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PROCEEDINGS
OF THE
FIFTH INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE
OF
AGRICULTURAL ECONOMISTS

HELD AT
MACDONALD COLLEGE
CANADA
21 AUGUST TO 28 AUGUST 1938

LONDON
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
HUMPHREY MILFORD
1939

3 copies

Farm tenure. Western Slavs
Europe. Farm tenure

Indexed

SOME REMARKS ON THE LAND TENURE OF THE WESTERN SLAVS

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ALL of you who were present at the last Conference will remember Mr. Ashby's warning in his excellent paper that discussion of systems of land tenure must be affected by the fact that these systems are still related to forms of the family, to systems of inheritance and disposal of property at death, and so on.¹ The discussion we had in St. Andrews demonstrated sufficiently the danger of generalizing some facts as to farm organization and the use of land without paying attention to differences existing in systems of land tenure between the particular countries.

Papers read on this subject at the previous Conferences dealt mainly with English, American, and German conditions. Some references have been made to Roman countries, but only a few remarks were devoted to the system of land tenure among the Slavs.

The origin of the land tenure of the Slavs is to be sought in the joint family called *zadruga*. In this several relatives, married and single, built a big common household; they occupied joint land property and cultivated it in common under the leadership of the eldest of the family. Professor M. Sering, who mentions the *zadruga* or the joint family in his paper 'Land Tenure and the Development of Agriculture', says: 'The patriarchal family has an effect on agriculture similar to that of the German custom of succession, that is, the preservation of the estate.'² This statement, I find, is very important for the right judgement of the development of land tenure among the Slavs.

The joint families survived among the Eastern and the Southern Slavs, sometimes even until the abolition of serfdom. While with the Western Slavs they were early split up into individual families, traces of them are even now to be found. Recently Dr. Obrebski, a Polish ethnographer and sociologist, who has done considerable field-work in Yugoslavia studying *zadrugas*, discovered them still in existence in some parts of eastern Poland. Along with the joint family we find the joint cultivation of land disappearing. But this does not necessarily mean an end to the joint ownership.

¹ *Proceedings of the Fourth International Conference of Agricultural Economists* (Oxford University Press, 1937), p. 88.

² *Ibid.*, p. 84.

Different systems of land tenure originating in the joint land property of the family community developed with the Eastern and the Western Slavs. With the Russians we find, at the beginning of the twentieth century, community ownership with individual cultivation of land as most common. Village community (*mir*) authorities apportion to heads of individual families shares of farm land which are determined by the legal custom or the so-called *obshchyna*. According to the rules of this legal custom, shares of land are subject to revision in accordance with population growth, so that every nine or twelve years, and so on, land is being redistributed.

Stolypin, the well-known Russian Minister, in the first decade of the twentieth century tried to dissolve land property communities and to introduce a new system of land tenure based on individual ownership. The land reform he started was executed with great vigour. If continued, it could have changed the appearance of rural Russia entirely. But the Great War and the unfavourable reactions on the majority of the peasants disturbed the work initiated by Stolypin. People stuck to their old traditions of village community ownership and to the legal custom of the *obshchyna*.

The lack of strong individual land ownership in the past was probably one of the main reasons why the bolsheviks won the Russian peasantry so easily for their ideas. They were propagating community ownership along with the seizure of the estates of the nobility, and this meant to the peasant nothing more and nothing less than greater shares of land for his own use. People certainly did not think at that time that they would be forced into collective farming.

Despite its common origin from the land property of the family community, the system of land tenure of the Western Slavs developed along entirely different lines from that of the Eastern Slavs. Instead of community ownership we find everywhere individual cultivation combined with occupying ownership as the system of land tenure which rules almost exclusively. Tenancy, particularly share tenancy, is very unpopular with the Western Slavs, and owner-operated farm units constitute the rule.

Since the abolition of serfdom, which in this part of Europe was rather severe, personal freedom has been held in very high esteem by the West-Slav peasant. Any restriction of private ownership is highly unpopular as reminding people of serfdom. And people are inclined to look upon such restriction as a danger threatening the personal freedom established for the country population in this part of the world not so long ago.

With the conception of private property we notice a combination of some ideas that differ from German as well as from English and American. People look upon farm land not as real but rather as personal property. They do not think of it in terms of units which should be indivisible if necessary for the successful running of a farm. This becomes comprehensible as soon as we compare how genuine customs of inheritance work with a German, an Anglo-Saxon, and a Pole.

A German in conformance with the law of succession which applies with some modifications to all Germanic countries of the European continent, will leave his farm unbroken to one only of his children, giving him an exceptional preference in order to preserve the whole of the farm unit. An Anglo-Saxon is likely to have every child sharing in the property he leaves on the basis of equal rights. But for the sake of it he will not think of destroying an efficient farm unit or of having all his farm land divided up and distributed in order to make sacrifice on the altar of equality. But with a Western Slav it is quite typical to be anxious about strict equality. Thus, even if he disposes of several items of property, he will be inclined to assign to each of his, say, five children one-fifth of his farm land, one-fifth of a town house, one-fifth of his money, and so on. And if he owns several pieces of land he is likely to apportion a patch of each to every child.

Economic progress was not, of course, without influence upon the system of land tenure. It caused some changes in customs of inheritance, and we find at present deviations from the genuine custom. Some parts of Poland and Czechoslovakia adopted, for instance, the German custom of succession. But big areas of Poland and Slovakia still stick to the old tradition.

Dense rural population and lack of industrial cities able to absorb the growing country surplus are given by many authors in explanation of the existing system of land tenure, the continuous subdividing of farm land, and the impossibility of checking it. It is well enough known that the proportion of the population engaged in agriculture varies considerably from country to country. In England it is at present some 8 per cent., and in Germany it does not exceed 20 per cent., but in that part of Europe I am referring to it is around 60 to 70 per cent., and it has been, since the War, almost stationary. The ratio of rural to urban population likewise has not changed in eastern Europe since the War. During the same period the birth-rate has not shown any tendency to decline as rapidly as in north-western Europe or North America. Thus, while some highly industrialized

European countries are making efforts to induce a back-to-the-land movement, all the East-European countries are confronted rather with the problem how to bring about just the opposite and make people start city businesses. This has been perhaps of greater importance for Poland than for any other country, and it has led to the opinion that further economic development depends upon a successful solution of the problem called rural overpopulation. There are, however, differences of opinion among scholars as to the causes of this problem and as to the ways by which a solution is to be brought about.

First as to causes; we notice two opposite points of view. Some look upon the genuine Slav custom of inheritance and the system of land tenure as a great handicap to economic progress. They point out the marked contrast with the Germanic countries. They insist that institutions originating in the joint family have caused the expansion of a system of land tenure which favoured sticking to land but has been unfavourable for the development of urban industrial culture. On the other hand, some deny that any relation exists between the customs of inheritance, the system of land tenure, and the population problem. They would insist, as already mentioned above, that the lack of industry made the subdivision of land unavoidable.

It seems to me to be true that at the present stage of development rapid checking of further subdivision of land by means of a compulsory shift in inheritance laws might create a very precarious situation; it would in all probability decrease the number of the partly unemployed small holders and increase at the same time the number of the fully unemployed in rural districts. But it does not follow that the same objection was equally important in the past. I should say that there is enough evidence to show that the mental attitude of the people, which changes but slowly, was responsible for the fact that urban industrial culture did not grow. And legal steps taken in the past to improve the system of land tenure and to induce the urbanization process failed because they were in opposition to the mental attitude of the peasant.

It is not surprising that entirely opposite reasons given to explain rural overpopulation and the existing system of land tenure imply correspondingly different ways of solution. I do not intend to discuss the alternatives extensively; they concern us only as far as they bear on the system of land tenure. On the one hand, we find supporters for a further redistribution of land and for provisions to meet the rising demand for land caused by population growth. Any

stocks of land, they say, particularly those which are still available under the law of land reform, should be directed towards creating the maximum of self-sufficient land holdings. On the other hand, the opinion is being expressed that an increase in land supply, under circumstances unfavourable for urban development, has resulted in stimulating the growth of rural population. Where the attitude of people, it is said, is for sticking to the land and not leaving it unless forced, plenty of land affects population in a way which might easily be compared with the effect of prosperity in city business. Thus it increases the number of marriages, and works to an end just contrary to any improvement of the system of land tenure, and gives no solution of the rural overpopulation problem. Similarly, supply of land under the law of land reform, conducted as a means of solution of the population problem, may fail.

Let us now see whether changes which have occurred in land tenure may help in giving a positive answer to the question raised. These changes have for a considerable time been related closely to the trend of emigration both oversea and seasonal. Since the last decade of the nineteenth century sums sent home by Polish oversea emigrants alone are estimated to have amounted to some \$50 million yearly. What strikes the scholar studying the influence of emigrants' savings upon the economic development of the country is this: while at the time of the abolition of serfdom there was a considerable proportion of land in estates conducted either as middle-sized farms by the owners themselves or as large-scale farms conducted by paid managers, at the later date savings of oversea and seasonal emigrants were used largely for buying off the farm land from the estates, leaving the estate forest land intact.

These investments, however, differed in different sections of the country. In sections where the prevalent customs of inheritance were unfavourable to the subdividing of land and helped to preserve the farm unit of the peasant, savings were directed accordingly. They were used to strengthen the position of indivisible peasant farm units and to induce the migration of population from country to city.

On the other hand, in sections where the universal custom of inheritance favoured the dividing up of the property in kind into equal shares, savings did not stop the tendency towards continuous subdividing of land. They even strengthened it, and a study of the evolution of land communities which comprise former estates broken up by means of emigrants' savings gives adequate evidence that the buying of the estate land in these sections of the country did

not check rural overpopulation at all. It even aggravated this problem, as migration from country to city had been slowed up and the number of marriages had been increased.

This, of course, does not mean that the estate farms which were broken up should have been preserved. As a matter of fact it only supports the opinion that differences in ideas relating to private ownership are mainly responsible for differences in systems of land tenure. The latter may not only influence the migration from country to city. It may influence even the rate of rural population growth and thus have a twofold effect upon the density of rural population. Finally, what I wish to emphasize is that a readily accessible land supply may have different results according to the system of land tenure and the custom of inheritance which prevails.

So far I have dealt with private land supply only. I do not, however, see why public land supply should have entirely opposite results to the private one. Neither do I think that a readily accessible land supply created under the land reform laws of several East-European States should be an exemption in this respect.

Turning now to these land reforms, which must be classified as social control of land, I would draw your attention to the fact that they have unintentionally become, in some respects, a substitute for emigration. In order to comprehend this it is necessary to realize that, though proceeding on different lines, all these reforms had common political aims. The real intention was to strengthen the Governments of the newly established States lying on the border of Soviet Russia and to help them to avoid being overrun by the bolsheviks. With this idea in mind the Governments of the respective countries looked to the peasants who form the huge majority of their populations. As peasant masses were eager to get as great shares of land as possible, the encouraging of the private land ownership of the peasant at the expense of the estate owners became the method of promoting individualistic ideas and of making people immune against the bolshevist ideas. Thus, in somewhat different ways, a readily accessible land supply, which seemed to be essential, has been created.

You may imagine that the final effects of this social control of land upon the system of land tenure and upon the population structure may prove as different as those of emigration were. It is very difficult to judge the results definitely at this early date. Years may still go by before scientific assessment will be possible.