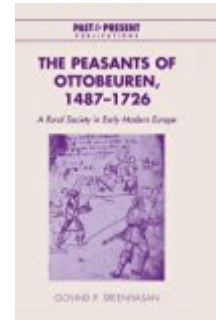


**Govind P. Sreenivasan.** *The Peasants of Ottobeuren, 1487-1726: A Rural Society in Early Modern Europe.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. xvii + 386 pp. \$85.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-521-83470-4.



**Reviewed by** David Sabeau

**Published on** H-German (June, 2005)

Sreenivasan continues a (now) long tradition of American scholars raising large, significant questions by writing detailed monographs on small rural places in Early Modern Germany. His intention is to take on the hoary question of the transition from feudalism to capitalism and ask whether the early modern period is a major one of transition or just a temporal marker of no particular significance. The older debate centered around an interpretation inspired by Malthus, on the one hand, that saw the low technological levels and organization incapable of breaking the "trap" of population pressure on the food supply and, on the other hand, a view inspired by Marx that concentrated on forms of exploitation to understand the crisis of feudal relationships. Sreenivasan thinks that the reigning explanation has tipped towards Malthus, and he wants to go over the evidence once again. What he finds "implausible" is the idea that because towards the end of the sixteenth century the European economy failed to raise the grain supply and in many areas saw a fall in production, nothing changed in the organization of the economy. Clearly around 1800 the European economy had not surpassed China

and many other parts of the world--as the research of Bin Wong and Kenneth Pomeranz has now convincingly shown--yet, within a few decades its productivity in industry and agriculture shot way ahead. The explanation for the take-off, Sreenivasan argues, lies in the significant changes in the previous two centuries.

Ottobeuren, a monastery territory with about 8,000 subjects, provides Sreenivasan with the opportunity to dig into the complex details that are necessary to take up the old questions with a fresh eye. He begins his account with the social and tenurial changes during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, putting the Peasants' War of 1525 in the context of a hundred years of negotiation between lord and subjects. In the fourteenth century, the monastery control of land was unsystematic and not subject to documentation or written regulations. A great deal of land had fallen into the hands of *ministeriales* or burghers from the town of Memmingen, who in turn leased it to the peasantry. In the course of the fifteenth century, the monastery reclaimed its rights over land, developed an administration, and took steps to

document its tenancies. Hand in hand with this developed a group of village patriarchs who held large farms and wrested from the monastery favorable inheritance rights. Interestingly enough, the largest tenancies were formally subject to the shortest tenures, but they *de facto* tended to stay within the elite families. Sreenivasan denies that the monastery's lordship was either arbitrary or exploitative. Even after the Peasants' War, the abbot's authority was not a regular presence in the villages and remained rather "episodic." In any event, the larger tenants became fully invested in the monastery's overlordship, especially with the very significant and growing social differentiation consonant with a long-term rise in population. Rural elites controlled offices and dominated the resources in the village (*Gemeinde*), and indeed the Peasants' War--initiated by the elites--can be seen as an attempt to extend their control of the *Gemeinde*.

Sreenivasan stresses the great degree of autonomy of villagers even after the crushing of the peasants during the 1525 uprising. Indeed, despite resistance on the part of the abbot, peasants, on the basis of their strong tenurial rights, reacted to the growing population by partitioning their farms among their heirs--or at least the male heirs. He emphasizes that exchange relations of all kinds connected villagers with each other, with the monastery, and with the outside, but, and this is the important point, the economy was barely monetized. People exchanged goods of all kinds, but seldom made cash transactions. Furthermore, although the central markets were crucial for the economy of each farm, they were not able to integrate the region. For example, as Sreenivasan shows, four villages within walking distance of each other had prices for the same goods that varied by almost 70 percent.

Sreenivasan takes up the problem of the so-called seventeenth-century "crisis," which has been examined largely in terms of population, stagnating and declining, and grain prices, which

in the short run fluctuated wildly and in the long run also declined. In the Ottobeuren territory, indeed, population reached a peak in the 1560s and sloped off to between 80 and 90 percent of its earlier level by 1620. To get at the problem, Sreenivasan wants to shift the argument from productivity to production. Various agricultural techniques to raise productivity were well known in the region, tried out from time to time, but just not adopted. It turns out--after a careful review of the sources--that rural Ottobeuren produced more than enough to feed itself, and there can be no argument that the decline in population was related to starvation. As for extraction providing an explanation, that too is not documentable. There has been an argument that lords of Upper Swabia reinforced serfdom as a means of saving their sinking incomes. The problem here is that Ottobeuren was wealthy and well run, and, while following a policy of making all of its subjects "serfs," income from serfdom was a trivial part of their total income. Indeed, there is evidence of a growing peasant agricultural surplus towards the end of the sixteenth century. In short, the history of Ottobeuren calls the notion of a production crisis into question. Yet while the households as a whole produced a surplus, production was very uneven and a large majority of the population did not produce enough from their land to feed themselves. They had to find other sources of income, not the least of which was employment by the monastery itself.

If the notion of agrarian "crisis" will not do, why did the population decline? First of all, it is important to see that, until the end of the nineteenth century, the population was never larger than in the 1560s, so the land-population nexus does not do much good as an explanatory variable. What did happen in the second half of the sixteenth century was a reconfiguration of inheritance rules by the tenants and monastery. They established primogeniture, brought an end to the partitioning of farms, enforced out-migration of young men, and capped the number of house lots that were available in each village. The mecha-

nism for this was to monetize familial relations: fathers sold farms to the heirs, who in turn were responsible for paying off the other siblings. All this happened before famine could become a reality. It also meant that the heir subjected himself to long-term debt. So the transformation involved a new style of householding, which actually led to even greater prosperity for individual farmers and cottagers (who relatively did even better).

This new household did not look like the old one (earlier two generations of married couples had not been allowed to live in the same house). For one thing there was a radical rise in the number of servants, and two generational households sprang up for the first time. With more labor, production was done more efficiently and intensively. Relations among kin came to be regulated by an elaborate set of contracts, and the newly monetized and capitalized household now was preoccupied with investment and yield. One cannot see here a peasant family economy whose dynamics are opposed to capitalism. Households entered into all kinds of by-employments, especially the spinning of thread and production of flax, both of which required ever greater labor inputs. Households, villages, and regions increased production through specialization. Sreenivasan is also able to document a rise in smuggling, travel to more distant markets, and the introduction of foreign peddlers, all indications of greater economic diversification.

If one wants to use the word "crisis"--"catastrophe" would be the better word--then it comes with the Thirty Years' War, with death from marauding soldiers and plague, mass migration, and arbitrary and burdensome exactions from armies and competing states. When things settled down, the monastery soon learned that the best thing to do was to untangle property rights, write off debts, and begin a policy of careful management--meaning at one level a proliferation of surveys and ledgers. But here the old "institutional matrix" of property rights, kinship, lordship

and town-country relations reestablished itself under different population conditions. The number of households was greatly reduced (at 40 percent), but their size continued to increase, with siblings, parents, "indwellers," and servants, the latter of which once again considerably increased in numbers. In fact servanthood became a life-cycle experience for all the farm children of the region. If before the war, Ottobeuren peasants produced an excess beyond subsistence of around 67 percent, in the postwar era, they produced two-and-a-half times their subsistence needs. But the rules of inheritance were reinforced, sex was put under stricter controls (a low point in illegitimacy and prenuptial pregnancy), and the age of marriage rose significantly. Sreenivasan documents the persistence of the prewar elite. Patriarchal control over the conditions of the transmission of land explains, accordingly, the new kind of household. In order to understand what went on, we can no longer posit automatic reactions of population to economic variables but must look at the particular mechanisms of power. There is no homeostatic system to be found here, but, at the end of the seventeenth century, an expansion and diversification of the economy, within a policy of strict population control. Peasant households took up the production of linen cloth and *Branntwein* and commercial activity in interregional grain trade. In fact the industrialization of Switzerland is closely tied to the grain supply from Upper Swabia.

So what changed during the period? Peasant households became fully commercialized and familial relations monetized. All households were fully integrated into the market, which in turn was able to integrate the prices of the region. Economic development of the region continued for two centuries to maintain certain characteristics that came out of the long seventeenth century--a landscape characterized by medium-sized farms, inheritances purchased by the heirs, and life-cycle servanthood for all the children of a farm. Peasants, regarding the household, had come "to con-

ceive of the whole not as an organic unity, but as an aggregate of heterogeneous and potentially antagonistic interests needing active management and formal certification to maintain harmony" (p. 352).

Sreenivasan conceptualizes his work within the new economic history concerned with putting Europe within a comparative perspective, on the one hand, and reconceptualizing the history of parts of Europe without asking why they are not England, on the other. The central perspective he offers is a shift from looking at productivity (how many bushels of wheat can be produced from a given field) to production (how did farmers feed themselves, enter into the market, develop complex forms of income, regulate their households). To do this he has had to move to the micro level and examine, in a detailed and exacting way, a network of social relationships culled from an imaginative and rigorous use of the sources. The microhistorical approach offers excellent tools for taking apart the given narratives of change, but is not as clear on the kind of knowledge it ultimately provides. Is Sreenivasan offering us a new narrative? Can one generalize from Ottobeuren? Is Ottobeuren typical? My own sense is that the power of his brilliant analysis lies in its heuristic, in the way it poses new questions, points to new objects to examine, and stimulates imaginative exploitation of the masses of sources lying around in German archives. This book may be about a small place (a very beautiful small place), but it takes on very significant issues that go to the heart of German social and economic development, and along the way offers an important new perspective on the Peasants' War of 1525, a critical reevaluation of the "crisis" of the seventeenth century, a novel way of thinking about the history of the family and household, and a fresh view on rural folk as key players in the creation of their own history (not exactly, perhaps, as they would have wished).

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**Citation:** David Sabeian. Review of Sreenivasan, Govind P. *The Peasants of Ottobeuren, 1487-1726: A Rural Society in Early Modern Europe*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. June, 2005.

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