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Subsistence economy, pluriactivity and family labour in rural Austria during the first decades of the 20th century

This paper deals with working class families living and working in the austrian countryside during the first decades of the 20th century. It draws mainly on autobiographical records from the rich “Documentation of life stories at the University of Vienna”. A considerable number of these records has been written by people (mainly women) who grew up in rural regions, in the Austrian Alplands (in Lower and Upper Austria, Salzburg, Carinthia and Styria). The paper draws on texts by authors born in the late 19th and the early 20th century. These texts permit historians look into people’s everyday lives, the division of labour within households and the way rural family economies functioned at a micro-level.

Subsistence economy, pluriactivity and mobility were integral and interrelated parts of these households’ survival strategies. Furthermore, subsistence economy and pluriactivity could be strongly, weakly, structurally or conjucturally related to the peasant world and thus to agricultural economy. They could contribute to the functioning of peasant economy and society, but they could also signal a gradual detachment from the peasant world.

For the most part we deal with people and households that belonged to the so-called “rural underclasses” (a translation of “ländliche Unterschichten”) and thus, in Michael Mitterauer’s words “to those groups of the rural population, who are not considered to be full peasants (a useful but controversial term, since pluriactivity is to be found in peasant households as well, M.P.) and who, in terms of prestige, rank under the peasants”. They were cottagers, rural poor living in huts on the peasant farm, and/or smallholders (oscillating between the peasant and the cottager world, especially in regions where property was divided among all heirs, as was the case in West Tirol and Vorarlberg). In the early 20th century austrian population censuses, these people and the households they lived in were usually registered as “day labourers” in a sweeping way, which does not do justice to their social rank and the complexity of their household economies and does not allow for subsistence and pluriactivity to be seen. 45 percent of the working population in the Austrian Alplands were occupied in the primary sector in 1900, 27 percent in 1934. A little more than 30 percent were registered as “workers” in the 1900 census, but almost half of the working population (47 percent) in 1934. In 1934 one fifth of these “workers” appear to have worked in agriculture and forestry. These numbers certainly include rural working classes and their households.

Qualitative evidence shows that subsistence was central to rural working class family economies. Small pieces of land were cultivated and a few small animals (hens, goats) together with a cow were kept, so that family members (parents and children, since

nuclear households dominated) could be fed for the most part of the year. Furthermore wood, small branches, mushrooms and all sorts of berries were gathered from forests: Wood was used to cook and as a heating material, small branches and their leaves were used to feed the animals, mushrooms and berries enriched the family's diet. All family members worked within the context of subsistence economy, though mainly mothers and children (up to around twelve years old). Women were primarily responsible for land plots and animals: Authors constantly refer to their mothers as the ones who would cultivate cereals and vegetables, take care of hens and milk animals or collect firewood and animal feed (fathers appear collecting firewood and roots as well, but in a limited number of cases). Furthermore, they constantly remember themselves as young children working on their mothers' side or being assigned tasks that related to subsistence economy (typically collecting mushrooms and berries from the forest) by their mothers. Not surprisingly, mothers appear to have been exclusively responsible for what we call housework (in the strict sense of the term, namely cooking, cleaning, caring for infants). However, in early 20th century and interwar rural Austria such "reproductive" (to use a common but controversial term) activities were in fact impossible to separate from subsistence economy, which directly and exclusively served the needs of family members.

In early 20th century and interwar rural Austria, subsistence economy characterized peasant households to different extents. But peasant subsistence economies were of a much larger scale than those of the rural working classes, often involved work by non family members and a part of the rural products (even if small) was usually meant for the market. At the same time, subsistence economy appears to have been part of reciprocal relations between cottagers and peasants living in the same region. Local peasants usually granted cottagers and, to a lesser extent, small peasants, pieces of land, animals as well as rights (the right for goats and cows to graze on peasant land, for people to collect various goods in peasant property). Peasants would do so mainly in exchange for men's, women's and children's labour; historians note that, in the late 19th century, peasants in Austria tried to increase the number of cottagers and small peasants in order to restrain rural exodus and secure labour force for their farms. Cottagers and small peasants provided "full" peasants not only with labouring hands when needed, at peak times, but also, especially where peasant economy largely focused on animal husbandry, with rural servants. By the age of twelve (sometimes even earlier) their sons and daughters would enter rural service, thus relieving family economy and often also directly contributing to it for the first few years (f.e. by handing over a part of their in kind or cash payments to their parents). In the late 1980s the Austrian historian Norbert Ortmayr examined rural service within the context of reciprocal relations in an upper austrian community and his findings appear to apply, with variations, for large parts of the Austrian Alplands as a whole.

Women and children working on peasant farms at peak times, children herding peasant animals in summer, children entering rural service: In regard to rural working classes, subsistence economy was inextricably linked to a peasant related pluriactivity which took place at an individual as well as a group level, but was certainly the result of family (and not individual) strategies. Furthermore peasant related pluriactivity

could take non work forms within the context of religious festivities and customs, whereby peasants provided the rural poor with necessary goods. Thus in the case of the rural poor pluriactivity related to moral economy in the broader sense of it.

Pluriactivity was however only partly related to peasant economy and society. At family level it took the form of adult members of the household group or the household group as a whole working on behalf of non peasants (which usually, though not necessarily, meant that they worked in the secondary, and to a lesser extent, in the tertiary sector). This pluriactivity off agricultural and indeed off rural economy, was often combined with mobility and regarded primarily men, namely, according to our sources, the authors' fathers: the latter worked as peddlers, masons during summer (especially in Vienna), factory workers, miners. In industrial regions mothers may have worked in factories as well. When not combined with mobility, pluriactivity off rural economy basically meant that family members (the whole family group or smaller groups of family members) worked in domestic industry. Domestic textile industry was still alive in rural, mountainous Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia in 1900. Well into the interwar period domestic industry and the putting out system in weaving, knitting or embroidering still existed in a handful of Austrian mountainous regions, the Vorarlberg, the upper Mühlviertel in Upper Austria and the upper Waldviertel in Lower Austria. In our sample there are examples of cottager families increasing their income through weaving and we know that in 1900 in Mühlviertel most of the 429 domestic workers' households counted by the factory inspectors belonged (or were thought to belong) to the "cottager families" ("Kleinhäuslerfamilien").

Now, the links of rural working class families with the peasant economy and society could be of different strength and character. In contemporary language "cottagers" and their families were integrated in the peasant economy and society in many ways. Labour ties between peasant and cottager households were long, continuous, intertwined with other social ties (f.e. godparenthood) and involved more or less almost everyone in the "cottager family".

On the other hand, domestic industry or factory work must have opened the way for independence and towards a less "peasant" way of life, where people were paid in cash and could buy things. There are rural working class families in our sample who sent their sons enter an apprenticeship or factory work, who sent their daughters to a factory or as housemaids in the city, usually after sons and daughters had first spent a few years in rural service. Pluriactivity outside the peasant economy and society may then well have loosened the links of the rural working classes to the peasants.

The case of railwaymen families is most interesting and remains historiographically unnoticed. Former rural servants became signalmen in the countryside, which meant regular wages and also crucial payments in kind (notably free coal). Subsistence economy was indispensable for the households' survival, but for the most part did not rely on peasant generosity; however work relations with peasants (in a way the continuation of former relations) appear to have been important from time to time.

Ties with rural economy encouraged pluriactivity and ensured a decent standard of living.

Furthermore, working class families in urban space (notably in Vienna) appear to have kept strong economic, in fact labour ties with their rural families of origin and the respective rural communities, far beyond regular visits and summer holidays in the countryside. In our sample we find mothers and children spending the summer in the countryside and working on the grandparents' farm or on behalf of other peasants, older children being sent to relatives in the countryside in order to work, whole families moving to the countryside and becoming rural for a few years (notably during the First World War), whereby agricultural labour dominated everyday life. In these cases pluriactivity goes hand in hand with the restructuring of the urban household, its (temporary) transformation into a rural one and a historiographically rather neglected form of labour mobility at the microlevel: from the city to the countryside and not vice versa.

During the first decades of the 20th century subsistence economy was very much alive in rural Austria. Peasant economy was to a considerable extent a subsistence economy and the same was true for the rural working class this paper deals with. Rural working class households combined subsistence economy with pluriactivity, but depending on how strong their ties to peasants were, subsistence economy reinforced or ran parallel to other occupations. Pluriactivity partly included working on behalf of the peasant economy and society, and partly meant that people turned to industrial and urban labour market. It could reinforce social, economic and thus labour ties within rural societies, but could also weaken such ties. It could reflect and reinforce integration into peasant society (as in the case of "cottagers") or the households' gradual detachment from it. And when we examine the history of subsistence economy, pluriactivity and mobility in rural spaces, we should take into account that under specific circumstances and in turbulent time periods urban families may become rural, providing peasant economy with working hands.