly price lists, purchase and resell goods for their members, represent them at the authorities, give them legal advice and even look through the peasants' bills to see whether they have not been overcharged. The political message will have a different echo against this backdrop.

Second, let's look at the political divisions among associations. Depending on their leaders and on their individual histories, there was something of a basic proximity or aloofness from the governments. As a tendency, the older an association was and the more narrowly technical its agenda and, the more aloof it was from the government. But there were other factors as well, for example, the cultural, religious or ethnic difference of the groups leading the particular association to the dominant groups in the state. This axis between associations with more or less distance to the state is meaningful in terms of explaining the history and politics of these associations. Indeed, being more or less friendly to and dependent on the government was a major question for them. But in the long run, they all belong to the same anti-modernist development of public opinion. To detach avowedly apolitical, technical associations from the "Kampverein" (approx. fight club) like the BdL is unwarranted. The winegrowers' associations' texts could have quite the same sort of scattered allusions to international predatory capital, like the BdL. But the one has put them in his program as a headline and the other text makes the same statement as a casual remark – the thrust of the message was the same. This is important to bear in mind, because upon this recognition of a wide network of associations and scenes, foci of discussion the realistic assessment of the breadth of both the scope of associations and of the discourse sustained by them depends.

Third, there was a substantial difference in the traditions and culture of the leadership of these associations, which boiled down to a difference of social roles and identities. It can be shortened like this: conservative aristocrats versus nationalistic or anti-Semitic peasants.

In the first phase of the development of literally all of these associations up to the seventies aristocrats, priests, high officials of royal and princely administrations played a major role in founding, financing and leading these organizations. Of course, the requirements for leading these bodies were rather modest, as their agenda was, as outlined above, restricted. As this agenda and scope of action widened, as forms and structures of modern press and mass politics evolved and as landowners' financial strength was eclipsed by the funds that entrepreneurs in industry and finance could mobilize, the leadership slipped from the hands of aristocratic landowners, even though there were always some great names in the leading bodies. But generally, since the 1890s, the associations had a much larger membership and thus, regular revenues making them less dependent on donations, while sometimes they also had subsidies from government bodies and income from their own co-operatives or even trade agencies. Parallel to the diminishing dependence of associations on individual great lords there was a substantial change of style in the tone of discourse of these organizations, a

popularization which was alien from the culture of a traditional-minded grand seigneur. These changes were concomitant with and reinforced the general turn towards mobilization of rural society in this last period between the 1890s and the First World War.

The personal participation of great lords did matter, and when they abstained from participation, it did amount to a demonstration. Thus, for example, there were sort of protest step-downs of aristocratic leaders from leadership positions as the government tried to take the major associations of the land under its tighter control. These resignations, however, did not demolish the idea, that an agricultural associations should be to some extent under the leadership of great landlords, rather the contrary, the glaring absence made the idea even more legitimate. But over and above that, the sheer change of operational mode of associations forced associations to take middle-class professionals not just as members of their staff, as secretaries and cashiers, but at least some of their leaders came from similar circumstances, too. That, however, still did not entirely rip off the aristocratic veneer that these associations had assumed.

This has been finally affected when the association embraced a modern popular ideology, usually nationalism or anti-Semitism or both, which could not be accepted by the aristocrats, unaccustomed as they were to rabble-rousing crowds. Before the First World War, this was the case with the Czech and Polish peasant parties. Naturally, the more narrowly technical organizations, but also the national agricultural associations of Austria and Hungary remained aloof from this sort of popular politics. Interestingly, both the Anti-Semitism of the BdL and that of the Christian Socialists in Austria went without explicit censure as anti-Semitism, but was criticized from a conservative/aristocratic stance as sensationalist, disloyal to the king, a political circus for the uneducated masses and as a sort of confidence trick.²³

But this final stance of anti-modernism required the conservative lords to state their clearly expressed views and condemnation in the press, tantamount to coming out in the open and shouting at their opponents – not a gentlemanlike behaviour. This, nevertheless is a final proof of the strength of the modernization process – its opponents were forced to adopt the methods of popular politics as well. They did this mostly after they had been defeated. Their vacating of their positions in the associations signalled the end of an era, where economic interest representation, learned discourse on progress in science, economy and society, attempts to influence government economic policy and old-style self-representation were nicely united.

What came afterwards, were modern political mass parties run by middle-class individuals who made a show of their deeply felt unity with the soil and with its peasant tillers. But that is another story.

²³ Wussow, Nothlage.