

# Peasant adaptivity and the power of the market: A long term study <sup>1/</sup>

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## Preliminary remarks

Social anthropologists doing field work in peasant societies in the initial stage unavoidably experience some difficulties in grasping the niceties of the techniques used by these peasants for cultivating their fields. Unlike naive observers who in short time will have a lot of ideas how these peasants could fare much better if only they used the techniques the naive observer knows from his own culture, social anthropologists have been trained to try their best first of all to understand their informants' techniques, motivations, and the reasons behind them. After a more or less lengthy period of observing and questioning the informants and if possible even of taking part in their work – as a rule one year is considered to be the minimum required in order to have the experience of the full agricultural cycle – the anthropologist may have learned enough to be full of admiration for the conventional wisdom of his informants. Reading the published results, we cannot but be impressed by these apparently well-adapted techniques.

This was the situation in the past. During the last decennia outward forces put most of these traditional peasant societies under pressure to "modernise," to produce more and cheaper in order to fully participate in a modern market economy or at least to provide food for a growing number of people. It seemed as if for various reasons all over the "third" world the carrying capacity of the areas which for hundreds of years had been sufficient to provide food for the local population became exhausted. Some peasants were successful in modernising, some tried and failed, and some (for some time at least) tried their best to resist. Some even could be persuaded to venture on new paths which in the end proved rather fatal. This situation gave rise to a new kind of studies trying to find out why some peasants were willing or able to "adapt," while others were not.

The first studies, putting the economic aspect into the foreground, led to the conclusion that there are – in principle – three strata in a peasant society: a lower one which cannot afford the risk to experiment with new techniques, an upper one which is so well-off that it does not see any necessity to do so, and a middle one which not

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<sup>1/</sup> Quotation: Löffler, Lorenz G. 2002. In *Aussaaten, Ethnologische Schriften*, 71–117. Zürich, Switzerland: Argonaut-Verlag. Comment: See the list of publications for details. This paper and the list of publications are available as pdf files on this webpage: [www.supras.biz/literature/loeffler.html](http://www.supras.biz/literature/loeffler.html).

only is able to afford it but also willing to try in order hopefully to improve the situation. Sometimes the upper stratum is lacking, sometimes the lower one, a hypothesis useful for explaining the first puzzling results according to which it might be either the richer or the poorer peasants which were willing to take the risk of introducing "innovations." All that was needed, was to mobilise the responsive stratum, the others would follow suit once they saw the success of those who had followed the advice of the development experts.

As soon as it turned out that also this was not the whole truth, that some peasants resorted to their old ways once the experts left, while others ended up by ruining their resources, it became obvious that the old unsettled debate between "formalists" and "institutionalists" had to be taken up again. Was it that peasants, within the limits of their knowledge, behave in principle like any other entrepreneur in a capitalist society, or was it that they followed another set of primary values which prevented them to act in a way we would call "(economically) rational"? The institutionalists never had really succeeded in providing a reliable analytical frame. Political structure, social organisation and even religion might provide for "institutions." Due to the "development problems" of Western societies which more and more surged to the surface of consciousness, anthropologists added a new idea on the side of the institutions: perhaps traditional peasant societies put ecological considerations (sustainability of their resources) above those of short term economic profitability – an idea reviving the cherished ethnological tradition of believing in the superior wisdom of men not estranged from nature. In order not just to maintain this hypothesis as a possibility but to try to give some more convincing evidence, long term studies would be required.

Not even twenty years after we had been told convincingly that the Bambuti kept their forests sacred, venerated them and thereby would keep them up eternally, we were told that in the meantime they had changed their mind, had bought motor saws to cut their trees down and sell them in order to make some money which they apparently thought more useful. The result of modern brainwashing? Had we forgotten that in pre-capitalist times men had killed out many hunting animals? Instead of painstakingly pursuing single animals, they spared a lot of trouble while providing themselves with heaps of roasted meat by using fire to burn down vast stretches of country – thereby heavily contributing to the desertification of, for instance, the Sahara. Maybe they could not foresee the bad results, but so did our modernisers, both in the capitalist West and the socialist East.

Animal and insect species do not fare better: if only they can, they will multiply and at the same time kill and eat up all they can get hold of, so as to exhaust their

resources, not considering the unavoidable consequence that their own species will have to nearly die out afterward for want of food. Mankind might have the superior wisdom not to follow their example. Today we do know that some forms of societal behaviour cannot but prove devastating in the long run; some people try to react accordingly, but the majority (among them presidents of highly civilised nations with a lot of power) do not care at all. Why should powerless illiterate leaders of traditional societies have been more enlightened? How did they come to know? By age-long experience? If yes, any rapid development is liable to prove fatal.

On the other hand, there is good reason to believe that it is not contributing to survival when you fossilise your culture and stubbornly stick to the ways of the forefathers in a changing world. Far better chances have those cultures where the individual flexibility escapes social control. The fact is that most of these escapes must end up in a failure, but a very few may prove successful enough for others to follow the example and thereby pave the way for a (in their judgement) better future, that is a way better adapted to the changed circumstances. But there is really no guaranty at all that this new way is better adapted to the natural environment. Hence it must be clear that "a changing world" here cannot but mean new social (political, economical, medical, cultural) conditions in most cases imposed from outside.

But we should not, at the same time, exclude the possibility of internal changes as long as deviant social behaviour is possible. "Deviant" here should not be misunderstood as a derogatory term, not as a term disqualifying "misbehaving" marginalised elements of the society. On the contrary, those with the best possibilities to defy hitherto culturally accepted ways normally are persons of power, especially when they are not elected into these positions but either inherit them or, even better, are appointed to them by some outer authority which welcomes such changes in attitude.

As every development expert knows: once the support of the "leading men" (also called opinion makers, gatekeepers, etc.) is won, one may be rather sure that the local people will not put up much resistance any longer. This is why the hypothesis of economic strata mentioned above must really lead astray as long as it disregards the local power structure. Economic rationality is one thing, political structure is another. To be sure: a peasant is keen on having a good harvest, but when he is in constant danger of losing his life while cultivating his field, he will have to shun work in his fields and thereby to accept a bad yield. The situation may not be as dramatic as that. When still a student, I experienced the situation that the peasant for whom I worked temporarily sent his minor son to church on Sunday to donate some money and to placate the priest because our man thought it necessary to work in his fields even on

this day, though by the rules of God it was a sin. Just give a little bit more spiritual conviction to the priest, and our man will accept the unavoidable loss due to being forbidden to work when economic rationality demands it. I am not in a position to tell the amount of profit lost in modern industry due to this Christian convention still in force, but it must be quite considerable. I mention these examples only in order to demonstrate that by "power" I do not just mean brutal force. Any convention internalised by the people ("irrational" as it may be) can prove even superior to brutal force. This implicates that even the politically powerful cannot deviate *ad libitum* from the traditional norms as otherwise they may run the risk of losing their legitimisation.

So far, no social research has been able to delimit the amount of deviation possible or not. To be sure anthropologists had the sad opportunity to analyse such extreme situations where the outer powers enforcing change were so violent that all conventional norms had to break down. To these outer political and economic forces we may add microbes and doctors, missionaries and engineers, tourists, devils and so on. If under all these onslaughts the old culture is ruined or adaption goes astray, nobody is to blame, neither the old wise men nor the young rascals who defy them, neither the exploiters nor the helpers. As a result, such situations are really not well suited to tell us anything about the adaptivity of peasants. Moreover, "adaption" here can mean all and nothing at the same time.

By "adaptivity" I'll therefore not understand the faculty to make a living whatever the circumstances, but, since I am concerned with traditional peasants, their ability to use their resources in such a way that it is economically "rational" while at the same time ensuring that in the long run these resources keep their productivity. Phrased otherwise: my question is whether peasants are able to acquire and to develop in a few generations the necessary knowledge and techniques for achieving the highest possible amount of sustainable productivity. Are they able to find the optimal balance between short term economic exploitation and long term preservation of their resources?

I suspect that my answer already lurks in my phrasing of the question. When doing my first field work (in 1955-57), the result was as depicted in my first paragraph. Subsequent historical studies led me to the conclusion that even prior to the extension of the colonial rule to these hill peasants some swidden cultivators (most probably not the Mru I had studied) had ruined the fertility of the hills bordering the plains in some areas. Some of the forces which unavoidably push the people in such a direction could be experienced among the Mru too. There can be really no doubt that, regarding traditional techniques, swidden cultivation is the best

possible way of using the available resources in these hills, and people did it at their best. But it also implies the possibility that these techniques are used in such a way that the soils will be run down, even when (or just because) new, hitherto untouched, areas are still available. Whenever these new areas are not available any longer, destruction continues – what else could you expect when people lack the land resources to allow the soils the necessary time to regain their fertility?

Much to the dismay of some colleagues who just tried to defend the rationality of swidden cultivation against government attacks, I foresaw the demise of swidden cultivation in the Chittagong hills, even before I started the historical studies. Still, I too was infuriated when the government went as far as to outlaw it. It survived, nevertheless, longer than I had anticipated, that is, in parts up to the present times. But by now people do know that they will have to take to new forms of using their exhausted soils, even though they radically resent it, since it means market integration and thereby not only the ultimate loss of their self-sufficiency but also the destruction of their egalitarian social structure.

Leaving apart the details, all sympathy with the people could not prevent me to accept the fact that their system of cultivating the soils they were so proud of was, in the long run, not an enduring solution and, even worse, had not been able in the past, when untouched land resources had been still available, to ensure sustainability. Most probably the sinners in the past had been Marma, a people who had been used to the cultivation of rice fields in the plains, with no long standing experience of swidden cultivation, and who by political circumstances were driven out of their former possessions into the refuge of the hills. These ill-fated people, still now day-dreaming of possessions in the plains which would make them well-to-do, just could not qualify as a prove that traditional swidden cultivators did not know to preserve the sustainability of their resources.

As a consequence, I did not publish my materials on this question which really did not provide any clear answer. Let us not impute deficiencies on traditional cultures we are not in a position to analyse thoroughly. On the other hand, the same principle should prevent us from attributing the above-mentioned "superior wisdom" to traditional societies. I see no reason why they should have been able, in former times, to clearly perceive the problems of sustainability, to find a solution and to put it into force as an inviolable rule.

Studies on optimal foraging have shown us that the techniques for procuring food can be called rational insofar as input-output relations tend to be maximised. As a consequence local resources may be overexploited temporarily. The resulting lower rate of productivity will prompt the foragers to move to a nearby locality, behaving

there the same way as before, but at the same time allowing the resources in the former locality to recover. Unless hampered by outer circumstances, swidden farmers – as far as we know – will behave according to the same principles. But what happens when the freedom to move does not exist any longer? Quite obviously, the resources will be subject to increasing depletion, so that those who feed on them will have to starve, unless there is (in view of the run-down resource level) a considerable reduction in population numbers or a lasting change in the techniques of exploitation. As we know, even the invention of agriculture has been attributed to such pressures. We may doubt this, but there should be little doubt that the spread of these new techniques was intimately connected with such pressures.

In order to cope with them the people concerned must not only be able to analyse the reasons for the failure of their system, but also to have the ingenuity to devise or adapt the appropriate techniques for a sustainable use of the remaining resources or, even better, to improve their amount, for instance by allowing their old resources to recover – a process which normally the people cannot afford unless in the meantime new resources can be tapped. It is this ability to cope with the situation which, for the purpose of this paper, I'll call "adaptivity." It needs a length of time to realise it. But how long? A few years, some decennia or even more? Most probably, these questions lead astray. The answer may depend on how fundamental the problem is. Add to this that, especially in modern times, the people concerned may be offered new solutions by foreign advice or forced to adopt them by superior order. In order to simplify the question we may for the moment restrict ourselves (not unlike the studies on optional foraging) to situations where the people had to devise the new measures by themselves. In order to do so, long term observations will not be sufficient. We need long term records. These, however, are not readily available.

Uninfluenced by my questions, more than thirty years ago, my father did a historical study on a village in Western Thuringia, central Germany. Due to political circumstances the result could not be published. It was but a few years ago that I got access to these data. In the beginning my endeavour was limited to the aim of publishing these data. The resulting book now contains more than 300 pages and is a companion volume to another historical study by the same author, more than 800 pages on the neighbouring small town against which the villagers for hundreds of years tried to defend their old rights. While reading into these data I came to realise that they provide (though not meant to do so) a reasonably well-documented study of peasants' adaptivity not only over decennia but for several hundreds of years.<sup>2/</sup> My present objective is to present the results as I interpret them. Since I must be

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<sup>2/</sup> Sigmar Löffler. 2002. Geschichte des Dorfes Langenhain. Erfurt – Waltershausen: Ulenspiegel-Verlag.

selective, I may over- or underrate some facts. Other studies of a similar nature may confirm or refute my conclusions.

## **The setting**

Village and town (320 m above sea level) are situated on the north-eastern fringes of the Thuringian forest, a chain of mountains peaking at a height of 800 to 1000 m. In front of the central chain there is a belt of sand stone hills bordered by a small chain of Muschelkalk (Triassic shell limestone). At rather regular intervals the whole formation is transversed by rivulets, coming down from the mountains, cutting through the sand stone hills and in the plains joining into a small river running north-westward. These "plains" as I'll call them are not really flat but nearly always softly undulating, mostly used as agricultural land and even when not directly diluvial or alluvial soil at any rate more fertile than the dales of the rivulets between the hills. The town is situated immediately before the Muschelkalk ridge, on one spur of which a castle, towering above the town, was built at the end of the 12th century. The regional central power, at first the landgraves, later the dukes, sometimes resided here in person, but most of the time the castle served as a subcentre for the administration. From a document of 1209 it can be taken that the status of a town was conferred upon this settlement at that time; from its name it can be concluded that the settlement most probably was founded by immigrants from Franconia in the 8th century. That is, it was founded rather lately in comparison with the villages lying nearer to the river. They, even if not in continuity, had been populated since the early Neolithic ages. Due to its poor soils and meagre water resources, the place where the town was situated was definitely not first choice for peasants.

The village (for brevity's sake I'll call it "L") lies in one of the dales and stretches along the rivulet with fields right and left on the more or less soft slopes of the surrounding sand stone hills, that is at best third choice for peasants equipped with simple ploughs. It may have been founded around the year 1000, but there is no document to prove this. Judging from prehistoric relics, it would seem that the dale had been uninhabited for thousands of years before the foundation of L, but there are traces of an even older settlement dating from early Neolithic times.

It is unknown how far the inhabitants of this settlement in the forest at that time practised a simple swidden cultivation. Yields cannot have been high, and thus their main subsistence source must have been hunting and gathering, not quite unlike another thousand years before, the Mesolithic age, from which a small heap of artefacts has been procured from a limestone slope in this valley. Meagre as the evidence is, this makes sense. Once agricultural products became the dominant type

of food, and as long as peasants had a choice where to settle, they would have been ill-advised if they had tried to work hard for poor yields when all they needed was just to move some 5 km in order to settle in the more fertile plains. If they wanted to hunt in the forest, they still could do so easily since it was quite near.

But why then did men come back at the beginning of what we call the second millennium? Did they have to move out of the plains which in the meantime and because of the limited techniques available at that time had become "overcrowded"? Or did they come from elsewhere in search of new land and had to contend themselves with the possibilities in the forest? Though we have a few indications only, to answer the questions is not very difficult.

The forest already at that time had ceased to be no-man's land, it was so-to-say state property under the control of the landgrave, in part given as fief to representatives of the local aristocracy. Illegal settlers in the forest would have been driven out soon. (There is a document to this end.) The landgrave and his vassals had taxes (in form of a hereditary rent) collected from the villages. Villagers no longer had any right to hunt (hunting was the privilege of the aristocracy), and villagers had even to pay for a permit to collect wood from the forests. Still, comparatively speaking, the forests contributed little to the income of the aristocracy. Nobody really needed all those forests. The best way to make them a little bit more productive was to settle in peasants, thereby increasing the number of villages which could be taxed.

However, it seems that the peasants of the plains were not very enthusiastic about this project and remained rather reluctant to move in. This, at any rate, is the conclusion we can draw from the fact that settlers were granted special privileges insofar as they had to pay less taxes and were freed from a number of socage burdens. The amount of land granted to them (about 17 ha per settler) by far surpassed the size normally possessed by villagers in the plains.

The number of families to be settled was limited. The area was divided into sixty long stripes crossing the rivulet (I'll call them estates), and every settler became the proprietor of one estate and at the same time a tax payer of his own, that is, his property was not sublet to him by some local vassal who collected the taxes from the whole village. These special rights were preserved when some landgrave, for the sake of the spiritual welfare of his deceased wife, in 1286 presented the village "with all rights and accessories" to a convent founded by one of his ancestors. According to medieval customs, this did not really mean a change in the villagers' rights and duties, the overlordship just passed from the landgrave to the convent which, first of all, was interested in the taxes and the other obligatory services, and it seems that the convent didn't even care for the village church.

After the reformation, when most of the monasteries and convents were shut down, the village reverted under the dominance of the secular power, now represented by a duke. Again and again some duke (and his administration) tried to undermine the special rights of the villagers. Sometimes the latter even had to defend their "liberties" before lower and higher courts, and still in the 17th and 18th century the village leaders stubbornly refused to render services which never had been imposed on the villagers in former times, even if they had to suffer jail for their refusal. This is why we are so well informed about these liberties. It was only after the bourgeois revolution of 1848 that all remnants of medieval rights and duties could be abolished; and although some hampered the necessary progress, the villagers even then were reluctant to get rid of them. Their privileges had lost any practical value, but they still had the feeling that they, against all others around them, were "free men."

One might assume that due to the comparatively large area granted to the settlers, coupled with these special rights and lower tax rates, the villagers must have fared rather well economically. Maybe they did so in the beginning. There is no document to prove this, but in favour of this assumption I can adduce the fact that in the beginning of the 13th century the village could afford a quite remarkable Romanesque church building, enlarged 100 years later and decorated with frescoes of some quality, not normally to be found in the village churches of the area. However, less than three hundred years later, by the end of the 16th century, the village was definitely very poor. The owners in the meantime had sold out 60% of their territory, in part to new owners from the town, but in part also to the inhabitants of a neighbouring twin village, a few kilometres upstream, at the very foot of the mountains.

This twin-village, let's call it TC, must have been founded later than L, probably in the 12th century, at latest in the 13th century. Its agricultural area comprised less than one third of that of L and was even less fertile. The villagers were subjects of petty feudal lords (residing in a plains village) and therefore had no special privileges. When in 1400 one of these lords ran out of money, he sold TC, with all traditional rights and duties, to a nearby monastery. Thus, like the convent in case of L, again until 1525, the monastery collected the taxes and demanded socage from TC, behaving just like any other feudal lord. Neither the convent nor the monastery cared for the spiritual welfare of their subjects. For centuries the people of TC had no church and no graveyard of their own. They had to walk over to L in order to follow the mess, to have their family members baptised, married and buried. For these services TC had to contribute one third to the expenses for the church in L. This duty could become quite a heavy burden once the church building needed repair. By 1528

the TC people had built a chapel of their own, but this did not really help them: they had no priest, and their customary duties to support the church of L could not be abolished anyhow.

Despite the small beginnings and the tiny territory, by 1600 the number of inhabitants of TC approached that of L. Many of these people most probably would have been rather badly off if some of them had not, in the meantime, managed to acquire estates in L. No wonder then that there were ample opportunities for quarrels between the inhabitants of L and TC, the more so as villagers from TC started even to build houses on the estates of L they had acquired. By doing so they officially became citizens of L and had to follow the rules set up in this villages, but (for reasons I'll mention later on) they never really did. Their settlement remained an outlying ward of TC, and finally, even if in the 20th century only, it was definitely separated from L and became part and parcel of TC.

We are left stranded with the fact that the villagers of TC, despite all of their unfavourable preconditions, in general apparently had been more successful than those of L who, bit by bit, lost their land resources. We don't know when they started to do so, but we know that prior to 1467 they already sold a whole stripe (estate no. 21) to the town council members who used it as a pasture for their sheep and cattle. Like many other spots afterward, this estate was not considered arable any longer. Some stretches of the village territory are barren until today. To be sure, there is no prove that they were more fertile centuries before, but others which in the 17th century were described by their (aristocratic) owner as barren stony land unfit for agriculture have regained some fertility after they had lain fallow for generations and were used as pastures only. At the end of the 19th century, according to a government census, 64% were used for plough cultivation while 30% were classified as meadows, waste land, etc.

The data presented so far should be sufficient to illustrate a situation which calls for an explanation. Few as the indications may be, they all seem to point into one and the same direction: around 1600 by the latest the peasants of L had largely ruined the fertility of their fields and had to sell, while those of TC had not and could buy.

## **The 16th century**

Let us have a closer look at TC first. It had been settled one or even two centuries later than L, but I repeat: the area was much smaller than that of L, and soils were poor from the start. Nevertheless, it provided a living basis for (in the meantime) nearly the same number of people. Did they perhaps grow other crops? No, they did

not. Did they rely on a different form of animal husbandry? No, but they kept less animals than the villagers of L, because they lacked the amount of grassland necessary for grazing. Did they have other possibilities of additional income? Yes, in some way.

They could find some employment as forest workers in the mountains, especially as charcoal burners. At the beginning of the 16th century the abbot of the monastery had a great demand for charcoal. In the year before the monastery was shut down he even asked the duke to open up his forests since he had exhausted the tree stock in the monastery's own (rather vast) forested area. Twenty years later even more charcoal was required. Small copper mines were opened up quite close to the village. Actually very few men were employed in these mines, and the mines did not really rent, so that at times even the "engineer" did not receive his payment. After a few years the miners had to give up, not necessarily because there was no ore any more, but because the mountains made available for charcoal burning had been cut bare. The duke refused to have his remaining forests touched, the more so as in most years the mine owners maintained that they were unable to pay the mining taxes and in the end really could not produce, sell or pay anything as long as they had no charcoal.

Thus, the whole business was a ruinous flop, but it at least provided some opportunity for the men of TC to earn some additional money. Maybe in this way some of them acquired enough money in order to be able to buy land in L. But will this do as a long term explanation? Perhaps I should also mention that some men of TC (probably more than in L) earned their livelihood as carters. One of the old transit roads passing the mountains was running nearby. But actually this road first passed L. Thus, also the villagers of L could have invested more in this business.

In the middle of the 16th century the foreign owners of land in L (residents of the town) in a letter to the duke flatly asserted that the villagers of L were "nach manniglichem Wissen diese Güter zu besitzen gantz unvermöglich" (as everyone knows totally unfit to possess these estates). This reads as if these villagers were a special race not able to adapt to local conditions. Were they perhaps originally foreigners? Not at all. They followed the same customs as the plains villagers. On the other hand, the people of TC at least partly were a kind of foreigners: immigrants from the southern slopes of the mountains. By the beginning of the 20th century the villagers of C still spoke a special dialect similar to that of their relatives beyond the mountains, and in the 19th century they still wore a style of clothes different from that of L and the plains villages. But why did they prove more adaptive? I'll defer my answer, in order to draw the attention to yet another fact.

One might ask whether not even the townsmen did fare better in using the estates they bought in L. Maybe, but they (in the 15th and 16th century) used the land for a different purpose, not for ploughing and making a living as peasants, but primarily for herding. The villagers of TC on the other hand even started to recultivate the estates they bought in L, where the local villagers had given up hope to have a harvest that rented the work. To be sure, the villagers from TC had to walk less far to reach their newly acquired fields in L than the former owners themselves. Hence they had more time left for field work. That walking distance did play a role is shown by the fact that the majority of fields sold to foreigners were lying at the periphery of the village. This is not to say that the villagers of L were especially lazy, the less so as the same argument is valid for the buyers as well. They bought the fields nearest to their place. But they had yet another reason to do so: the foreigners might expect to be heavily harassed by the villagers of L, especially when a foreign animal trespassed on their fields.

As mentioned above, the town council had bought a whole estate already in the 15th century for grazing purposes, and more pieces of other estates were to follow. But the herdsmen were not allowed to cross any estates still belonging to the villagers themselves. Whenever they tried to do so nevertheless, they run the risk to be beaten up and to have their animals confiscated. The council men again and again sought the help of an influential administrator of the duke. In the beginning they were quite successful in receiving additional concessions in order to have better access to their possessions and to water for their animals. Yet the more they got, the more they wanted, while the villagers became adamant. They resorted to even more violence, and the village leaders finally spent large amounts of their local tax income and even sold the last pieces of communal land (of rather small size since the founding days) to foreigners in order to be able to fight through seemingly endless lawsuits in defence of their inherited rights. In the end they did not get back what in the beginning, unable to foresee the results, they had already agreed to cede to the town. On the other hand, the town council finally had to give up its attempts to receive more. This "feud" with the town, lasting for decennia of the 16th century, was much more severe than the quarrels with the villagers of TC.

But it was not this feud which caused the poverty of the villagers, on the contrary, in some way it resulted from it. As many of their fields were no longer arable, raising sheep became a last source of income and the loss of ever more herding facilities a new thread. We might even put it in another way: the villagers of L, having the example of successful townsmen before their eyes, soon learned that herding could be remunerative in itself, provided that one possessed the necessary area. The village spent a lot of money in defending its herding rights, but it did nothing to stop the

land sales. Are we to conclude that herding was considered more important than plough cultivation? I don't think so: the difference in action was due to a different legal situation. Plough land was privately owned and the village had no right to intervene in sales, but pasture and herding rights were communal and it was up to the village to prevent encroachments.

Still, in the following centuries the rich peasants in L did make herding their main business. In order to do so they had to circumvent and even abolish some traditional rules. They did so successfully, at the same time reducing the chances for successful plough cultivation for poor peasants still more. But they did not become ranchers. They continued to plough their own fields and cared well for preserving their fertility by allocating to them most of the available manure. The originally large area under the control of the villagers not only had dwindled, but would even in its former size not have been large enough for all the people to live by raising hundreds of sheep. Moreover, the number of sheep the villagers were allowed to raise was restricted (to less than 1000 sheep), perhaps from the beginning. Still, we shall have to wait until the beginning of the 18th century to see the sheep holders as successful as to be able to control all village affairs -only to become, barely one hundred years later, a real obstacle to further progress.

The development sketched above confirms part of our preliminary statements. Even if belatedly, some villagers (the rich peasants) did prove their ability to react adaptively. Maybe due to examples from outside and new marketing facilities (a growing demand in town), maybe due to internal evidence (declining yields on the fields) those having the necessary power to exert their flexibility, did find a way out of past misery – at least for themselves. The lower stratum, however, did not follow their example. These people were unable to do so, because the re-established system still was very similar to the old one. Resources remained decreased, but (with further degradation and selling of land stopped) might well have supported 30 to 40 families. The remaining poor people were just superfluous. They had become landless and remained landless. Let us take a closer look at these later centuries.

### **From the end of the 16th to the middle of the 18th century**

The first half of the 17th century was a rather disastrous time for all villages and towns in the country. Already in the 16th century all the gold robbed from the Indians in Central and South America started to cause a hitherto unknown inflation. Though it still can be called rather moderate in comparison with 20th century inflations, it induced fundamental changes. First of all, it impoverished the feudal lords, whose income to a substantial part consisted of the hereditary rents which,

according to medieval law, had to be treated as fixed once and for all times. They could not be raised. Fees for leasing pasture rights (we have reason to come back to them) could be raised, but could not do as a substitute.

Being in a real fix, the local princes tried to help themselves by issuing heaps of new money. The result this time was a rapidly increasing inflation which contributed to lessening the value of the debts incurred before, but otherwise gravely disturbed the economy while not raising the income of the principalities in any sustainable way. New "state loans" were forced on the subjects whenever necessary, but could not be repaid. Thus, in reality, these loans were nothing but arbitrary extortions, mainly imposed on the town councils who, in order to pay them, had to take up loans themselves. In the end, the estates, in order to escape these impossible situation with all its arbitrary measures, were willing to accept a new property tax which, when collected once a year, seemed tolerable. But when the Thirty Years' War plunged some principalities into even deeper debts, these taxes were raised twice, thrice and finally five times a year. And every army passing by or, even worse, stationed in an area would exact its own contributions. Finally, the possibilities of the subjects to pay any more were completely exhausted; even executions could not bring anything to the fore any longer. The old hereditary rents shrunk to the value of a fowl, but, to be sure, they were not abolished.

After the war the economy recovered in rather short time, inflation had gone, and the financial situation of the principalities improved. The principality responsible for L was under the rule of a duke who became famous for his strict measures to restore law and order and to further economic and moral progress according to his conceptions. In order to be able to control all and everything, he ordered reports to be made from all places. From them we learn that during the war most plains villages had suffered badly, being subject to repeated plundering and arson. Half of the former population was gone, most of them probably had not managed to survive. L was a little bit better off; for months many villagers had taken refuge in town, but animals had largely been lost. TC had remained comparatively unmolested, until at last marauders had invaded and looted the villages, raped women and killed animals, just for fun.

Consequently, the forest villages were the first to recover, L followed. The town, for all the debts it had been forced to incur, was lagging behind, and its council even sold its main grazing estate in L, though not to the peasants but to an aristocrat from a nearby village, also situated in the forest. We'll come back to him soon, since he played a fateful role for L and TC. In case some rich peasants of L were able to buy back parts of the estates on their territory, those from whom they purchased the land

were mainly townsmen, while the peasants of TC even enlarged their possessions under the protection of the above mentioned aristocrat.

After the Thirty Years' War the process of selling out lands to foreigners (most probably moneylenders from town) reached alarming dimensions in other villages as well. In order to stop it, in 1655 a new law decreed an option of purchase for co-villagers. When a co-villager was interested in acquiring the land but at present did not have the means to do so, while the community could be reasonably confident that he would be able to pay the amount in future, the community was empowered to buy the land for him and settle the conditions of repayment. Helped by this law, by the end of the 17th century the village council of L, whenever a foreign owner wanted to sell, tried his best to acquire the land.

This meant quite a change of attitude compared with the situation 100 or more years before. There is a main reason for it: during the last century many new kinds of "contributions" (especially for military purposes) had been imposed on the village, and every time the foreign owners had tried to evade paying a share, since this never had been their duty before. Again and again the village council had to seek the help of the administration in order to retrieve at least part of the contribution from the foreigners, and even though by the time this new duty of the foreigners became the rule, they still tried to shirk whenever possible. For the village council the expenses for recovering these duties from recalcitrant absentee landowners, especially when they were men of importance, could be higher than the sum finally received. Thus it was really advantageous for the village budget, when these estates reverted into the possession of local residents.

In order to understand the second (and perhaps more important) reason, we'll have to take a closer look at what happened in the south-western third of the village territory. As already mentioned, at the end of the 16th century the first TC peasants had started to build their houses in the territory of L, and they continued to do so in the 17th century. The village council of L again and again tried to subject them to the rules of L, but in most cases failed to do so, since the settlers in this new hamlet had the protection of a very influential officer who actually was the first to be ordered by the duke to settle here, close to the mountains: the duke's forest overseer.

Near the end of the Thirty Years' War, the father of the above mentioned aristocrat had supported the new duke with a substantial loan, and the duke had made him the forest overseer. Since he had his own land seat, he left the building in L to a subordinate. His son, who rose to the position of the duke's minister of forests and game, against an even more substantial new loan had the duke's rights to lease the

grazing grounds in the Southern third of the territory of L conferred on himself, and instead of leasing them out to the peasants of L had his own sheep grazing there.

Having bought, as mentioned above, also the grazing estate from the town council, he was now in a position to prevent even the cattle owners of L to drive their animals to the places in the South where they had traditional grazing rights. Unless they trespassed on the territory of the town in the East, the herders had to cross the aristocrat's privately owned estate, the more so as latter also owned the forest on the Western border of L. The TC peasants, on the other hand, experienced no difficulty with the new lord. He allowed them to have their sheep and cattle grazing along with his own. The owners from L had to give in: they allowed the minister to use the main water spring on their territory for his sheep, and he allowed them to pass with their cattle through his estate. At the same time the village council of L lost, for the moment at least, any interest to enforce its agricultural rules on the settlers from TC. The council's interests centred in the grazing rights during the fallow period, but those in the south-western part by now were beyond reach.

After the minister's death, his son and heir (who did not inherit his father's important position and at times even was ordered by the government to comply with the peasants' rightful demands) was really not on good terms with the leading men of L. His own son finally squandered the inherited wealth. In order to pay one of his burdening debts, he sold his rights back to the duke, or more precisely, to his sons. The latter might have resumed to lease these rights to the peasants of L, but they did not. Instead, they preferred to keep a shepherd for their own ends. Apparently, herding and supplying the market with sheep had become profitable.

One might expect that the leasing fees for grazing rights would have been raised accordingly. But as a matter of fact, the age old feudal custom of leasing grazing rights had largely come to an end, not because some modernising government had decided so, but since the times of frugality and morality and good management of the state resources (as introduced by the duke after the Thirty Years' War) had given way to conspicuous consumption among the aristocrats and even minor people who could afford it.

The worst examples were set by the rulers who had acquired absolute power and, in order to show their importance, did not hesitate to spend in one year twenty times the amount they could hope to receive in form of taxes. As a result, some principalities definitely went bankrupt, others started to sell out to the highest bidder whatever could be sold, not only all kinds of offices including parsonships and the like, but also their medieval rights. It was a period of what today we would call "privatisation" of state property.

Already by the end of the 17th century the town council had tried to acquire the grazing rights in L by offering to pay higher fees. But the villagers had insisted on their old options of purchase, and, since having a tradition still meant having a right, thereby could prevent the take-over. When in 1739 the duke decided to sell his leasing rights for good, the villagers reacted promptly and acquired them for themselves, though for two thirds of their territory only, since the third part had been ceded to the minister already a hundred years before.

The leading men of L had learned their lesson: even poor soils, good for herding only, could be turned into sources of substantial income – provided one had enough of them. If even ministers and princes who never had tilled a field were keen to possess pastures, why should not they, the peasants, try to profit as well. By now they used every occasion to become private owners of pasture land and (since they could not afford to buy them individually) corporate owners of the grazing rights.

The peasants of TC, on the other hand, had no chance to follow this example, their territory was too small, and on the additional estates they had acquired in L, the rights already were privatised. Thus, they still had to rely on agriculture in first instance, but their agricultural techniques were not sufficient to extract enough to feed all inhabitants well. They remained poor people, forced to look for new opportunities to make a living. In order to get the best possible yield from their small number of fields with meagre soils, they started to experiment with new techniques and new crops.

Since the villagers of L did not possess any substantial amount of rights in the south-western third of their territory, the settlers from TC, though being formally bound to obey the orders of L, factually were able to experiment, provided only, they could arrange themselves with the owners of the grazing rights. As we'll see below, before the end of the 18th century the sheep holders of L proved so successful that they finally managed to acquire also the grazing rights in the south-western part. The ensuing quarrel with the settlers might be seen as a consequence of the new techniques the latter had developed in the meantime – but this would not explain why the same quarrel was rife already in the beginning of 17th century.

After all, there is reason to assume that already in former centuries the methods used in TC were different from those of L. Our information, however, is limited to the latter only. Let's have a closer look at them. Details will be mentioned only selectively. The interested reader will find more of them in the book to be published.

## The rules of L

There are nearly no 16th century documents which tell us more about the process of impoverishment in L. All we know for sure is the result at the end of this century. However, there is a document dated 1553 and prepared by the villagers themselves clearly stating the rules for agriculture and herding. It doesn't mention land degradation, but lists the fines imposed on those who did not observe the rules. These rules apparently were not imposed by some superior power but decided on by the assembly of all proprietors. The fines remained part of the village income and had not to be handed on. After all, it looks as if the rules for agriculture and herding were the villagers' own business. Assuming that something went wrong with their agricultural techniques, more than hundred years of decline should have been enough to perceive the reasons and to introduce the necessary measures. In the 17th century some more rules and fines were added to this document, but there was not any major change.

As the document of 1553 proves, the villagers followed a three-field system like any other village in the plains as well as the peasants of the town. When the first immigrants from the plains settled in L, nobody asked them to adopt new rules of dealing with their new environment. The rulers were unable to do so. They were interested in increasing their income, not in telling their peasants how to proceed. If these peasants had some rules of cultivation, fine, let them have them and in case of necessity support them in keeping law and order. The detailed arrangements for the settlement of the first inhabitants of L may point to definitely more care, but even if the administrators of the landgraves of that period would have tried to impart more instructions to the settlers, it factually was beyond their capacity to set up special rules regarding soil use in this area. For this end no data were available at that time. And as for the settlers, they just knew what they had learned from childhood in their native villages. Even modern development experts expect that what they have learned in one country should more or less also be true in any other country.

Thus, neither the settlers nor those who arranged their settlement share the blame for the subsequent development. Assuming the settlement to have taken place around the year 1000 and judging from the quality of the church built more than two hundred years later and the enlargements and the decorations added another hundred years later, the village apparently flourished.<sup>3/</sup> Thus, the effects of the long term application of the cultivation rules developed in the plains were not to be foreseen.

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<sup>3/</sup> In 1763, an otherwise quite reliable local historian by the available historical sources was even led to the conclusion that during these times the church of L had been the "mater" while that of the town had been its filial – a thesis still accepted by local historians in the middle of the 20th century!

The peasants saw no reason to adopt new ways, since they most probably followed them quite successfully for three or even four hundreds of years.

In the 15th century, however, degradation must have set in, since some villager sold a whole estate good for pasturing purposes only to the town's council. One might expect the peasants to be able to analyse the reasons for the gradual decline of fertility and to mend their ways within the next hundred years. They, however, did not, and they did not learn from their neighbours in TC who, though having much more meagre resources, fared much better. Instead, the peasants of L tried to submit those of TC, who had acquired land in L, to the rules of L.

The bone of contention was the refusal of the people from TC to observe the good old rule of all civilised peasants in this area: the three-field system (winter crops, summer crops, fallow). This system could develop all of its beneficial effects only when all villagers complied, and it was therefore that the village council was empowered to make the necessary rules and to enforce them by imposing heavy fines in case of contravention. The rules were binding for everyone living in the village. In case some defaulters or transgressors proved recalcitrant, the village could count on the help of the courts of the duke's administration.

The document providing the details dates from 1553, but we may be sure that the main rules are much older. Most fines are recorded in terms of the currency units valid in the previous centuries, for a few fines only the same amount is stated in the currency units of the 16th century. More rules were added in the 17th century. This proves that the rules could be amended. The fact that these rules were put down in a written form, devoting a substantial part of it to the fines, may prove nothing but that the administration just insisted on having it in such a form, in order to have a reliable document in case it had to decide an appeal. At this time virtually nobody in the village was able to read or write and, there can be no doubt, all responsible men in the village knew the rules by heart. Those who did not and contravened were fined, and this ensured that in the end everybody knew them. Under these conditions too many amendments might have had a destabilising effect, but that is not a proof that they were impossible. The document shows how new rules could be introduced and made binding for everyone.

Up to the beginning of the 17th century the collected fines were, two times a year, spent in feasting and carousing on the occasion of a general meeting of all proprietors who at that time not only had to approve the village budget, but also had to discuss and to decide measures to be taken in future and, in the spring meeting, to elect new representatives for the next year. The most important men, to be elected for one year, were the "Heimbiirge" and his "Kompe" (companion). The "Heimbiirge" (a

term, not used in modern German any longer, which might be literally translated into English as "home guarantor") was responsible for the village budget and the keeping up of law and order. In this latter duty he was helped by a "Flurschiitz," a watchman whose special duty was (as his name indicates) to "protect" fields and grazing areas (against violations of the rules). At the same time it was everyone's duty to report any contravention to the rules whenever he came to see them or to hear of them. Unless he did, he would be fined as well. The "Heimbiirge" had the power to impose and collect the fines (the "Flurschiitz" was authorised to do the same in case he caught the transgressors in the act). Moreover, it was to his discretion to decide on everyday problems, but he had no right to deviate from what was customary or even to make a new rule.

In case there were new rules to be made or new measures to be taken, he would put the question to the general assembly. Here every proprietor had to attend, otherwise he would be fined. Only in case he was totally unable to appear (for instance, because he had died and his son was not yet able to bare full responsibility), his wife could represent him, and only in this case women were allowed to participate in the assembly. Whatever the question to be solved and the matter to be decided, the "Heimbiirge" did not expound it to the assembly himself. He told it to a "common man" who acted as a speaker. The assembly discussed and decided, told their decision to the speaker and the latter reported it to the "Heimbiirge." That is, the latter had no say in the assembly, but it was his duty to proclaim the decision. By this proclamation it became binding for all and everyone like any law. There was no way to appeal against it.

This rather democratic system was abolished after the Thirty Years' War when the duke wanted to restore law and order in his country and restructured the administration in such a way that henceforth all power and the right to delegate it accrued to him only. The villagers still had the right to elect the men for the village council (now consisting of twelve men), but the administration had the right not to confirm the election of those whom it thought unfit and to empower others instead. The office period now was five years. The new most important man was the "Schultheiss" (mayor) who received his orders from above. The "Heimbiirge" was still there, but his duty now was that of a cashier, and nobody was keen to take that job. The new rules for account keeping were complicated, and the villagers distrusted everyone who was in charge of the village money but whom they had no right to control. As a result, everyone elected to this position resigned after one year, while the administration refused to accept the resignation. As a result, it took quite a time before the new system worked.

On the village level, this reform had an effect probably unintended by the administration but (as one may take from the aforementioned events) apparently foreseen by the villagers themselves: freed from democratic control, the economically powerful now could introduce changes which primarily served their own interests. In the course of time they even learned to circumvent the orders they received from above, at the same time trying to find the villagers' approval by seemingly acting as praiseworthy benefactors of the whole village. The latter was especially true when they managed to buy the grazing rights, thereby warding off the danger that the village fell prey to the town.

In effect they feathered their own nest, as can be seen by the new rules they made with the approval of the administration. While formerly it had been everyone's right to incorporate his sheep in the village herd, now all rights accrued only to those who had contributed money to the acquisition of the grazing rights. Those who could not pay had no possibility to participate. They even had no right to the dung which formerly the sheep distributed freely all over the fields lying fallow for one year. Those who wanted to "participate in the dung" though they had no sheep themselves had to pay for every night of stationing the herd on their estates. Obviously the importance of dung was well-known by now.

The amount of manure available could have been increased by allowing the herdsmen from the town to station their herd over night on the fallow fields of L as well. But this remained strictly forbidden. Apparently the sheep owners were not too highly interested in increasing the fertility of the fields, but first of all in having the maximum of pasture for their own sheep. As they could not have that unless everybody strictly kept the rules of the three-fields system, they prevented any attempt to deviate from it, at the same time qualifying as the preservers of the time-honoured tradition.

Since the middle ages, all fields lying fallow could be grazed by the sheep free of charge for the sheep owner and, apart from the dung left, with no recompense for the field owner. Stable feeding was not possible, unless a peasant privately owned a piece of meadow. But even then all he could keep for himself was the first harvest of hay, the aftermath had to be left for general use. By the middle of the 17th century the rules were changed in such a way that the owner could also keep the aftermath for himself before reopening his meadows for general use. This rule, however, applied to local villagers only, foreigners were not granted this new privilege. No wonder then, that the number of cows remained small. At the very end of the 17th century their number barely exceeded that of the tax paying families, most had but

one cow, several had none at all. The maximum number, reached by one family only, was five.

The sheep, supervised by the village shepherd and defended against wolves by his dogs, always stayed outside in winter. Still, grazing facilities would have become precarious during this time if the herd would have had to rely on the fallow only. So there was another rule which forbade the tilling of the fields immediately after the harvest of the "winter fruit" (species of rye and barley sown in autumn). The remaining straw and the stubble were to be left to the sheep. As the soils by this received some manure before being replanted next spring with the "summer fruit" (oats, some wheat, but also again rye and barley) this rule may have made sense as long as everyone possessed sheep and participated in the dung. But it became anachronistic when sheep holding became restricted to a few rich families only, and the stationing of the sheep on the fields had to be bought. No wonder then that some poor peasants tried to sow and harvest at times when they thought their fields fit for it. Against them the sheep holders made another new rule according to which their sheep could graze off two third of the sprouting seed which appeared at a time when the grazing rights were theirs.

As a matter of fact, most rules of the three-field system originally aimed at reconciling the competing requirements of humans and animals concerning the field produce. When the sheep owners came to dominate the village, they changed these rules according to their own requirements. Since they remained agriculturists themselves, they tried to concentrate the dung on their own fields. As a result, poorer peasants would have to give up as their fields lost fertility. But this effect did not worry the rich. Since all herding and grazing rights were theirs, no foreigner would be interested in buying the land. Whenever an area became so degraded that agriculture would not rent any longer, the area available for grazing the sheep of the rich extended. But it was only now that they had learned to derive real profit for it. Couldn't they have done so earlier, i. e., in the 16th or 15th century? I don't think so.

When the town council decided to buy a first estate in L, it may have done so for the simple reason that the territory of the town available for agriculture and pasture (which was smaller than that of L) had become insufficient for the growing population. A hundred years later, many of the rich and influential men in town were butchers. A whole dynasty of butchers ruled the town until the 19th century. Already in the 16th century the butchers kept their own herds and hence again were interested to buy more pastures in L, while the peasants in L, becoming poorer and poorer, were unable to compete with them. Whenever they had sheep to sell, they only could sell them to the town butchers, but these preferred to buy the pastures instead.

By the end of the Thirty Years' War – following a time when the number of animals had substantially dwindled and townsmen had to sell their estates in L –the villagers definitely were no longer inclined to sell their estates, and the government decreed the law necessary to stop similar sales in all villages. Thus, after the general economic recovery, the butchers could only respond to the growing demand for mutton by turning to large-scale buying the animals they slaughtered. The minister profited from this new situation in the same way as his successors did, including the duke's sons.

### **From the middle of the 18th to the middle of the 19th century**

As we saw, the sheep owners of L had learnt their lesson. Being prevented from extending their rule over all of the territory of L, they now did their best to get the maximum out of what they had acquired by disadvantaging their own poorer neighbours. It was not before the end of the 18th century that they got a real chance to expand. The duke's sons who owned the grazing rights in the southern third of L had lost interest, and another member of the family of the former aristocratic owner who had become a general under the court of Hanover bought the old rights back. A few years later, however, also he offered them for sale together with his ancestor's country seat. It seems that for years nobody was willing to pay the price he demanded. Yet, interested men in L formed a new sheep holders association, and after 13 years they finally had the means to let their dream come true: they bought what the general had to offer, resold the country seat, and were now, after more than one hundred years, also the owners of the grazing rights in the last third of their territory. And promptly they pressed on the settlers from TC, who in the meantime had formed a whole hamlet of their own, to observe the rules of the three-field system.

Let us recall that the aristocratic owners of the grazing rights had kept their own sheep on these estates. There are no indications that they had any problem with the settlers using their fields without keeping the three-field system. On the contrary, the aristocrats had accepted the villagers' animals among their own herds. Were they rich and generous enough not to care for the "disorder" caused by the settlers? Maybe during the last decennia with more or less absentee landlords. But before?

My hypothesis is that in fact the field owners from TC caused no disorder, on the contrary, their way of cultivating their fields even provided the herders with more pasture. I cannot prove it from the data available, but it is rather common knowledge that poor soils (in the absence of special manuring techniques), in order to regain their fertility, need longer fallow periods than richer ones where two years of

cultivation and one year of fallow were sufficient. The "disorder" of the TC peasants meant nothing but that they orientated their cultivation on the degree of fertility their soils had regained at a given moment. (Peasants are able to judge this by various indicators). To be sure, it was risky to have a field amidst grazing sheep, but the risk could be minimised, once the peasants took the trouble – and were allowed – to fence their fields.

The villagers of L, however, strictly followed their old rule and tried to enforce it on everybody possessing a field in their territory. The fines collected were no longer used for big meals for all proprietors, but for paying the fees for the lawsuits necessary to enforce these rules.

Since allowing longer fallow periods whenever necessary would not have reduced pasture grounds but enlarged them, one may argue that the sheep owners acted irrationally in a double sense: they not only reduced pasture land but also ruined the fertility of the fields. But this is a short term perspective. Qualified politics have a long term perspective, and the sheep owners apparently pursued it as well. The settlers from TC were legal owners and could not be ousted. But if they could be forced to follow the old rules (two years of cultivation, one year of fallow), within a few decades the formerly degraded fields, which the settlers had managed to open for agriculture again, would lose their regained fertility once more, become useless for further cultivation and would have to be abandoned. The settlers, not allowed to keep sheep, would have to give up and leave the area to the villagers of L, that is to the successful herders. The economically well-to-do had learned from the mistakes of their forefathers. They now knew how the adherence to the old rules which had driven their forefathers into poverty could be converted into the opposite: they now could be used to get rich again.

In the last decennia of the 17th and in the 18th century affluence had returned to L. But unlike the conditions hundreds of years ago when the villagers built their first church, wealth now was quite unequally distributed. Misery continued for many more families than those who were well-to-do. But what do you want: this was the situation then everywhere. And thus, in order to praise God the Lord for all these new benefits, L in 1763-68 had its church renovated, partly rebuilt and completely modernised again in a high quality not normally to be found in village churches in the surrounding country.

But in this very century God also helped the poor – by means of the potato. Already in the middle of the 18th century, when the grazing rights were in the hands of the duke's sons, the TC peasants started to do what the complaining leaders from L later called "to turn three fields into two," that is, introduce a regular sequence of

summer and winter crops, thereby abolishing the fallow. At first sight this seems to contradict completely my own hypothesis, viz. that they used longer periods of fallow. But to all probability the TC peasants did not just alternate between two types of cereals when they abolished the fallow on some plots. They started growing something quite different: potatoes. The duke's sons, against a yearly fee, permitted them to do so for a limited time. It was an experiment in the interest of the state. It apparently proved successful, since the permit was renewed. The grazing rights continued to be converted into potato growing rights, and the general of Hanover accepted this practice as well.

By the end of the century a growing number of poor peasants from L in their turn wanted to plant potatoes. The sheep holders, seeing their interests endangered, tried to put a stop to this new way of cultivation. But the government was in favour of it, and even the sheep holders had to admit that something had to be done in order to alleviate the precarious food situation of the poor. This, however, was mere lip service. For their own poor peasants they devised a compromise: In order to be able to feed their only cow, they were allowed to use the fallow period on their small fields to grow another plant recently introduced, viz. clover. Still, they were not permitted to do so unless they paid a fee to recompense the sheep holders for their loss of grazing facilities. (Let us recall: the duke's sons had paved the way for this new kind of exploiting the poor when they allowed them to grow potatoes.)

Maybe the sheep owners accepted the same fee from their own villagers when some poor peasants finally started to grow potatoes on their fallow land as well. For the TC settlers, on the other hand, they tried to revoke the old permit. When the administration did not support their claim, they tried nevertheless by refusing dung to anyone who did not keep the rules of the three-field system. To be sure, this was an effective measure, since as long as the fields lacked the necessary manure the yields would remain poor – and permanent cultivation needed even more manure. This time poor townsmen who had a cow but no field helped the poor peasants with no cow but some field. These townsmen rented fallow plots, put all their cow dung into them, and grew potatoes. The owners of the fields got a reasonable rent for the fallow and were left with a manured field for the next two crops of cereals. This co-operation was so profitable that even the sheep owners accepted it for their own fields. As a result it became quite common in the beginning of the 19th century.

Moreover, in 1832 the responsible men in the government made up their mind and supported the agriculturists against the interests of the sheep holders. Villages had to report on their progress of abolishing the three-field system and using the fallow to grow potatoes and various other new crops. It is from these reports only that, for the

first time, we officially come to know what I had surmised already for the 16th century, when I was looking for an explanation of the differential development in L and TC. The forest villages (like TC) had no tradition of using the three-field system. I admit that this is still no prove that their forefathers really never practised it. But the villagers from TC (or at least those from C) were immigrants from the Southern slopes of the Thuringian forest, that is, they were "hill peasants" from the start. Their forefathers never could have been successful with a three-field system adapted to the conditions of the plains. If their offspring on the other side of the mountains (but quite similar social structure) would not have continued the old practice they never would have managed to do any better than the peasants of L.

The rest is easily told. The sheep holders of L lost their privilege to use the whole village territory for their purposes, free from charge and even without paying taxes for their sheep, but with the right to be compensated for every piece of fallow they left to the owner of this land. After the final abolishment of medieval rights (after the Bourgeois Revolution of 1848), in order to have still enough pasture land, the sheep owners had to buy it for themselves. This meant the end of their power and their profitable business. In town industry developed and offered hundreds of new places of work to the poorer section of the village population. Those who remained peasants could make a living. But they could not expect rich harvests, since even with new manuring techniques and crop rotation these soils still remained in principle unsuited for agriculture.

So what to do in modern times? Convert (for the first time in history) all into pasture and raise a number of sheep? While in the past 20 to 30 families formed the sheep holders association, nowadays two or three men would do. What to do with the rest of the population? The 20th century saw the demise of the industry in town. The possibility to find a new place of work was extremely low. And the once so splendid church? It was closed down. Today there is no church service any more. The building has been emptied out and urgently needs renovation in order to prevent further decay.

What about TC? Due to its beautiful surroundings it became a favoured tourist spot for more than one century. In the first half of the 19th century an enterprising man in L built a guest house on the road to TC, hoping that the tourists steering for TC and for this reason passing L would make up their mind and stay with him. He hoped for them in vain. God had subjected the peasants of TC to the heaviest tests, but finally decided in favour of them. The state elite of the GDR followed suite and chose TC as one of their holiday resorts. After they left by the end of the 20th

century, also the tourists changed their mind. They now prefer the Mediterranean surrounding to the cold beauty of the Thuringian forest.

I admit these last remarks can really not qualify as scientific. They are just meant to say that today nothing is as it was before, with one exception: the soils are still poor. And that's why the only peasants who really used them in the most sustainable way were those who used these places for thousands of years as nothing but a hunting resort and in times of war as a refuge. However, when the landgraves, now dead for thousand years, made them their private property, they soon realised that this was not the most profitable way to use these forested territories. Herewith I am back to the start and bound to draw some conclusions, not relying on God's higher wisdom, but dealing with peasants' wisdom to manage their affairs as efficient as possible. After all, there are still some open questions. That's why I cannot just end up with a summary.

## **Open questions**

One thing emerged: peasants' adaptivity is more limited than is commonly assumed. What they have learned in their youth they practice as adults and hand it on to their children who will do the same thing once more, provided only it has proved successful in the past. Once it has done so, they stick to it even if in the long run it will not work any more. The peasants of L, up to the 17th century, irrespective of the autocratic overlordship, had a rather democratic village constitution and were not bound to follow blindly the decrees of some village aristocrat. It seems as if by their free will and common consent they stuck to their old rules even though they ran into difficulties and became poor for generations on end, instead of using their brains to analyse the facts and to change their ways.

The peasants of TC fared much better. But this does not mean that their behaviour differed in principle from that of the peasants of L. They too followed the rules of their forefathers. The difference is that these rules were better suited to the environment. We don't know, however, how far (or whether at all and for which reason) the villagers of C adapted their old rules to their new locality. This means, the fact that the peasants of TC flourished while those of L became poor, may have been conditioned by the same forces. It would be unjustified to blame the one part and to applaud the other. Phrased less dramatic: when we try to understand the behaviour of the peasants in L, that of the peasants of TC cannot normally be adduced as an argument to the contrary.

In fact, to blame the villagers of L for their failure to react in time, would be the worst thing we could do. Not the obvious fact that they failed, but the hidden reasons why they failed should be of concern. When, at the end of the first paragraph of these final remarks, I formulated "it seems as if," I did so intentionally. The source material for the critical period before the 17th century is scanty, and we are not able to analyse the process in any detail. Comparative material suggests that peasants under similar democratic conditions indeed are able to react much earlier.

One might suggest that the peasants of L were not allowed to adjust the rules of the three-field system, but since the forest villages apparently were allowed to do without them, this is implausible. The claims of the villagers of L that those villagers of TC who had settled in L should have to follow the rules of L did find the approval of the administration. This shows that the superior power cared for the upkeep of the old rules, but it furnishes no proof that it tried to impose the three-field system on all villages. In the middle ages changes were nothing provided for: a convention once accepted remained a convention, whatever its merits. Even the dukes had to respect the inviolability of the hereditary rents – even though their income gradually dwindled due to a (in one generation very limited, but over a period of hundreds of years) lastly intolerable degree.

The parallel is striking, the more so as both processes happened at the same time. If even the aristocrats had no idea what to do in order to escape the forces of impoverishment, why should the peasants have been more clever? Yet the parallel is not convincing. In case the aristocrats had dared to change the inherited rules, they would have lost their legitimisation, and their subjects would have rebelled. Peasant upheavals in the aftermath of the Reformation – I'll come back to them – had shown the danger. This rebellion had been quelled. But the dukes would not have been powerful enough to enforce a change which would have had adverse effects on all of their subjects. They were bound to a principle which allowed no change. Thus, it took them some time to use the legal loopholes so cleverly and to such an extent that the situation in the end became unbearable for most of their subjects. In order to put an end to the disaster the estates finally accepted a completely new tax system – without abolishing the old hereditary rights and duties.

The peasants of L, however, would not have had to face rebellious subjects in case they had decided to give more rest to those of their soils which urgently needed it in order to regain fertility.

Looking for other impediments, we can exclude the possibility that already at that time there was a powerful elite of sheep holders who, in their own interest, prevented any change. It was not before the democratic village system had been officially

abolished that the rich could dare to disregard the common benefit. Still, even then the villagers were not easily duped. When the leader of the association of sheep owners who bought the grazing rights for the village, the richest man of the village, disclosed that all those who had not contributed to the acquisition henceforth had forfeited their traditional right to let their sheep graze together with the village herd, the villagers voted him out of the council. But this was all they could do. The duke's office had sealed the contract and thereby legalised this possibility as it was already available to the aristocrat who, in the 16th century, had monopolised the grazing rights in the south-western part.

Laws of the past were not to be revoked. When the landgraves and dukes still owned these rights, they could lease them out, but they were not obliged to do so. That is why they could raise the leasing fees. Thus, no new owner was under any obligation to lease these rights. Unlike the aristocrats, the men of the herders' association were lenient enough to introduce new leasing rules. They leased the right to have the herd stationed for one night on someone's field so that he could "participate in the dung." Seen in this perspective, the herders' association behaved in complete submission to the traditional rules – at least as far as the rights of those in power were concerned – and therefore could call on the full support of the duke's administration. Most villagers had good reason to protest but no chances to appeal to a higher court, since the herders had not violated any law. All they did was to avail themselves of the time-honoured rights they had been able to buy.

Still, this statement does not solve our problem for the time when all villagers could decide on all necessary measures to be taken in order to solve a problem. A last possibility: although the peasants could not but realise that the situation was deteriorating, they were unable to find a way out, since they would have needed an example to show them what to do. However, they did have one in their immediate neighbourhood, in TC, and they did not lack contacts with these neighbours since they were members of their church community. To be sure, these people, not enjoying the liberties of L, were subject to all plights of so-cage, poor "hill peasants," immigrants from beyond the mountains, speaking a funny dialect and wearing funny clothes, probably despised by the villagers of L. But was this enough to prevent all possibilities of learning something from them?

There is another fact which may have hampered a clear perception. Let us recall that the success of the TC people in the 16th century which allowed them to acquire lands in L had something to do with their chances as forest workers, especially in supplying charcoal, first to the abbot of the monastery, whose subjects they were, and afterwards to the copper mining enterprises. Thus, the villagers of L, running

into poverty, might with some justification have attributed the better situation of the TC peasants just to these opportunities to make some money, not to their ability to care for preservation of the fertility of their fields. And when the peasants of L had to realise that these people from TC were even able to recultivate the fields which for them had ceased to rent the work, they still could attribute it to the fact that the TC peasants were able to spend more working hours on these fields, because they were situated close to their homes. But if this was the main reason, one may ask why the proprietors of L had not shortened their walking distance by building their houses closer to their fields. The answer is obvious: they had settled from the start as one community closely together in the centre. Thereby the proprietors of the outlying estates had some disadvantages, but as their ancestors had accepted them and fared well nevertheless, why should (and how could) their successors now change the rule?

After all, we end up with the same result. The villagers of L stuck to their old rules though these fell short, both economically and ecologically, of what we would call rationality. Did they perhaps have a general reason to do so? Was this behaviour a fundamental part of their culture? In the previous so-called high middle ages development did not come to a halt, on the contrary. Especially in Thuringia nothing was stable: new religious and political structures were set up, new villages and new cloisters were founded. Power relations were fluctuating, settlements were deserted again, and nobody could be sure that anything he had achieved or acquired would have any continuity. In general the chances for survival were rather precarious. Nevertheless (or perhaps just because of this, in an effort to alleviate the constant insecurity), the fiction was built up that all arrangements and agreements were to remain valid forever.

Local overlords who thought they had the power to proclaim new laws and revoke them at their discretion, fell from power when they lost the backing from their own overlords or their supporters. Vassalage was the principle devised to overcome this insecurity. For good reasons mutual distrust continued, thereby producing ever more assertions of loyalty, not just for the moment, but – once again – forever. The feudal system extended down to the villages, the peasants were enfeoffed. In order to become legitimate, both the feudal duties and the services rendered "in exchange" for these (that is the guaranty the vassals got to be protected in their rights and possessions) had also to be put on the very same basis, that is the assertion that they would remain valid forever. Whenever they did persist hundreds of years, they finally acquired a status of inviolability approximating God's commands.

Inflation was minimal at that time. Because of this fixed relation between money and goods, minor changes could be introduced in rendering the tributes. Since it was

more convenient for both parts and moreover promoted the market integration of the peasants (in its turn necessary for the welfare of the towns), many tributes instead of being rendered in kind came to be paid in cash. Peasants at first may have grumbled, but in the end they profited from the transformation. Minimal as the inflation might have been, in the course of the centuries its results became quite sizeable. The tributes became less burdening while the real income of the overlords dwindled. Since it was impossible to raise the taxes, the system worked, quite unexpectedly, to the benefit of the peasants. It would have lost its legitimisation if the "eternally fixed" rules would have been changed. This was shown by the peasant upheavals at the beginning of the 16th century, upheavals which were intimately linked to the process of delegitimisation of the rules of the Catholic Church.

The Protestant movement was not calling the Christian creed into question, on the contrary, it was a "reformation" meant to abolish the deviations from the true doctrine which the Catholic Church had introduced. Monasteries, once founded with the aim of setting an example of modesty, honesty and humble work, full of hardships in the praise of God, had become rich institutions. Their aristocratic inhabitants indulged in pleasurable life. They not only extorted taxes and services from their subjects like any feudal lord, but in addition sold eternal blessings and absolution from all kinds of sin to everyone who could afford to pay the money. When the peasants rose up against them, those who really profited were the Protestant dukes: they not only imposed extremely heavy fines on all those who had participated in the uprisings, but they also shut down the monasteries and convents and appropriated all their wealth to themselves. This, to some extent, helped to put the finances of the duchies back on an even keel – but not for long.

With the continuing decline of state finances, the conflict between Catholic and Protestant creed served as a pretext for the Thirty Years' War which, however, first of all served the end of introducing a completely new tax system, squeezing all financial resources out of countrymen and townsmen alike and empowering the aristocracy in a hitherto unattained degree.

But let us return to the middle ages. As has been said, despite all assertions to the contrary, the feudal system did not really provide for security. This early state organisation was not meant to care for the subjects' everyday life and well-being. Conventions which had been democratically agreed upon within a community were definitely better suited to serve as reliable guidelines in making a living. When they had proven well-adapted to local conditions for hundreds of years, putting them into question became unthinkable. They were God's truth or even more than that, since

the belief in the three-field system probably outdated by far that in the Christian doctrine. No "reformation" was possible.

The new Protestant parsons remained unmoved by the misery of their "sheep" and exacted precisely the same taxes and contributions as their Catholic predecessors. It can neither be proved nor disproved that they, again like their predecessors, used the local misery for their own ends, explaining it as a result of God's wrath in view of the peasants' deviations from the doctrines. All that is known for sure is that their sermons became longer and longer and that peasants regularly went to sleep during church service. It is quite obvious that the new Protestant parsons had to offer no new ideas which the peasants thought to be of importance to them.

What the peasants went for, was a moderate reduction or, more exactly, a reform of the old principle according to which they had to pay their church taxes. It was structured in such a way that in case an estate was divided into two, the former rate had to be paid twice. In the end the owner of even the tiniest parcel of an estate had to pay the same amount as any wealthy man. Because this principle was valid since olden times, the church refused any change. Since other church reforms had been possible, the peasants continued to make new proposals. However, they never succeeded in achieving any change. The system survived until, in the 19th century, the government abolished it. This example shows that the inviolability of a rule not only depended on its legitimisation by age but, to a large extent, also on the interests and power of those concerned. On the other hand, we cannot exclude the possibility that the peasants perhaps never might have envisaged the possibility of a change, unless the church organisation had not experienced even more fundamental changes before. Moreover, the peasants never questioned these taxes as such and not even the form of these prestations; all they wanted was a small reduction or at least a reallocation of the burden.

There can be no doubt that there was a general belief in the eternal validity of old rules. Still, any closer look reveals that this belief could not impede changes. As shown by the example of the church taxes, it did not prevent the peasants to imagine and even to demand some amendments. Consequently, we have to conclude that there were no "cultural constraints" which prevented the peasants to devise new solutions or to introduce changes when they had to cope with current problems. Otherwise, as a matter of fact, the procedures for introducing new rules written down in the document of 1553 would have made no sense at all. Since the peasants of L did assert their right to introduce new rules (and thereby to modify old rules) and since there were no objections from the side of the duke's administration, we end up with the old question: why did the peasants in the 16th century not take measures to

stop their economic decline, that is, first of all, to change the rules of their three-field system?

## **Hypothesis revised**

Regarding the three-field system, we know that minor reforms were possible, but there are no instances of new rules of some importance before the end of the 17th century. The probability that others had been introduced before, but went unrecorded, is minimal, since the primary rules were put down in written form in 1553, and any subsequent amendment was added to the same document. Even if these amendments went undated, the time of their entry can be judged by the style of the handwriting and the orthography used. As the peasants were able to adapt after the Thirty Years' War, why should they have been unable to do so before? To be sure, their culture was different from ours, it followed ideals of invariability, but it did not decree inflexibility when problems had to be solved. This allows but one conclusion: the peasants themselves never attributed the failure of their agriculture to the cause I identified, namely that their techniques were maladapted to the quality of the soils.

As an anthropologist, I too have to stick to some principles. One of them is that, in case of discrepancies of interpretation, the anthropologist should assume that he is wrong and accept that his informants are right. According to this principle my analysis as presented so far must have a flaw. However, it took me all the way up to here before I realised that I had overlooked something. Instead of rewriting the previous text, I prefer to admit my mistake. My argument went somewhat astray for a simple reason: even though under the rules of the three-field system individual short term modifications were impossible, there is nothing to prevent us to assume that it was always possible and left to the discretion of the owner not to recultivate a certain plot and to let it rest for the next 3 or 6 and even an unlimited number of years in case the agricultural yields did not prove sufficient any longer. This fact does not completely upset my thesis, but it calls for a revision of the analysis.

Let us first make sure that there were no official obstacles against longer fallow periods. The feudal lords had no reason to interfere or to raise objections, because whoever the possessor and whatever the actual use of the land, they always had the same right to collect ever the same rent. The village itself collected taxes from houses, cows, pigs, and land. Uncultivated fields would not cause any reduction in the village income.

Indeed, if there had been an official objection against longer fallow periods within the framework of the three-field system, soil degradation should have set in after less than two hundred years. Still, the village seems to have flourished in the 13th and 14th century. Given the general poverty of the soils, the probability that a certain plot became exhausted was always there. This fact soon must have become well-known to the peasants themselves. But since the three-field system allowed a certain flexibility, soil degradation could not be attributed to the three-field system as such. Instead it quite obviously depended on the decisions taken by the individual owner.

But why should an increasing number of individual owners be so silly to ruin the fertility of their fields? Let us recall the danger inherent in swidden cultivation: every peasant will tend to use best quality soils in preference to poorer ones, falling back on the latter only when better opportunities have been exhausted. A compulsory three-field system may somewhat check this tendency, but it cannot prevent it altogether. Assuming that even the best soils of L from time to time would have needed a longer rest, the probability that they were granted it is low. Fertile lands always and everywhere are liable to be overused as long as they require less input and/or yield more output than the poorer soils. As a consequence, we have reason to assume that after three hundred years of use the overall potential of the territory was considerably less than in the beginning. But this decrease was a slow process and, in view of the large territory, nothing to be especially worried about, at least as long as every peasant had enough land.

At the death of an owner his estate would be divided among his heirs, but this does not necessarily mean that more and more people had to live from ever smaller plots. Due to the fixed number of estates, we know that the number of families in the beginning must have been 60. Roughly 600 years later, in 1595, their number had grown to barely more than 70. This still meant nearly a whole estate for each family (and thereby the possibility to allow longer fallow periods to those parts of the fields which needed them) – provided only the territory of L had been as large as before and more or less equally distributed among the families.

This, however, was definitely not the case. Around 1600 most of the territory had been sold to foreigners, and the remaining part was quite unequally distributed. There are no records to document the distribution one or two hundred years earlier. Only one thing is clear: There was no rule to ensure an equalising redistribution. In order to introduce one, the peasants would have had to abolish the rules of inheritance or to introduce communal ownership in contravention to their status as freeholders. This was beyond their capacity.

Since no specific data have been reported, let me take recourse to some general principles. The children of rich peasants all over the world have the better chances for survival. As long as there are no additional sources of income, this implies a higher probability for the descendants of rich men to be left with partitioned property and hence the probability soon to become poor again. The best way out is clever marriage politics. Still, in pre-capitalist peasant societies wealth is not considered a lasting specificity of certain families. "As won, so gone." Moreover, the general trend does not exclude the possibility that in some cases rich men die without issue while poorer men leave a number of children.

For them the chances to become wealthy again are definitely much more limited than those for the sons of rich men. Some of them may end up as emigrants, but most will try to eke out their meagre income by seeking employment as manual labourers for those who have more land than they can work themselves. Frugal life and hard work alone would not do. Thank God there are some rich peasants. Without them, the poor would have to starve. To be sure, any peasant prefers, whenever possible, to invest his labour into his own fields and not into those of others. Moreover the best chances to be hired always fall into a period when every hand is required – also at home. Still, as long as those families who have less land than necessary for their upkeep can work for those who have more than they could work by their own labour force, individual poverty need not become an inescapable fate – provided only that population figures and the size of the arable village territory remain nearly constant.

As we have seen, population figures remained rather constant, but arable village territory dwindled considerably. In 1595 more than one third of the remaining territory was owned by 10% of the tax payers residing in L. Apart from four estates in the hands of foreigners, all estates had been parcelled. More than 40% of the local tax payers had no land at all. 12% owned less than a quarter of an estate, and though they formed a minority only, they deserve our special attention. For them every three years of additional fallow for one third of their land would have meant 4 years of starvation. The possibility to eke out their earnings by working for the rich had become extremely limited, since there was an abundance of needy people. Unless they found other sources of income, those who still had a small piece of land just had to use their fields as often as possible and thereby had to run the risk of a progressive decline in the fertility of their plots. Many of those who still owned a quarter of an estate may not have fared better, since considerable parts of their quarter might already have become unfit for agriculture.

If, on the other hand, the territory had been so small from the start that every family had less than a quarter of an estate the size of L, the limited flexibility of the

three-field system would soon have led to irreversible damages. The peasants of TC are a case in point: they had nothing but tiny fields, never more but often less than what a man could work. They always badly needed all of their land and had to care first of all for sustainability. Soil fertility would soon have been ruined, had not every proprietor had the right and the necessary knowledge inherited from his forefathers to adjust the fallow and the crops for even the smallest plot of his land to the actual requirements and possibilities. When the poor peasants of L were left with as little land as those of TC had had from the start, the former could not, like the latter, survive nevertheless. Not necessarily because their land by now was more degraded (the TC peasants in the southern estates of L proved that these soils could be turned agriculturally productive again), but because they were bound to observe the rules of the three-field system.

Herewith I am back to my main thesis, but the context has changed. The three-field system was not so rigid that it prevented longer fallow periods. Doubtlessly a general rule prescribing two years of fallow instead of just one would have been more suited to the overall condition of the soils, the more so as it would have restrained the general tendency to overuse good soils, but this could not be foreseen. For more than three hundred years the system worked quite well. A general decrease of productivity was unavoidable, but could not be considered really harmful as long as everyone possessed a rather large estate. To take preventive measures against a further decrease by extending the obligatory fallow period was in nobody's interest. Those who still possessed enough felt no necessity (the pasture would have been enlarged, but the number of sheep to be held in the village was limited anyhow), and those who possessed too little had to oppose such a measure as it would have reduced the yearly percentage of land they could use for cultivation. In case you are needy, a cut from two third back to one half is nothing you can go for.

In their situation these poorer peasants in fact should have been interested in just the opposite measure, that is, to be allowed to use their land for cultivation whenever they liked to do so. This would mean to lift the strict rules of the three-field system instead of extending them. These poor peasants most probably knew quite well that some day their land would become unfit for further agricultural use, but it remains to be doubted that they, no longer subject to the old rules, soon would have started to fare better. They did not have the long experience of the villagers of TC and therefore might as well have ruined their land even more rapidly.

However that might have been, such an experiment had no chance. Those concerned always were a minority, disqualified by their very poverty to function as opinion leaders in a democratic village community. Sooner or later the poorer

peasants had to become landless. The landless who did not emigrate, but took to some artisanship not monopolised by the town, cannot be expected to have voted for those who still possessed some land but might soon join their ranks. They were depending on the benevolence of the rich peasants and could not afford to confront them with revolutionary ideas demanding fundamental changes in the time-honoured village rules.

### **Yet another revision**

My revised hypothesis by now may sound plausible, the more so as it also explains why no measures to change the old rules could be taken. If the attentive reader so far did not find anything which might be raised as an objection against the validity of my conclusions, I could contend myself. However, I am rather certain that the hypothesis is still flawed. I'll publish it nevertheless, as it may serve as an example that even plausible hypotheses may be leading astray. My reason for putting all into question once more (while writing this, I still do not know where I will end up) is a tiny detail which I mentioned in the previous chapter. It clearly shows that I overrated the role of the poor and thereby once more the limitations of the three-field system.

If it had been, first of all, the poor who sold their land plot by plot to foreigners, in 1595 the latter should have possessed a patchwork of small pieces of estates all over the territory of L. But most of them possessed quarters or halves, and – that is what I mentioned – four of them even whole undivided estates, while, at the same time, even the rich peasants of L did not possess such undivided estates any more. Maybe some foreigners had the chance to gradually enlarge their possessions in one and the same estate, but since the estates were long small stripes crossing the rivulet, foreigners should have been more interested to acquire adjacent pieces of two or more estates on the side bordering their own localities. It is much more reasonable to assume that these estates were sold en bloc.

Let me also recall that already prior to 1467 a whole estate was sold to the town council. It could be used for grazing purposes only. We do not know who sold it and what he needed the money for, but he cannot have been a poor man. In 1489 the village mayor (at that time a local magistrate in the services of the convent) took a loan on a whole estate owned by him. He cannot have been a poor man. Again we do not know what he needed the money for. The same is true for yet another loan (the first one recorded), dated 1457. Maybe the money was used to buy more arable land which some other villager had to sell. Since his family name does not reappear at later times, this may not have prevented him like many other debtors to become unable to repay, so that all ended up with a transfer of ownership. At best the pawn

may have been a security for money loaned just in order to buy the land pawned – a procedure well attested for that time. Whatever the actual reason and outcome, in any case the money was acquired from outside the village.

Most probably there were many more instances of loans and, as shown by the situation in 1595, there were definitely more sales, though not a single document was preserved. The process apparently started at latest in the second half of the 15th century. Though in the 15th century pawning and mortgaging were quite common up to the highest ranks of the aristocracy, this does not explain why the peasants of L had to follow suit and why money-lenders could begin to siphon off the village resources. It seems as if the general affluence of the village was gone. Those who sold whole estates, cannot have been peasants who were short of land. Only those who were fortunate enough to possess more land than they needed, could afford to sell large parts of their estates. Logical as this argument may seem, it provides no reason why these rich peasants did sell their land.

I have already stated that we should not expect peasants to invest a lot of work into poor stony soils which promise nothing but poor harvests as long as they still have more fertile lands where they can expect better harvests for less work. Given the unmodified rules of the three-field system, in the course of the centuries several areas of the territory must have reached, in the eyes of their proprietors, a stage where the input no longer rented the output. These plots could still be used as pasture, but within the village had no market value, since grazing lands were (like all fallow lands) common pasture, open for grazing to all sheep and cattle of all local villagers. This had been so from the start and to everyone's profit – even to that of the feudal lord. Leasing the grazing rights was a privilege accruing only to him, and he leased them every three years to the village as a whole for the territory as a whole. Apart from his share in the leasing fees, any landowner had to pay his hereditary rent for his privately owned land, whether fit or unfit for cultivation. The situation was the same for everyone, whether rich or poor: To have to pay for private land which was of no private use any more but served as pasture for all village sheep was nothing to vie for. This situation even may have contributed to more care for sustainability.

Keeping these preconditions in mind, we now should be in a position to better perceive what caused the breakdown of the village economy in the 15th and 16th century. During these centuries what hitherto had been costly unsellable wasteland for the owner marvellously acquired a new quality: it could be converted into money. For those who owned enough land, the time when they had to care for the

preservation of the soil fertility was gone. They could pursue short term profitability, run the land quality down and in the end still profit by selling it.

The marvel is easily explained. The town prospered, the population grew. But not everyone in town was a merchant or an artisan, many people still lived mainly from agriculture, kept some sheep and a cow. But the town territory was small. The butchers (I already mentioned them) needed more grazing land. The village nearest to the town had already been bought in 1414 from an indebted aristocrat. The best place to find more land was the village of L. It was in the hands of the convent, but the freeholders had the right to sell their estates. After the acquisition by foreigners the convent could fix new hereditary rents – the rent demanded from the town council for the grazing estate was twenty times higher than that paid by the previous owner, a peasant of L who had to pay what everyone else in L had to pay once and forever. As the sales to foreigners allowed the convent to enormously raise the rent, it was definitely not interested in preventing them.

The community of L, however, could not be happy. The foreigners, unless they also resided in L, did not pay any local taxes to the community. They also could not be fined unless they trespassed on the estates still owned by the villagers. The community, on the other hand, still had to pay the fee for the grazing rights for the whole territory, even though it could not use them any longer once the estate had been sold. (The obligation to pay the full fee for the whole territory even persisted when the duke in the middle of the 17th century ceded his leasing rights in the southwestern third of L to his minister. The village council protested and demanded the reduction of the fees by one third – in vain. Though the duke had ceded one part, he still was entitled to raise the fees for the remaining part every third year at his discretion.) In view of all these disadvantages it is not to be expected that the community as a whole was in favour of these sales. But it could do nothing in order to prevent them.

In the 15th and the 16th century there was no option of purchase for co-villagers. But even if they had had it, they would not have used it. As long as the village had ample land to serve as a pasture for all local sheep and cattle, there was no reason to spend a lot of money on what one possessed anyhow. The impoverished soils were of no immediate value to any single villager. Therefore, nobody in the village could be interested to acquire it. Perhaps some poorer peasants of L nevertheless would have been willing to invest their labour even into those fields which the rich discarded, but they did not have the means to buy them. Some of those in TC, however, had the

means due to their additional chances of gainful employment.<sup>4/</sup> As clearly shown by documents of the 17th century, some (though not all) plots which for years had been used as pasture only, during this long "fallow" period did regain enough fertility to be again used as agricultural land. But the more land was sold to foreigners the less became the options of the villagers for longer fallow periods, since an increasing number of them just did not possess enough arable land to leave one third of it untilled for years.

During the 16th century the disastrous consequences of further sales for the village as a whole became clearly visible. But the community had no legal means to intervene. Moreover it had no financial means to acquire as communal property the plots open for sale. The local taxation rates had always been low, had suffered under the impact of the creeping inflation and had been reduced even more due to the sales. No wonder then that by the middle of the 16th century the council imposed new fines on contraventions to the field rules. These fines constituted a major part of the village income. Still, even the community was forced to sell communal property in order to repay the debts incurred for yet another lawsuit against the foreigners.

As a matter of fact, all the community could do in order to repel the townspeople, was to fight against their repeated attempts to encroach on the grazing rights for the remnants of the territory. The pasture was of primary interest for the animals only, for the humans it was the rights which were decisive. If they would have been lost, also the land would be lost – whoever the owner. Since these rights also included the fallow of all cultivated fields, what started as encroachments might soon have ended up with a complete subjection. The villagers therefore started to defend their rights by all means. This so-called feud has already been mentioned, but we are now in a

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<sup>4/</sup> The document of 1595, by listing tax paying landowners (and the size of their property) and residents, allow to infer the amount of land in possession of foreigners, but it is only in exceptional cases that it lists the place of residence of these foreign owners. At that time TC for a few decennia belonged to a foreign duchy. Therefore unfortunately no comparable list exists for TC. By consulting some other documents I tried my best to find out where the foreign owners of the southern quarter of L were domiciled. Result: of the 15 southern estates 10% belonged to 5 villagers (one of them, though residing in L, a member of a family in TC), another 10% belonged to the duke's forest officer who (though being a foreigner) had to be counted as a villager since he was residing on the territory of L, at best 55% belonged to owners from TC, at least 25% to owners from the town. The total number of foreigners being 25, only half of them could be located with some certainty in TC, 3 of them members of the family running the local (flower) mill, while 3 of those who most probably were townsmen at the same time were members of a co-operative owning a saw mill in TC. Because of the distance from town, the plots owned by townspeople could be used for pasture only. This means that the number of peasants from TC and the area reused for cultivation was smaller than may have appeared from my presentation; it was only to grow in the following century. – This detail tells us that by 1595 the villagers of TC had acquired less territory in L than it may have appeared until now. This mean that by that time the total territory available to them still was considerably smaller than the total territory still in the hands of the villagers of L. Nevertheless, TC fared better and continued to expand its possessions. This difference, in my view, can only be explained by the difference in their agrarian techniques.

better position to understand why it lasted for decennia, why it became so violent, and especially why the village was ready to spend its last means in order to win the process in these seemingly endless lawsuits with the town council.

In the 16th century the village did really all in its power in order to prevent a further deterioration of the situation. That they concentrated on the grazing rights for the territory remaining under their control cannot be seen as an attempt to tackle the problem on the least important end. These rights were of major concern for all villagers, since they were decisive for all further use of the whole territory. However, they did and could not imply any right to prevent individual owners to sell their property. The community had no right to defend its territorial integrity. Every single land owner was free to sell whenever he found it convenient and to whomever he wanted. He might sell it when he wanted to settle as a businessman in town, when he wanted to make a donation for his spiritual welfare after death, when he had incurred debts he could not repay, in short, for every reason one may imagine.

This had always been the case, but within the village the land would fetch a price only as long as the soils still could be used agriculturally. Whenever it was no longer thought fit for agricultural use, no one in the village would be motivated to buy it. The change which came in the 15th century was not provided for. Foreigners offered money in order to acquire land no matter how degraded. They were so keen on acquiring it that they even did not mind to pay enormously increased hereditary rents to the feudal lord who, therefore, profited from ever more sales. Sooner or later every peasant would be tempted to convert his unprofitable land into money. No one could forbid him to avail himself of the opportunity and to behave as rational as any private land owner all over the world.

After all, the impoverishment of L was not due to the shortcomings of the three-field system which the peasants failed to amend, but the expansion of the town which instilled value into hitherto unprofitable land. This may sound paradox, since the money-flow was directed from the town to the village. But the town profited from the acquisition of the land while the peasants of L had no possibility to gainfully reinvest the money they received – unless they did so in town. Judging from the development of the population figures in the town and in the village, there is a high probability that quite a few of the peasants who sold their land also migrated to town.

When during the Thirty Years' War many peasants took refuge in town for months, they most probably could do so because they had their relatives there, not because they until recently had fought an embittered feud with the townspeople now in possession of a large area of their territory. The village people could not expect to be accosted and, together with their animals, to be given shelter by those townsmen

whose animals they again and again had tried to confiscate when they trespassed their borders. Only their relatives could be willing to accept them.

Migration rates must have been rather high, though there is little to prove this before the end of the 16th century. For the 17th century, however, it can be clearly shown by the family names. Of those recorded in 1595 neither the names of the richest families nor those of the landless reappear in 1698. Only one fifth of the family names remained constant. Thus, one may be induced to argue that the new village policy was due to newly immigrated families, perhaps sheep keepers from the town. But 4 names of the 5 richest families in 1698 were already present in 1595, their bearers belonged to the middle stratum. Hence the change was not abrupt. There are some details in the list of 1595 which indicate that already at that time some of the rich peasants of L started to acquire pasture land ("meadows") from townsmen. But there are other data from the middle of the 17th century which suggest that the territory in the possession of villagers had dwindled even more. There is nothing to prevent the conclusion that, notwithstanding the fact that their fathers by the end of the 16th century enlarged their possession, the sons and grandsons of these rich men, unless they died prematurely, once more sold their possessions and emigrated.

Whatever the individual decisions and fates, the general village situation did not drastically change. With the foreigners enmity continued. They refused any contribution to and any sharing of the enormously increased loads and ever new financial exactions imposed on the village community as a whole during war time and afterwards. And when officially judged liable to do so, the foreign owners still tried to evade any payment as best as they could. As the peasants of L had proved adamant in not ceding any rights any longer, the townsmen now started to buy land in those villages which had suffered most during the war. But the new duke put communal responsibility over individual profit and finally passed the law which provided the villagers with an option of purchase whenever their own territory was concerned. But it was not before the end of the 17th century that the village council of L could avail itself of any occasion to buy parts of the lost territory back. Before this time, it just had no money left to do so.

As I stated above, such a law would have had no effect two hundred years ago. The villagers always knew quite well that privately unprofitable land still was of value to all of them because it served as a common pasture. This fact, however, had not really mattered as long as nobody else was interested in these rights. While the number of sheep the village was allowed to hold was fixed from the beginning, the area unfit for agriculture must have slowly grown over the centuries. As a consequence the sheep had ample pasture, and there was no reason to worry when

some villagers sold their unprofitable land to townsmen and more money came into the village.

These times of carelessness had ceased when in the 16th century the appetite of the foreigners grew, even arable lands became sold, resources became scarce both for the animals and the humans, and the foreigners started to encroach on the grazing rights of the remaining territory. When the community started to defend these rights, the villagers had come to realise the new value of their land – a value imputed on it by the townsmen, not by the villagers themselves. And still it was the townsmen only who could convert this value into a durable source of money. The butchers in town had no difficulty to sell their mutton, the villagers had. Due to the monopoly rights of the town, all that the villagers could do was to sell their sheep to the butchers, but these for good reason preferred to buy the land instead. For this they could offer prices no individual villager could compete with, since for him the land was and remained unprofitable as long as he had no private rights to use the grass, for instance to feed his cows. In 1578 such rights in a meadow are mentioned for the first time. They were to become more numerous in the 17th century, but the plots in question were and remained small, a few acres only. (Also the "meadows" mentioned above for 1595 may have belonged to this category.)

It needed the experience of impoverishment to induce the villagers to fight in defence of their rights. Most probably, however, they still would have fought a losing battle, had not the Thirty Years' War tilted the chances. To be sure, the townsmen behind their walls enjoyed more security than the peasants in the open country, but the former had less chances to care for their animals. The soldiers of any army, but especially the marauders in the last years of the war, would try to appropriate all animals for themselves, either in order to still their hunger or to sell them to the highest bidder. Butchers might be forced to buy their own animals back at high prices. It became more reasonable to let the peasants run the risk. One of the first men to avail himself of this new possibility to raise sheep for sale in the town was, as has been mentioned, the duke's minister who profited from the fact that his pasture area in L was bordered by forests also owned by him. In case of danger he could have his sheep hidden in the forests.

The peasants of L had no right to do the same, but after the war they soon seized their chances to sell their sheep as well. The town was so indebted that the council decided to sell a good part of the land acquired in the preceding centuries, the more so as it had become clear that the villagers of L could not be forced to give up their remaining rights which they had learned not only to defend but also to use as a means to impede a more profitable use of the territories acquired by the townsmen.

Together with the wealth, the power of the town was gone. In order to put the economy of his wasted duchy on an even keel again, the puritanic duke, who loathed the display of luxury as practised by the rich people in town, decreed modesty and preferred to help the villages to recover.

Still, times were not rosy for the village council. Instead of the town they had a new enemy who even (if only in the form of his shepherd) resided on their village territory. And that is where the trouble started. His father, the minister, never could have been asked to pay village taxes or to contribute to the "defence costs" now imposed on the village. His son was judged liable to do so by the duke's administration, but he never was willing to accept this verdict. At the end of the 17th century the village council at times still spent more than half of its budget to pay for the lawsuits against this recalcitrant aristocrat and other foreigners who tried to evade paying their share of the "defence costs." Most of these costs accrued to the village when parts of the new army were stationed in their village. The soldiers had the right not only to be lodged but also to be fed and provided with the fodder for their horses. Whenever they did not get what they wanted they took it by force – from the villagers and not from the absentee landowners. They resented to be lodged, far from their comrades, in the aristocrats sheepfold. The owner therefore nearly always, like any other absentee land owner, could evade an immediate contribution.

No wonder then that by the end of the 17th century, when the council was allowed by the administration to adjust the local taxes to the expenditures incurred during the previous year, the council started to acquire all land which the foreign owners intended to sell. Whether the poorer peasants and the landless approved this may be doubted, since those to profit most were those who owned most sheep. But village democracy had been largely abolished. Due to the new law the administration was bound to approve such acquisitions, and that was what really counted.

I'll not repeat my statements how the sheep owners feathered their own nest, but let me add one remark. Due to the old law exploited by the duke's minister the owner of the right to lease the grazing rights also could decide not to lease them any longer, and due to the fact that these leasing right still applied to the areas bought by the foreigners as well, the association of sheep holders who had bought it must have had the possibility to do the same. They could not expropriate the foreign owners, but they could withhold the grazing rights. In this way all foreign owners of village land would lose any possibility to profit from their possessions unless they complied with the village rules. There was no need to wait any longer for an occasion to rebuy the lands used as pasture only, their foreign owners would have to sell them anyhow – in case they still could demand a price for it. The value once infused into these lands by

the townsmen was, by the very acquisition of the leasing right by the association of sheep owners, in the long run irretrievably lost for the foreign owners.

Only the villagers of TC who had bought the estates of L for agricultural use could not be ousted even when a new association of sheep holders (probably containing all important members of the first association) finally succeeded in acquiring also the leasing right for the grazing in the last part of the territory. The new association could harass the old foreign owners to the utmost by denying them any dung, but it did not succeed in driving them out. Still, it can be suspected that in the long run the villagers of L would have succeeded, provided only that the administration would have supported them.

But by now the important townspeople, called bourgeoisie, had regained enough power to once more confront, now in the name of the teeming poor and the general progress, the village elite, which in the meantime had flourished without any remarkable care for the poor. The bourgeoisie curtailed the power of the sheep owners and allowed the poor peasants to raise their productivity by planting potatoes. However, the bourgeoisie came to full power only when they provided for new working opportunities for the poor peasants and developed methods to exploit their labour force in a way the sheep owners could never have dreamt of. In order to achieve this, any adherence to medieval laws and rights would have been an obstacle. Consequently the bourgeoisie abolished them as soon as they had gained the power to do so.

For good reasons those who still owned sheep and land in L were slow in accepting the consequences of the new laws. But due to the renewed democratic principle and the new working facilities offered in town, all those hitherto disadvantaged poor people who largely had been at the mercy of the rich, could not be intimidated any more and received the opportunity to assert their interests. However, it soon turned out that their interests were not centred in acquiring land rights and in defending grazing rights. They had become members of the new working class, and whatever their ancestors might have been vying for, it was of no importance for them any longer. The town by adopting new ways in which the old rights lost all importance finally had won the battle. Once again the village was overwhelmed by forces beyond its control.

## **Summing up**

This paper intentionally violates an old scientific convention: the author should not publish his mistakes, but the results he finally judges valid. If he finds flaws in his

argumentation, he should eliminate them. If he still wanted to refer to them, he could write: "It would be wrong to assume that ... [the assumption abandoned], because ... [the reason for the abandonment]." In some way, I still did this, only rather extensively and without any prior warning that in the end I would revoke what I had argued before. As a matter of fact, I did not know the outcome when I wrote the arguments.

To be sure, this should not have prevented me to write a new version of the paper, omitting all the dead alleys. I did not do so for the simple reason that the paper now also shows what, in the beginning, it was not meant to show, but what, when still teaching at the university, I always thought I should be able to show to my students. However, for years on end, I could not find a really convincing example, unless I took recourse to papers of different authors. The first author expounded a simple thesis, the second found some flaws and tried his best to correct them so that the result now seemed plausible, the third author finally showed that there still was a detail which contradicted at least part of the assumption. The new solution which he proposed might again be contradicted, usually by the previous authors – but that's where my parallel ends.

All that this is meant to show is: we should not mistake the seeming plausibility of a thesis as a proof that it is tenable. To be sure, all of us do know this. But we all tend to believe that we are less liable to fall into this trap than others. Students – to phrase it politely – are not happy to be told that they once more committed the same mistake. The assertion (rarely given) that professors as a rule do not fare much better cannot really comfort them, since this is an abstract statement. This paper provides a concrete example, the more so as the facts calling for a revision of my thesis had already been mentioned before. I did not add them afterwards. Perhaps I mentioned them by chance only, but perhaps they also were the very reason that it came to my mind that I had overlooked something. The lesson to be learned from this: it is better to keep all facts in mind than to trust in the validity of one's judgement.

In all of my paper I did not wilfully change any facts, but I used them selectively, weighed and composed them differently, thereby creating different scenarios. I did so in trying to convince myself, at the same time hoping that others would be convinced as well. This procedure, however, implies the possibility that you will deceive yourself. This, to be sure, all of us also do know as well; but we tend to forget it as easily as the peasants of L in the 15th century forgot that what individually had to be judged unprofitable was of enormous relevance for their future life.

I am far from maintaining that the modern "business world" is more considerate, on the contrary. Even some Bambuti (mentioned in the beginning of this paper)

selling their forest have become aware of the usefulness of short term profitability. This example shows that the 15th century peasants of L were not slow in adapting to the new conditions, on the contrary, they were quick in availing themselves of the new opportunities offered by the development in the town. In the past, the rules of the three-field system concerning grazing rights had prevented that pasture land had any market value. But they could not prevent the growing demand of the market in town. Once this new market value became visible, those villagers of L who could afford a transaction (that is those who had ample land) underwent a process of "rapid modernisation," quite unlike their poor "backward" neighbours in TC.

The trouble was that the communal value of these lands was higher than the price received by the individual owners, while the community as such had no right to interfere.<sup>5/</sup> The only institution which at that time could have prevented the sales was the feudal lord, i. e., the convent. But the convent too profited from the sales to foreigners, since they provided a unique opportunity to raise the heritable rent. We do not know whether and to which extent the situation changed when, after 1525, the convent was shut down and the village reverted under the sole power of the duke. We know that the village did retain its old special rights, but it is also the fact that after 1525 the village had to defend its autonomy against the attacks of the town council. During the resulting "feud" the villagers often reacted emotionally and by resorting to physical force lowered their chances to win before the courts. Though

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<sup>5/</sup> Since I started with the swidden cultivators of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, let me add some sort of parallel, though these people never became the private owners of their land. The colonial power declared their land to be "unclassified state forest." For the hill people this had no immediate consequences except for the fact that henceforth they had to pay a tax whenever they cultivated a swidden. (Most probably, already the previous local rulers had demanded a similar tax, but in kind.) This colonial tax was a real burden in the beginning, but due to inflation its value gradually became less and finally, as it was never raised, a mere token payment. When the postcolonial government enacted a law by which the hill peasants could buy their land in order to become individual owners (and to pay considerably higher taxes), most of them saw little reason to incur additional expenses and to buy what in fact they had possessed since long.

But when land, and especially bamboo and wood, became extremely scarce in the plains, the resources of the hill people soon became plundered by foreigners, i. e., by encroaching plains people. The hill people even forewent the materials to build their houses, unless they bought at rising prices what formerly they could cut free of charge. Once more, they had no legal right to defend their territory. The government, while blaming the loss of resources on the hill people and embarking on enforced "reforestation," sponsored mass immigration of plains people. In the meantime, probably 50% of the territory has been lost to the "foreigners," whether poor settlers or absentee landowners of high ranking. This time, the result of this policy was not a hundred years feud, but a dirty local war which by now has been going on for nearly 30 years. But participation is not the same for all hill people. Those who lost most at the same time are those who are most integrated in the dominant society and have many well-to-do members. These (comparable to the villagers of L) put up most resistance. Those least affected, the most "backward" (uneducated and poor) and at the same time "real" hill people (comparable to the villagers of TC) until now stayed aloof. And yet history does not repeat itself. The problem of this comparison is that I had to enlarge the area (which may be permitted) and to compress the time sequence (which may distort the facts). To be sure, I could evade the problem by simply deleting this footnote. Having warned the reader by my previous comments on my procedure, I prefer to retain it.

they had to pay highly for these faults, they learned rather quickly how to adapt to the rules of these courts with which they had no prior experiences. In the end, the town council had to give up.

But the territory lost remained lost (it had been sold in conformity with the law). Impoverished and landless peasants now formed a majority in the village. However, under the old democratic system of the village, they still had full voting rights. Couldn't they, by now fully conscious of the value of the temporarily and permanently uncultivated areas, have amended the old rules of the three-field system in such a way as to provide them with better facilities to make a living? The answer must be in the negative, not because of the political influence of those still rich, but because these rules, put into written form in 1553, formed the sacrosanct basis of the defence system against the attack of the town council. All substantial amendments just had to be deferred.

The Thirty Years' War spoiled all hopes (if they still existed) of the town council to acquire full power over the village, but the poorer majority still could not change the rules, since after the war the democratic village system was abolished by the absolutist duke. The rich, never keen on abolishing the old rules which served their interests, quite successfully adapted to the new legal situation. They not only managed to buy, in "common interest," the leasing right of the grazing rights as far as it still was in the hands of the duke, but they even regained some of the land owned by townspeople.

In the Southern part, however, the leasing right had been ceded by the duke to one of his ministers. Thus, the village council had no possibility to drive out the settlers from TC. When finally even the right for this territory could be acquired, the superior power had changed its policy. The old rules of the three-field system (the re-application of which would have served quite well to drive out the settlers) had to be abolished and the methods in the meantime adopted by the villagers in TC had to be adopted in L as well. The sheep keepers who ruled the village lost a considerable amount of their pastures, and in the end all the rights they had acquired at high price became useless. They did their best to resist, but keeping sheep was out and planting potatoes was in. Adaptation to the local habitat no longer was a right of the peasants, but a process decreed from above.

In effect this was nothing deplorable. Since the time of absolutism the rights of the peasants were rather tilted in favour of the rich. But even in the time of a democratic village constitution, the villagers never were free to decide by themselves about the rules of land use. They were subjected to a state which, after decreeing the laws (especially the duties) of private ownership, legalised their rules. This estate

liberally enabled the selling of private property to outsiders, thereby disabling the villagers to defend the integrity of their village territory. Hunting, fishing and grazing remained the privilege of the landgraves and dukes who, however, leased the grazing rights to the village as a community.

It was up to the villagers to make their own rules regarding the use of their territory for both agriculture and herding. These rules were acknowledged by the state and could serve as a legal basis for court judgements. Foreigners entering the territory of the village had to comply with them – unless they had the power to disregard them. While foreign soldiers were terrible but passing events, the less violent town council and other rich townsmen became a lasting threat. After having bought part of the estates, they tried to get access to the pastures of the remaining village territory as well and thus to break up the exclusive rights the villagers had allocated to themselves. One hundred years later the duke's minister tried the same (though in a more limited area), this time more successfully.

In all these events power was the dominating factor, power to make laws and rules (and to override them). Power set the framework for the peasants' behaviour, but it was not the driving force behind it – except in situations where power could be bought. That is to say, first of all the peasants tried to make a living by their economic activity, but when their products could be converted into money and money could be used to buy power (more specifically: the rights ensuing from it), those who could afford it availed themselves of this possibility. Since the right to use a resource is a subcategory of the whole system, this process from the start was inherent in the village structure: land could be bought and grazing rights could be leased. At a higher level (beyond the reach of the common man) even whole villages and towns – more exactly: the right to collect the heritable rent in these places – could be bought, pawned, or donated. This whole state-made set-up was an artificial environment beyond the influence of peasants, except on the lowest level: the village-made rules.

By now, the reason for the flaw in my original hypothesis becomes clear: As an anthropologist trained in the realm of "simple societies" I concentrated on the lowest level. Except in the founding years, the state could not be seen to intervene in the village affairs. From the beginning it had curtailed the peasants' freedom to exploit all kinds of natural resources and had demanded rents and grazing fees for the use of the soils, but it had also granted them certain exemptions from socage duties normally imposed on the subjects. The villagers had become accustomed to this kind of framework, were proud to be "free men," and indeed were free to decide about their own affairs – a situation very similar to that which, in the last centuries, an

anthropologist might find with many so-called simple and even some peasant societies.

Thus, when after several hundreds of years something went wrong with their resources while a neighbouring village with much poorer resources experienced no such difficulties, it seemed obvious that the reasons for this development had to be found in some detail of their traditional way of handling their resources, a detail not shared with the neighbouring village. This detail could be located in the limited flexibility of the three-field system imported from the plains and not very well suited for the new environment. While during my revisions of the original thesis this fact seemed to disappear more and more, a closer look at the situation in the area of L bordering TC however revealed that it was a major factor. By 1595 the villagers of TC had acquired less territory in L as it might appear at first. Thus, without their different techniques they would not have been able to nourish approximately the same population on a still more limited territory.

However, the question remained: why did the peasants of L not change their rules? This led to the next question: who had to suffer most from the deficiencies of the rules? There could be no doubt: those with small territories. They had the least possibility to take the necessary measures to prevent a further decline in the fertility of their soils, and they probably had, despite the democratic village system, the smallest chances to effect a change in the old rules. If they had to give up cultivation, the other villagers could still graze their sheep on the land.

This may be correct, but it really cannot explain why in the end the villagers had sold more than half of their territory to foreigners. Not only is it unreasonable to expect the poor to have owned more than half of the territory, but we also have to ask us why it was not the rich villagers who acted as buyers, especially when the shortage of land also reduced the pasture and thereby effected the rich peasants as well. Moreover, there must have been (despite their better techniques) a still greater number of poor peasants in the neighbouring village with but one third of the territory, but (by 1600) nearly the same number of inhabitants. As a consequence, it cannot have been the poor who paved the way to the poverty of the whole village – it must have been the rich. But what induced them to do so?

The state did not interfere, but it had set the framework. Officially all laws were declared to be valid once and for all times. Nobody had been so bold as to declare that this was the best way to prosperity (and for the ruling class it definitely was not), but the urban centres managed to flourish. The laws provided for approximately equal heritable rents on landed property, but they did not foresee the development (due to the market) of differential rents many times superior to the heritable rents

fixed forever. It took the rulers hundreds of years to adapt, the rich peasants reacted immediately. They made money of degraded land which due to the traditional laws could not have any private value for them.

This is the very process anthropologists by now can study all over the world. Land and other resources which by traditional laws and for the common benefit could not have any market value, fall prey to the market imposed from outside. Peasants who can afford it do adapt for their own benefit – and thereby join the ranks of those who have been called the "compradores bourgeoisie" – to the detriment of the community.

It would seem that the poor cannot have any say in this matter, but this is not quite true. The villagers of TC did not sell their land. It was too precious for them. They could not afford to keep many sheep; but those who had settled out into the territory of L had to accept the dominance of the aristocratic sheep holders. These peasants paid to be allowed to use their lands for more profitable use (by planting potatoes). In order to alleviate the general scarcity of food, the new bourgeois government finally accepted the abolishment of the three-field system and thereby deprived the sheep holders of their power basis.

I leave it to the reader to adapt this scenery to the modern world-wide dominance of those stock (instead of merely sheep) holders who use the marvellous forces of the market to tap the natural resources all over the world in order to squander them for their own benefit, maintaining that they do it for the common welfare. The flaw of this comparison is obvious: is there anyone to take the place of the 19th century revolutionary bourgeoisie?