

John Broad and Anton Schuurman (Eds.)

## **Wealth and Poverty in European Rural Societies from the Sixteenth to the Nineteenth Century**

Turnhout, Brepols, 2014, 253 páginas

**T**he book under review is the 10<sup>th</sup> volume of the Rural History in Europe series, a series that put forth important contributions to a comparative historiographical survey of European rural societies. The present volume contains ten articles on material culture and living conditions in the European countryside, covering south and central Europe, including Denmark as representative of the northern part of Europe.

The authors aim at contributing to an ongoing discussion of the development of material culture, standard of living and industriousness in the European countryside. Most of the articles analyse inventories, or probate inventories, to get insights into belongings and treasures of rural people in the past. One result of these comparative studies, though, are the shortcomings of these sources when it comes to detailed information, especially on small and slow changes in items as clothing, furniture or lightening. Not to forget the socio-economic bias of these sources, that are mostly available for the middle classes, but less often for the very rich and only scarcely for the poor. It is evident from the start that it is not an easy task acquire knowledge on the development of living standards and economic development from these sources.

Anton Schuurman starts in his introduction to sound out the relationship between material culture and economic de-

velopment, pointing at achievements of historiographical research, but also at pitfalls and contradictory interpretations of results. As an expert in his field, he also provides a thorough overview of approaches, indicators, ways to cope with questions and obstacles the sources might involve. He picks up this topics in his final article, claiming that the whole story has not been told yet and that there is need for more research, among other things on the contradictionary statements of advocates of a '*industrious revolution*' and proponents of protoindustrialization theory, that is much less optimistic with regards to entrepreneurial scope of common people, and an uplift of living standards. He also stresses the need to think about the meaning of materials, objects and styles for imitation of higher class-habits, but also for social distinction.

The article by Björn Poulsen reaches at the same time the farthest in the North, to Denmark, and the furthest in time, starting in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. He demonstrates strong regional variation between peasants, correlating with their access to markets, but rather limited variation between urban places and the countryside. The second chapter dealing with a north Western Europe context is by John Broad, describing the significance of the *New Poor Law* in England after 1834. Despite strong intentions to downgrade recipients of support with regard to their material well-being and

to institutionalize these people in workhouses, the importance of the poor's own house as settlement within a certain parish kept untouched for a long time.

Three chapters deal with material culture in Eastern Europe. Marie Ryantová shows differences in material possessions and wealth between urban and rural clergy, with significantly more wealth in the city. In the countryside she also observed differences with regard to social origin of clergymen. Clergymen having a rich family background were rather wealthy, whereas rural clergy without family resources did not differ much from their peasant neighbours. Josef Grulich claims that peasants in 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries South Bohemia had only limited interest in material objects like household equipment, and rather invested their savings in cattle. There was only a very gradual development in material culture. In Hungary Péter Granasztói observes changes in lifestyle in the market town Kiskunhalas between late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, introduced by urban immigrants. Rooms and furniture started to become more differentiated and sophisticated, demonstrating the advent of new cultural tastes.

For Western Europe authors emphasize the role of material goods, their circulation and their meaning for status demonstration or as a kind of store in value. Laurence Fontaine shows that material goods circulated widely, and that circulation served as a stimulus for changes in material culture. She also observes that even poorer people possessed objects made of precious metals, explaining that they were used for hoarding

and that it was much easier to defend those objects from desires of relatives and neighbours than cash. For 18<sup>th</sup> century rural Catalonia, Belén Moreno Claverías demonstrates that material culture strongly depended on group membership, with marked differences e.g. between peasants and bourgeois. Wealth only played a minor role. Paul Servais finds for the 19<sup>th</sup> century a development of lifestyle in rural areas near Liège, Belgium, that is close to Peter Granasztói's findings for the Hungarian place. Increasing numbers of objects and of specialized rooms point to modernization and urbanization of lifestyles, and again migration was a driving factor of this process.

The reader of this volume profits from its broad geographical design and the wide range of places and social groups that the authors of the different chapters take into account. It is a rich source for comparative research, and illustrates nicely the merits of the efforts to establish international networks of research and exchange.

**Christine Fertig**

Universität Münster