

17.2 The Scandinavian *bonde*: a challenge to the peasant-farmer dichotomy?

Room 104

Convener: Carsten Porskrog Rasmussen

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17.21 Bjørn Poulsen – The free *bønder* of Scandinavia – who were they?

From the eighteenth century it was an integrated part of the historical discourse that the Viking Scandinavians were free men without aristocracy. This was maintained by nineteenth-century Swedish historians, such as Erik Geijer, as well as contemporary Danish scholars, such as C. F. Allen. During the last part of the twentieth century opposition to this view has rightly been raised, stressing the existence of early aristocracies and manors. Nevertheless, it remains a fact that the rural population of all the Nordic Countries from the Viking age and through the middle ages was, to a high degree, composed of relatively large farms run by farmers, freeholders, termed *bonder* or *bønder*. Recent studies stress this, even in regard to the most aristocratically dominated of the Scandinavian countries, Denmark, where 100 per cent freeholders are found in some areas. It is the aim of this paper to trace the early roots of the group of *bønder* and to show its growing terminological and social separation from the rest of society during the late middle ages. The question will be raised how this group fits into the general discussion of European peasantries.

Bjørn Poulsen (b.1955) has been Professor of European History 1000–1750, University of Aarhus, since 2001. His publications in English include: ‘Rural credit and land market in the Duchy of Schleswig c.1450–1660’, in: B. van Havel and P. Hoppenbrouwers (eds), *Landholding and land transfer in the North Sea area (late middle ages – nineteenth century)* (2004); (with Jeppe Büchert Netterstrøm) (eds), *Feud in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (2007); (with Nils Hybel) *The Danish Resources c.1000–1550. Growth and Recession* (2007); (with Klaus-Joachim Lorenzen-Schmidt) (eds), *Writing Peasants. Studies on Peasant Literacy in Early Modern Northern Europe* (2002); (with Finn E. Eliassen and Jørgen Mikkelsen) (eds), *Regional Integration in Early Modern Scandinavia* (2001).

17.22 Carsten Porskrog Rasmussen – Primitive peasants or free yeomen: *bønder* in early modern Scandinavia

In the early modern period, the Scandinavian *bonde* or peasant became consolidated as a distinctive group. It was a period of increased taxation and conscription by the state, and, for noble tenants, demands of labour service and increased manorial authority. State and landlord policy nonetheless consolidated the solid family farm, which was seen as suited to paying taxes and providing labour service. Consequently large parts of Scandinavia remained dominated by farms of fairly equal size. In much of Scandinavia the holders of these farms – the *bonder* or *bønder* – were in low esteem from higher strata, but they farmed most of the land and dominated village life over cottagers and crofters.

In northern Sweden and much of Norway solid family farms also prevailed. Their holders were also seen as *bønder*, but they had a more free status and were seen as entrepreneurial. When the *bønder* of lowland Scandinavia were largely freed from feudal bonds in the late eighteenth century, the image of the ‘free’ *bonde* from upland Scandinavia in many ways served as ideal.

The paper discusses the relationship between social and conceptual development.

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Hansen, K. (eds) *Modernisation and Tradition* (2004); and ‘Corvée and Paid Work’, in Sundberg, K. (ed.), *Work and Production on Manors in the Baltic Sea Region, 1700–1900* (2002).

17.23 Mats Morell – The modern *bonde* in Scandinavia

From the mid-eighteenth century an emancipation process blew over Scandinavia. Tenants were encouraged to buy themselves status as freeholders. Falling taxes and rents and increased production promoted their economic progress. Largely they carried the agricultural revolution on their shoulders and they were positive to consolidations and enclosures. Social and cultural advancement followed and they strengthened their political influence both in the emerging national bicameral parliaments and in the restructured local governments, where the dominance of large landowners was challenged.

The owner-occupying *bönder* combined old and new in a way to that rendered tradition-modernity dichotomies problematic. They involved themselves in a vivid co-operative movement that transformed them into entrepreneurial commercial actors. Despite the *fin de siècle* smallholder movement and post-war structural transformation, with partial leases and formation of large farm units, *bönder* with medium size farms remained the backbone of the farming communities throughout the twentieth century, and the term *bonde*, which for urban observers have sometimes symbolised backwardness, has turned from a sociologic-historical category into a occupational one: any farmer – even a large estate owner of aristocratic descent – may call himself *bonde*.

The paper elaborates on the tension between concept, image and reality

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