

**Rural History in Europe**

Vol. 1–10

Gérard Béaur et al. (ed.)  
**Property Rights, Land Markets and  
Economic Growth in the European  
Countryside (13th–20th Centuries)**

Brepols, Turnhout 2013, 535 p., € 71,-

Vicente Pinilla (ed.)  
**Markets and Agricultural  
Change in Europe from the 13th  
to the 20th century**

Brepols, Turnhout 2009, 300 p., € 62,-

Erich Landsteiner et al. (ed.)  
**Agrosystems and Labour Relations  
in European Rural Societies**

Brepols, Turnhout 2010, 218 p., € 61,-

Nadine Vivier (ed.)  
**The State and Rural Societies  
Policy and Education in Europe,  
1750–2000**

Brepols, Turnhout 2008, 278 p. € 63,50

Rosa Congost, Rui Santos (ed.)  
**Contexts of Property in Europe**  
 The Social Embeddedness  
 of Property Rights in Land  
 in Historical Perspective

Brepols, Turnhout 2011, 285 p., € 66,-

Mats Olsson, Patrick Svensson (ed.)  
**Growth and Stagnation in European  
 Historical Agriculture**

Brepols, Turnhout 2011, 307 p., € 71,-

Anne-Lise Head-König (ed.)  
**Inheritance Practices, Marriage  
 Strategies and Household Formation  
 in European Rural Societies**

Brepols, Turnhout 2012, 337 p., € 72,-

Peter Moser, Tony Varley (ed.)  
**Integration through Subordination**  
 The Politics of Agricultural  
 Modernisation in Industrial Europe

Brepols, Turnhout 2013, 320 p., € 72,-

Bas van Bavel, Erik Thoen (ed.)  
**Rural Societies and Environments  
 at Risk**

Ecology, Property Rights and Social  
 Organisation in Fragile Areas  
 (Middle Ages-Twentieth century)

Brepols, Turnhout 2013, 329 p., € 72,-

John Broad, Anton Schuurman (ed.)  
**Wealth and Poverty in European  
 Rural Societies from the Sixteenth  
 to the Nineteenth Century**

Brepols, Turnhout 2014, 254 p., € 62,-

Between 2005 and 2008, with the support of the *European COST Action 35 Progressore*, a large group of mainly European rural historians got involved in diverse several days' workshops all over the continent. Their aim was to bring together and debate research on a vast array of carefully chosen topics, in order to provide keys "to unlock the changes experienced by

present-day European rural societies in the light of their historical experience". The result of this large undertaking is the ten books series that Brepols has published between 2008 and 2014. Addressing the whole series in a single review is an almost impossible task: we are talking about 3110 pages, written by 19 editors and a really long list of authors. Therefore I shall just give a very short view of their contents and then proceed to a global assessment of the series.

*Property Rights, Land Markets and Economic Growth*, the first although not the first published book of the series, explores as its title states, the issues of property rights and land markets in order to arrive at insights into long-term economic change in Europe. Most of its chapters dialogue, directly or implicitly, with neo-institutional views in economics and their generalisations about definition of property rights, transaction costs, moral hazard and other key concepts: they suggest that a wide variety of causative explanations must be taken into account to shape a convincing view of how property rights and land markets have interacted in their evolution and conditioned economic growth. The second book, edited by Vicente Pinilla, explores how the involvement of rural populations and communities in different kinds of markets, especially food and other agrarian products, has influenced the management of rural land in Europe. Most of its chapters focus on the forces driving agricultural change between the Middle Ages and the present days and coincide in the relevance of what could be termed "external" forces, urban and long distance markets, to create the incentives to change in the management of rural land. Market integration and mercantilisation of agriculture was, via specialization, the main force behind European agricultural revolutions during early modern times. *Agrosystems and Labour Relations in*

*European Rural Societies*, the third volume in the series, is organised around the concept of agrosystems, described as “production systems based on the ecological and socioeconomic relations involved in the reproduction of rural societies at multiple levels”. In order to access these complex systems, the authors use labour relations which are convincingly shown to be the central link between production and reproduction. They address their traits in different periods and societies and try to evaluate the factors behind their resilience in order to approach the future of peasant family farming. The fourth book of the series, edited by Nadine Vivier, deals with a shorter time-span (18th to 20th centuries) and addresses the State-building process and its impact on agriculture, dealing with the various aspects of rural life in which the State intervened: in fact many of the contributions try to follow the growing range of agrarian-rural issues which became State matters and were regulated as well as the ways in which agrarian policy was institutionalised and the actors (social movements, bureaucrats, politicians) of the institutionalisation and its major historical turns. *Contexts of Property in Europe* gathers a long collection of essays that analyse historically social contexts in which property rights are embedded – social relations, power and agency, political institutions, culture – to understand how landed resources have been actually appropriated. Like the first volume, the authors of this book address the issues raised by the theory of property rights, as developed by neo-institutionalism, but go beyond it through the incorporation of other social processes and factors in the explanation of property institutions. The sixth book in the series, edited by Olsson and Svensson, focuses on measuring and explaining the growth of agricultural production, especially food since that was its main output, and productivity indicators in Europe.

Most of the chapters deal with the last three centuries (although there is one on Medieval Flanders) and many undertake regional analysis of productivity, the only way to reconstruct reliable data on inputs and outputs, before the 20th century. The book displays the relevant advances which have been made in this field of agrarian output quantification in the last decades and produces hence a useful state of the art. *Inheritance Practices, Marriage Strategies and Household Formation* tackles the complex links among inheritance practices and legislation, marriage decisions and family strategies in a varied sample of European regions, trying to identify inheritance patterns and their correspondence with household structures. Its chapters cover rural Europe from the 17th to the 20th century, ranging from semi-subsistence and seignorial societies to highly market-oriented economies, and reveal both the difficulty to come up with broad generalisations and the existence, nonetheless, of clear correlations and explanatory factors. The eighth book, edited by Moser and Varley, studies the role of states as agents of modernisation, exploring why, how and with what results European states have striven to transform their agricultural sectors in the last two centuries. Its authors attribute great importance to the modernisation models and their overall cultural and political dependence on the industrial organisational trends, a dependence that has often caused unintended effects since living resources (plants and animals) are not passive objects and react in interconnected and often unforeseen ways. The latter, the interconnectedness of agricultural production is the subject of the ninth volume of the series, *Rural Societies and Environments at Risk*, which discusses the relationship between ecology and rural society in fragile environments from the Middle Ages until the 20th century. Fragile environments (poor soils, aridity

or their location in mountain areas, near the sea or in severe climatic conditions) is in this case the key concept of a book that analyses how societies coped with this vulnerability, especially through the definition of property and exploitation rights, which were not however independent variables but institutions conditioned by political and social factors. The final volume of the series, so far, is *Wealth and Poverty in European Rural Societies from the Sixteenth to the Nineteenth Century*, a book that intends to shed new light on old problems of wealth, poverty and material culture in rural societies, going beyond the well studied geographic spaces of North-western Europe to include historical experiences in the Mediterranean world, Central Europe and Scandinavia. It covers as well an ample range of approaches and indicators to living standards and lifestyles and aims at a nuanced analysis of wealth distribution and access to diverse material and immaterial goods.

The Brepols series contains therefore a wide series of topics, authors, methodologies and concepts. Despite its width it has certain biases. If we look at the national origin of the authors, and to the geographic focus of their essays which in history are often connected, we can find straight away that there is a relative over-representation of certain European countries and a clear under-representation of others: most of Eastern Europe is not well covered – especially Poland, Russia and the Balkans; France, despite the fact that the general editor of the series is a French professor, Gérard Béaur, has a much smaller presence than the one expected from the country with the largest association of rural history in Europe; there are few essays on Italian rural societies, a symptom most probably of the decay of a long tradition of rural studies in this Mediterranean country. When considering the topics, indexes reflect a very low weight of political and

cultural history: peasant movements and parties do hardly appear; the role of the peasantry in major political upheavals is not dealt with; representations of rural societies are almost absent. Readers will miss a study on the words used in different languages to talk about rural society: I have referred to “peasants” but authors hesitate, when writing in English, between “farmer” and “peasant” and very many other words, both in English and in their vernacular languages.

However these problems can only be identified precisely because of the existence of the series, that is to say, because for the first time we have a collaborative and transnational project that addresses rural transformations in Europe in the long run. The series is the final result of an ambitious undertaking led by a supranational academic work-team, which has arrived at its final output, thanks to face-to-face workshops and long hours of refining and coordinating texts via e-mails. In doing so, it has to reflect the relative strength of rural history in different countries and its mainstream leanings in terms of methodology and subjects. Therefore even the partiality of the series has a formative value. The same can be said of the different introductions to all the volumes, all of them really excellent, that analyse the concepts around which the common work has been built and enable the reader to understand how these concepts work for historians, how they can help them to explain and understand past and present societies, and the problems they raise when applied to different historical periods and cultural areas. They are as meaningful for the theories they refer to as for those they ignore.

None of the issues dealt with in the series is a matter of concern just for the specialist: most of the chapters manage to convince the reader of the relevance of their subject precisely because they address theoretical issues that transcend

their specific historical topic. Studying past rural societies raises problems and outcomes that are very relevant for our societies, obviously for the rural ones (if such a separate entity has a substantial meaning in our days in Europe) and for society as a whole. European rural historians, once they have shown in this series their capacity to overcome intellectual, linguistic and even political frontiers to construct a fertile transnational dialogue, should now go ahead and start bridging the gap between their discipline and the wider public, not at all insensitive to our professional concerns.

*Juan Pan-Montojo (Madrid)*