The End of the Old Order in Rural Austria *

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Jerome Blum's, *The End of the Old Order in Rural Europe*,[1] has received much acclaim, and deservedly so. It is an ambitious undertaking, and it achieves its aim of describing the feudal economy, its functioning and its transformation at the end of the *ancien regime*.

Because of the book's wide geographic coverage, one need not be surprised that even such a learned scholar as Blum commits some oversights in regard to Habsburg Austria. It is to these oversights I would like to turn my attention.

The material condition of the peasantry was, I believe, generally rather bleak from the point of view of a twentieth-century observer. An outmoded legal system, coupled with a high population density in certain places, and a rudimentary agricultural technology confined the peasantry to a low standard of living. In addition, population growth, which accelerated at the middle of the eighteenth century, burdened ever more heavily the peasantry, whose ability to expand production was constrained considerably by the availability of land. As a consequence, conditions were deteriorating. Though the peasant's lot was a hard one, Blum's description of the condition of the Austrian peasantry prior to the late eighteenth-century reforms, nonetheless seems a bit exaggerated.

Thus Blum asserts that peasants in seventeenth and eighteenth century Bohemia were sold by the lords as a matter of course, thereby making the system of subjection resemble a form of slavery.[2] This assertion rests on meagre evidence. Blum cites Stark, who in turn mentions the single case of a locksmith who was released from his subjection as a peasant with his wife and children upon the payment of a fee of 53 Thaler. This locksmith remained indebted to the lord who advanced this sum on his behalf; he promised to repay the debt with

* Austria here refers to the Habsburg Monarchy without Hungary. This collection of lands and kingdoms is often called Cisleithania.

[1] (Princeton University Press, 1978).

[2] Blum, p. 48.

his own work.[3] Blum believes that the form of the arrangement was a mere subterfuge, designed to circumvent the legal system. There is no evidence for this, however. In any event this case concerned a craftsman and his family, not an ordinary peasant. It took place in 1674, not in the eighteenth century, and it is by no means clear to what extent this single event could be considered representative of the rural society of its time. One should add, that Grünberg, who studied Bohemian rural society more thoroughly than perhaps anyone else, did not believe that the peasants were bought and sold.[4] In addition, Stark himself concluded that "several researchers have correctly emphasized that the lords did not have the right to sell their peasants without land". He did believe, however, that there were some exceptions to this, which he then mentioned; yet none of these cases occurred in the eighteenth-century Habsburg Monarchy. In general, the peasants were not considered property: they could not be sold or rented. (That is, a lord could not order a peasant to work for another lord).[5] To be sure, the peasants were bound to the soil, and if the estate was sold they went along with it. Moreover, it was up to the lord to grant permission for leaving the estate and to determine the fee to be paid for it. (This resembled the system of payment citizens of Romania and East Germany have to make upon emigrating from the country more closely than the system of slavery that prevailed in the New World, in which human beings were bought and sold without their consent). In an environment in which peasant complaints were voiced about almost every aspect of the peasant-lord relationship it would be odd if such a system of buying and selling peasants prevailed without hearing peasant complaints about it.

Blum also mentions the lords' right to require three years of compulsory labour service of 14-year-old peasant children who were not needed at home.[6] It should be pointed out that children who were not needed at home posed a considerable burden on the family; finding a place of employment for such children must have meant a considerable relief for the parents. It is for this very reason that entrepreneurs who petitioned for licenses from the government throughout this period stressed the fact that they would employ children, if that was indeed the case, in order to relieve the peasantry from the burden of population pressure. Rather than depicting this system as compulsory it would be fairer to say that the lord had the first choice of children he wished to hire. The reader should know that the children received board and a wage which was

[3] Werner Stark, "Die Abhängigkeitsverhältnisse der gutsherrlichen Bauern Böhmens im 17. und 18. Jahrhundert," *Jahrbücher für Nationalökonomie und Statistik*, 164 (1952), p. 359.

[4] Karl Grünberg, *Die Bauernbefreiung und die Auflösung des gutsherrlich-bauerlichen Verhältnisses in Böhmen, Mähren und Schlesien* (Leipzig: 1893/94), I, p. 28.

[5] Grünberg, I, pp. 3, 28, 87.

[6] Blum, p. 57.

supposed to have been the market wage, and that a child could be exempted from this constraint, and presumably work on another estate, upon the payment of an annual fee of 3 fl. (This was the equivalent of two weeks' adult wages.)

As most modern-day historians of *ancien regime* Europe, Blum, in his description of the labour obligations of the peasantry, exaggerates this burden by citing the upper range rather than the mean. He writes that "a family in Austrian Silesia in the 1840s who had about 42 acres of land had to give its lord each year 108 to 144 days of labor service with a two-animal team, 28 days of hand labor"...[7] The reader is not told, however, that such a family would have been a "millionaire", in contemporary terms of course, in a province in which land was scarcer than in most other ones. We are also not told that members of the family other than the head of household could help perform the obligation. Was such a rent excessive? The debt of peasants in Cisleithania at the time was of the order of 69 million days per annum.[8] This meant a per capita obligation of about 5 days, or, say, 25 days per peasant family. In other words, the labour obligations were, on average, far less excessive than historians have hitherto led us to believe. In contrast, Blum tells us that on at least one estate peasants had to work the entire week for the lord.[9] Are we to think that these peasants died shortly after commencing their services?

To be sure, labour services per capita were declining after 1775 on account of the increase in population and the government-imposed ceiling on the rents the peasants paid. In 1748, for instance the average number of robot obligations in Moravia per adult male was closer to 40 days per annum.[10]

Blum errs in claiming that during the spring and summer peasants worked 19-hour days, starting to work at 3 A.M. and ending at 10 P.M.[11] The human body could not have kept up such an effort for long. To be sure, when natural calamity threatened the harvest the peasants even worked through the night. The workday, however, was generally much closer to 10 hours a day. That, at least is the length prescribed in the law of 1775. Even prior to that law, the stipulation to work from sunrise to sunset included two hours' rest period for meals.[12]

Blum suggests that after the labour obligations of the peasants were limited by the central government some lords found themselves in the position of having demanded less services than the ones stipulated by law. These lords, he claims, raised their rents to the new ceiling. This is false. In fact, the law stated

[7] BLUM, p. 74.

[8] JOHN KOMLOS, *The Habsburg Monarchy as a Customs Union: Economic Development in Austria-Hungary in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 236.

[9] BLUM, p. 71.

[10] GRÜNBERG, I, p. 74.

[11] BLUM, p. 112.

[12] GRÜNBERG, I, p. 180; II, p. 13.

that in such cases the peasants were to choose between their old and new obligations.[13] Since the peasants had to choose between the old and the new set of obligations as a package, they might have chosen the greater of the two in terms of labour services, if it offered them some compensating advantages.

Blum asserts that the law of September, 1781 "established the procedure, which included the free services of a government attorney, by which a peasant could lodge a complaint against his lord".[14] This is a misconception. This right was, in fact, never taken away from the peasants, and the whole XVIIIth century is full of such peasant suits against their landlords.[15]

The lords increased rents considerably during the second half of the eighteenth century. Blum explains this phenomenon by the "opening of new... markets .../and by/ the increased demands of the seignoirs. They needed more money to maintain their scale of living in an era of rising prices and more luxurious tastes. The heightened exploitation of their peasants presented itself as an obvious way to increase their income".[16] This seems to contradict Blum's subsequent assertion that the cash income of those lords who sent goods to markets increased.[17] Agricultural prices were rising, after all, both absolutely as well as relative to industrial prices. Consequently the lords would have been able not only to maintain but also to increase their standard of living even if they had not increased rents. Or are we to suppose that only those lords increased rents who were not integrated into the market? Then why would they want to produce more grain?

A much simpler explanation presents itself once we consider that population growth, that is, the increase in the labour/land ratio, meant an increase in the marginal product of land. Basic economic principles would lead one to suppose that the lords, by increasing rents, were attempting to capture this increase in the marginal product of the land they were renting to the peasants.

Blum states that during the famine of 1770/71 in Bohemia "250,000 people or about 14% of the population, are said to have died".[18] He cites Grünberg, who, however, put it differently. He wrote that Pelzel "gives an obviously exaggerated figure of 250,000 people as having died in Bohemia".[19] To be sure, Pelzel does mention that 250,000 people died as a result of the famine without presenting any evidential basis for this estimate. (Even if that had been true it would have been 10% of the population.) Other estimates range between

[13] Grünberg, I, p. 225.
[14] Blum, p. 88.
[15] Grünberg, I, p. 30.
[16] Blum, p. 72.
[17] Blum, p. 163.
[18] Blum, p. 147.
[19] Grünberg, I, p. 201.

170,000 and 200,000.[20] According to the contemporary census Bohemian population decreased by 180,000 between 1771 and 1772. 10,000 of this might have been due, however, to a fall in the birth rate. Hence as far as one can tell 7% of the population perished on account of the subsistence crisis of 1771/72. This is still a great toll, but, in percentage terms, one-half of that reported by Blum.

Other details in Pelzel's account of the famine, however did not find their way into subsequent accounts. Yet these details contradict the narrow view of the *ancien regime* as an exploitative society in which the aristocracy was callously indifferent to the plight of the peasantry. Pelzel wrote that a nobleman fed 600 hungry people in Prage, and that a rich Jew distributed 100 metzen of rye and half as much flour. He also mentioned that half of the peasants would have died of hunger if their lords had not advanced them grain and money until they themselves had no more to give. He states that the military in Prague gave flour to the population, that Joseph II sent thousands of measures of grain and rice to Prague and that Maria Theresia lowered the tax burden of the peasantry by 15% and advanced the kingdom two million florins in cash in order to feed the destitute.[21]

In a different vein, Blum cites the English traveller, Paget, on the miserable condition of the Hungarian peasant's housing. In fact, Paget had sketches of underground houses.[22] Such houses, however, were generally not used for dwelling in Hungary except by shepherds or by people living outside the village community. The ground water, alone, would have made such houses impossible in most places.[23] The drawing in the picture leaves no doubt that the housing to which Paget refers is not in a village, and therefore could not have been representative. Blum unfortunately overlooks Paget's own observations that in some of the villages he was surprised by the "comfortable appearance of everything." In fact, he remarked that "the storeroom in one cottage had such a quantity of cheese, lard, fruits, dried herbs, and pickles I never saw."[24]

With regard to the universal military conscription Blum states that "so many non-peasants had received exemptions that the burden rested upon the sons of the peasantry".[25] Even without such exemptions, the burden would have rested

[20] F. Palacky, "Gradation der Bevölkerung Böhmens seit den lezten 60 Jahren," *Monatschrift der Gesellschaft des vaterländischen Museums in Böhmen*, 3 (January, 1829), pp. 188-205, p. 196.

[21] Franz Martin Pelzel, *Kurzgefasste Geschichte der Böhmen* (Prag, 1774), pp. 621-623.

[22] Blum, pp. 179, 180.

[23] I am indebted for this information to Mr. Gyula Benda of the Ethnographic Museum in Budapest.

[24] John Paget, *Hungary and Transylvania: with Remarks on their Condition Social, Political and Economical* (2nd ed. London: 1855, First published in 1839), I, pp. 282-293.

[25] Blum, p. 68.

upon the peasants, since they comprised the largest share of the population. Most of the exemptions, however, had economic motivation. Hence skilled workers, miners, and factory workers exempted in the late eighteenth century in order to foster economic development. One might have mentioned that peasants in the possession of land, as well as their only sons, were also exempt as were those shorter than 165 cm.[26] Although noblemen were exempt till 1848, in Hungary many noblemen had become mere peasants in the course of time, and were, in fact, drafted.

In sum, Blum's description of the Austrian peasantry's condition paints an unflattering and unnecessarily harsh picture of Habsburg rural society prior to the reform legislations of the 1770s and 1780s. The above lines are meant only to correct certain misconceptions which mar an otherwise worthy effort, and should not be construed as a criticism of the level of scholarship of the remainder of the book. As the reader will notice, most of the observations refer to the part of the work pertaining to the pre-reform era.

[26] Kriegsarchiv, Vienna, Hübler, Handschriften, vol. 2, 1749, p. 172.