

SUMMARIES OF LECTURES in ECO 303Y1:
the Economic History of Modern Europe, to 1914
for the Academic Year: 2012 - 2013

Updated: Thursday, 23 January 2013

XV. Week no. 15: Lecture Topic no. 18, part 2: on 23 January 2013:

The French Revolution and French Agriculture, 1789 - 1914:

1) The concluding part of lecture 18 examined the consequence of the French Revolutionary Land Reforms ("peasant emancipation"), with the supposed abolition of Feudalism, Manorialism (Seigniorialism), and Serfdom (virtually extinct by the Revolution):

a) The Revolutionary Land Reforms of 1789 - 95: designed to abolish feudalism, manorialism, and serfdom (or its remnants), with the goal of achieving 'peasant emancipation'

i) such changes pertained chiefly only to northern France (north of the Loire), and pertained chiefly only to the villein peasant tenants under former feudal-seigneurial regimes.

ii) Because métayage (share-cropping), which became so predominant in France south of the Loire, was non-feudal, it was left untouched by the first Revolution, and abolished only in the second Revolution of 1848.

iii) Inheritance Law of 1795: stipulated that all lands (property) be subdivided equally amongst all male heirs on their inheritance: supposedly led to:

- (1) piecemeal subdivisions to very small, uneconomically-sized holdings
- (2) demographic stagnation also a consequence: to prevent further uneconomic subdivisions of inherited holdings, more and more French peasant families chose to have fewer and fewer children
- (3) most male heirs, guaranteed their share of the family farm, would not leave their farms to seek their livelihood elsewhere, and would not marry until inheriting their share ==> delayed age of marriage ==> smaller family sizes (as features of the European Marriage Pattern)

iv) hindrances to enclosures provided perhaps the chief negative consequences:

- (1) meant the lack of Convertible Husbandry (for reasons discussed in English enclosures)
- (2) inability of either landlords or their tenants to acquire mortgages: which required defined ownership
- (3) hindrance (if not inability) to adopt and use more advanced techniques: requiring collective consent of all communal peasant tenants
- (4) inability to breed better forms of livestock: breeding impossible with intermingled communal flocks, herds

v) why peasants and even some landlords preferred to retain communal farming:

- (1) economic security and stability provided by village risk-sharing (as seen earlier, in England)
- (2) accommodating disguised unemployment
- (3) for landlords: whose demesne lands were intermingled with tenancies in open-fields: to gain the benefit of having the tenants plough their lands

vi) **Only the coming of French railroads in 1850s promoted voluntary enclosures:**

- (1) by peasants who agreed to swap holdings to form consolidated plots:
- (2) in that railways promoted more profitable forms of market-oriented agriculture
- (3) but such enclosures still meant very small sized holdings: unlike large-scale capitalist farms in England and eastern Germany (Prussia: see later).

b) **Common Assumptions about the economic consequences:**

- i) severe impediments to engaging in enclosures and in achieving scale economies
- ii) agricultural inefficiency: low productivity, per unit of manpower and per hectare of land
- iii) inadequate supplies of industrial raw materials from agriculture
- iv) inadequate savings and capital investments in agriculture: because of low productivity
- v) labour immobility: insufficient labour released for urban industries
- vi) demographic stagnation: slow population growth
- vii) slow and incomplete industrial urbanization
- viii) slow growth in domestic demand for industrial goods: inadequate market growth

c) **evidence for demographic and economic stagnation in French agriculture to 1914:**

i) **various tables demonstrating** low birth rates, low rates of population growth, far less urbanization than in Britain and Germany, far lower levels of agricultural productivity.

ii) **government survey of French farming in 1881:**

- (1) demonstrating that 87.5% of the 3,504,000 French farms were under 20 hectares (50 acres).
- (2) On the other while large estates, those over 40 hectares (100 acres) constituted only 4.1% of the number of farms, they accounted for 45.9% of the total area. As March Bloch had observed, the reconstitution of large estates, from the 1480s to the 1780s, though only piecemeal and scattered, was left largely unchanged by the French revolution

2) **French agriculture from the French Revolution to World War I: 1789 - 1914: a survey noting alternating cycles of growth and stagnation:**

a) **agricultural productivity in France, Britain, and Germany, 1815 - 1914:**

This lecture concluded with evidence for an explanation of why outputs and productivity in French agriculture were so much lower than in either Great Britain or Germany

i) the comparison with Britain is skewed by Britain's abandonment of much of its agriculture, as it obeyed the Law of Comparative Advantage after the adoption of Free Trade and Agriculture,

ii) while France and Germany resorted to higher tariff protection to insulate their farmers from the flood of cheap foreign grains, that resulted from the post-1870 transportation revolutions.

c) **In summary, the British advantages over the French:** lay in having more than twice as much land and three times as much capital per farmer.

i) **In that same context, we discussed Patrick O'Brien's thesis of 'path dependency':** to explain why Great Britain became an industrialized and urbanized economy, reducing its agricultural sector so dramatically, long before France.

ii) The essence of the 'path dependency' thesis (Patrick O'Brien), to explain the French failure to transform its agricultural sector, lay in:

- (1) France's natural resource endowments, climate, and topography: why they were inferior to those found in England.
- (2) and the legal-institutional inheritance that explained the strengths and continuity of communal farming, i.e., the failure to achieve enclosures before the Revolution. But that thesis logically pertains only to northern France and we brought forth other reasons for southern France, involving the institution of métayage or share-cropping.
- (3) in essence, the typical English (or later, typical Prussian) farmer had far more land and far more capital (especially in the form of livestock) at his disposal than did the typical French farmer - but within France, the same comparison explains why northern French farmers were more productive than southern French farmers

3. The Fundamental Questions Posed in Lecture Topic no. 18 on French Agriculture:

a) Were the perceived faults of French agriculture in the 19th century the product of:

i) ill-advised features of the French Revolutionary Land Reforms, in particular:

- (1) guaranteeing the property rights of French peasants to the extent of preventing Enclosures, and thus the adoption of Convertible Husbandry, scale-economies, mechanization, etc.
- (2) The 1795 Inheritance Law: requiring equal subdivision of peasant holdings by inheritance, thus leading to continual 'morcellement': or piece-meal, small-scale holdings

ii) or the 'Path Dependency' thesis: Patrick O'Brien's thesis that France was the victim of:

- (1) a combination of climate, topography and natural resource endowment inferior to those of Britain (and Germany)
- (2) the deeply imbedded survival of institutional features of French feudal-manorial agriculture: those that were the product of the pro-royalist anti-aristocratic legal decisions of the French Parlement guaranteeing the property rights of French peasants (but in fact only of the feudal villein peasants in the North)

iii) How does the O'Brien thesis deal with French agriculture south of the Loire: and the problem of non-feudal métayage (and how did I deal with the problem?)

b) Did the faults of 19th century French agriculture provide the principal impediments to the economic growth and industrialization of 19th-century France: in particular its slow rate of population growth and urbanization

c) To what extent did the French Revolutionary Land Reforms provide the model for land reforms and agrarian changes elsewhere in 19th century continental Europe: especially in Germany and Russia.