

PEASANTS AND PARLIAMENTS: AGRARIAN REFORM IN LATER EIGHTEENTH CENTURY EUROPE

Brendan McElroy*

June 8, 2023

FROM Montesquieu to North and Weingast, the literature tells us that representative institutions in pre-industrial Europe fostered economic development by shielding property from governmental predation. This interpretation is so hegemonic that even critics of the assertion that early parliaments as such caused growth gloss them as economically benign “constraints on the executive.”

Peasants and Parliaments argues that this influential account has at least two fatal flaws. First, representative institutions in medieval and early modern Europe did far more than constrain the monarch, and their other functions are equally relevant to an assessment of their developmental contribution. Second, constraints on monarchical power were not always an economic boon, since many of the property rights parliamentary elites sought to protect—among them serfdom, patrimonial office-holding, and guild monopolies—impeded growth. If we are to accurately evaluate the contribution of early parliaments to long-run growth, we must be able to explain why elites sometimes cooperated with, and sometimes resisted, the throne’s attempts to eliminate “bad” or anti-developmental property rights. I do this on the example of eighteenth century agrarian reforms in Central and Eastern Europe, which sought to dismantle serfdom and reorder the lord-peasant relationship.

I consider two main outcomes of interest. First, why did agrarian reform in some places involve negotiation and collaboration between the throne and landed elites, whereas elsewhere the government simply tried to impose its will upon a recalcitrant nobility? Second, why were some reform edicts actually implemented on the ground, whereas others were

*Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Toronto, e-mail: b.mcelroy@utoronto.ca.

dead letters from the moment of promulgation? Self-evidently, the answer to both questions turns in part on the *distribution of preferences* among elites, and so we need to understand why some landowners opposed state intervention in the lord-peasant relationship whereas others championed it. Less obviously, perhaps, cooperation between the throne and landed elites—not only in designing new agrarian policies but also in implementing them—depended on what I call the *decision-making efficiency* of elites’ representative institutions, meaning their capacity to take and to enforce collective decisions which bind members and their constituents.

These two lines of inquiry—exploring the determinants of elite preferences over agrarian reform and identifying the institutional bases of decision-making efficiency—give structure to *Peasants and Parliaments*. The book’s empirical core is a controlled comparison of reform processes and outcomes in the Russian Baltic province of Livonia and the Danish-ruled duchies of Schleswig and Holstein (1795–1805), based on archival research carried out in Estonia, Germany, Latvia, and Russia. I reconstruct the legislative process in the Livonian Diet and show that certain institutional attributes—simple majority voting, centralized agenda control, and delegation to a powerful speaker and directorial committee—can account for the success of cooperation between the throne and the Estates in Livonia, and their absence, in turn, for the breakdown of cooperation in Schleswig-Holstein. Using an original dataset of elite preferences over reform, I show how economic interests, family loyalties, and political allegiances structured intra-elite conflict over serf emancipation, leading to divergent outcomes in Schleswig-Holstein and Livonia. Finally, turning from the design of new agrarian policies to their realization, I use novel district- and village-level data to examine the implementation of labor service contracts in Prussian Silesia during the 1780s and 1790s.

The book’s final chapter extends the scope of my theory in several directions, bringing the story of agrarian change in Livonia and Schleswig-Holstein up to the middle of the nineteenth century and testing whether my findings about decision-making efficiency (and its institutional correlates) apply to other classes of “bad” property rights.

Peasants and Parliaments shows that conventional dichotomies—“absolute” versus “limited” monarchy, “extractive” versus “inclusive” institutions—are more a hindrance than an aid to understanding the political economy of development in pre-industrial Europe. The book also unearths the non-institutional, personalistic foundations of state capacity in early modern Europe, demonstrating that a government’s ability to implement its policies depended not so much on the existence of a rigid bureaucratic hierarchy as on the social structure of the ruling elites. In this sense, my findings bring the conventional political science story of European state formation closer to recent historical scholarship, which emphasizes the persistence of noble power in the age of “absolutist” state building and the synergy between aristocratic power and state power. Ultimately, my analysis suggests

that the developmental state literature, with its attention to linkages between state officials and the private sector, the “non-bureaucratic elements of bureaucracy” (Peter Evans), and the strategic use of rents to induce entrepreneurial behavior, offers a far better theoretical framework for understanding developmental success stories and failures in early modern Europe than the dominant liberal-institutionalist perspective.