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BUREAUCRACY, LAND REFORM, AND  
TECHNOLOGICAL PROGRESS:  
DENMARK, 1755-1810

The second half of the eighteenth century was a period of comprehensive land reform legislation in Denmark, which ended the manorial system, freed the peasants from semiservitude, and ushered in modern agriculture on owner-operated family farms. It is a striking fact that these revolutionary reforms were adopted in a period of absolutism during most of which the monarch, Christian VII (1766-1808), was insane and some of the most important ones came in the 1780s after an inexperienced 16-year old crown prince had seized the reins of government. The explanation lies in the gradual development of a professional bureaucracy—a common occurrence in Europe in the late Middle Ages or thereafter (McNeill, 1964, *passim*; Schlebecker, 1977, pp. 644-45; Schlight, 1968, p. 53)—which proved able and disposed to initiate agricultural reforms, able to gain the necessary royal consent.<sup>1</sup> The relatively brief span of years and the comprehensive manner in which the agrarian system, the whole complex of social and technological institutions, was changed make it possible to see the influence of individual bureaucrats on the future shape of Danish agriculture by tracing their participation in the legislative processes that led to specific reform measures.

The Danish experience demonstrates the tremendous importance of efficient public administration, a fact increasingly recognized by development economists, and the influence which individual administrators can have when such a bureaucracy exists. It is an experience contrary to present-day concerns in many western countries with the necessity for broad-based political participation by the citizenry in major changes and the tendency of western development economists to rely on a smoothly functioning marketing system to determine appropriate allocations of the factors of production, including the appropriate size and organization of farming units. It suggests that if an enlightened autocracy enjoys the services of able, idealistic bureaucrats and has a population prepared to

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<sup>1</sup> Conversely, even a powerful monarch lacking the support of his bureaucracy in the matter might fail in his efforts to initiate reforms. For instance, orders issued by Frederick the Great of Prussia in 1763, and by his father before him in 1718, calling for an end to serfdom were ignored (Knapp, 1887, vol. 1, p. 118).

accept the dictates of the government, the public policy on behalf of this population may be more productive of good than corresponding efforts under a parliamentary system with its safeguards of give-and-take compromise and reliance on market forces.

### AGRICULTURE BEFORE THE REFORMS

A brief sketch of Danish agriculture prior to the reform period may be useful. It is based, primarily, on published data derived from the very detailed farm records underlying a land register of 1688 (Hansen and Steensberg, 1951; Pedersen, 1907-08, 1915-17, 1913, 1928), and on a substantial number of *bylove*, i.e., village agreements in which peasants spelled out the rules under which they carried out their common-field agriculture (Bjerge and Soegaard, 1904-20).

At the time of the land register and for nearly a century thereafter most land was held in large estates, owned in 1688 by the Crown (25 percent), the nobility (46 percent), estate owners not of the nobility (17 percent), the clergy and various institutions (10 percent). Peasant land ownership was of very minor importance (2 percent).<sup>2</sup> Peasants living in villages surrounded by their common arable fields and outlying pastured commons farmed 85-90 percent of the land of an estate, and the estate owner farmed the rest, the demesne, with labor owed him by the tenants of his villages, the so-called *boveri*. Within the village each peasant had a small plot of land, adjacent to or near his buildings where he grew cabbages, turnips, hops, apples, and other minor garden crops, chiefly for his own use. The tenant peasants were the backbone of Danish agriculture. Cottagers were largely day laborers with little or no land and perhaps some grazing rights.

A three-field system of cultivation, the well-known rotation of winter grain-spring grain-fallow, was most common on the islands, a multi-field system in Jutland involving 6-13 year rotations with many years consecutively in fallow (Table 1). The field in winter grain was generally referred to as the rye field, that in spring grain the barley field. Oats, buckwheat, peas and wheat—very little wheat—also were planted in these fields.

Each of the cultivated fields was divided into *shots* according to the quality of the soil (i.e., the more the quality of the soils within the field varied, the greater the number of shots), and each shot into *selions*, averaging about one-half acre each. The selion was the basic unit used in the allocation of land to peasants. Each peasant got his share of soils of different quality. It was an inconvenient arrangement, but expressed the prevailing concept of fairness. A tenant farm commonly consisted of 50-100 scattered selions, sometimes many more (Table 2). Peasants sometimes cultivated selions in the fields of another village and two or more villages might share the use of outlying commons for grazing. Also, some 18 percent of the estates had their demesne intermixed with village lands. The village agreements are eloquent testimony to the cumbersome husbandry that resulted from this fragmentation within the common field system. It stymied the kind of technological change that characterized eighteenth century agriculture, as exemplified in such innovations as the Norfolk rotation.

<sup>2</sup> Short of tunds, the Crown sold land in 1764-69 and 1774 amounting to roughly half of its holdings in the 1680s, some of it to peasants, whose share may have increased to well over 5 percent (Hansen et al., 1925-45, vol. 1, pp. 156-58).

TABLE 1.—CROP ROTATIONS ON DANISH MANORIAL ESTATES, 1680s\*  
(Percentage distribution)

Rotation	Islands	Jutland	Denmark
Simple rotations <sup>a</sup>			
Continuous cropping <sup>b</sup>	1	1	1
3-year rotation <sup>c</sup>	76	1	34
4- or 5-year rotation <sup>d</sup>	6	0	3
6- to 13-year rotation <sup>e</sup>	2	59	33
Simple rotations, total	85	61	71
Composite rotations <sup>f</sup>	7	22	16
Others or unspecified	8	17	13
All rotations	100	100	100

\*Based on rotations employed on the demesnes of 731 estates studied by Pedersen, Henrik (1915-17), "Nogle Træk til Belysning af Herregaardsdriften i sidste Halvdel af det 17de Aarhundrede," *Historisk Tidsskrift*, Copenhagen, Ser. 8, Vol. 6, pp. 1-82. At the time of the land register of the 1680s, crop rotations on peasant farms differed only in minor respects from those on the demesne, according to Pedersen. Details of continuous cropping are from Hansen, K. et al. (1925-45), *Det Danske Landbrugs Historie*, Copenhagen, Vol. 1 p. 99, other typical rotations from Pedersen (*ibid.*, p. 68-70). Fallows reverted to grasses and other natural vegetation and were used for grazing.

<sup>a</sup>Under simple rotation, all the land of the estate was subject to the same rotation; under composite rotation part of the land was subject to one type of rotation, part of it to a different rotation.

<sup>b</sup>Barley, rye, oats, repeat.

<sup>c</sup>Barley, rye, fallow one year, repeat.

<sup>d</sup>Rye and wheat, barley or barley and oats, peas, fallow one year or, in a 5-year rotation, barley and oats then fallow one year, repeat. Confined almost exclusively to the island of Lolland where good soils permitted wheat production.

<sup>e</sup>Seven to 9-year rotations were barley, rye, oats, oats or barley, rye, rye, oats, followed by 3 to 5 years of fallow. Ten-year rotation had 1 year of barley, 2 years of rye and 2 years of oats. Characteristic of Jutland where light soils have made long fallows necessary.

Fodder was scarce on peasant farms at the best of times, disastrously so toward the end of winter. There were no cultivated fodder crops, only the meager growth on meadows, outlying commons, fallow fields, and stubble. Livestock was of correspondingly poor quality and grain yields were low. No improvement was possible without more manure, which in turn was not obtainable without more or better fed livestock. But introduction of fodder crops in new crop rotations necessitated distribution of each farm's land in different fields. This was clearly an impossible task for individual peasants, given the common husbandry, even if they had the initiative, knowledge, and money.<sup>3</sup> These they had not, and the relationship between lord and tenant contributed to the low productivity of the peasant farm and the stagnation of common field husbandry.

The estate owner had extensive legal and economic powers over his tenants, the

<sup>3</sup> It was also next to impossible for the individual estate owner to effect such profound changes on his peasant land, though some adopted new crops and cultivation practices on the demesne.

TABLE 2.—FRAGMENTATION OF FARMS IN FIVE VILLAGES, EARLY 1680S\*

Village	Number of farms	Selions per farm	Plots per farm "	Arable land per farm (acres)	Average size of plot (acres)	Average size of selion (acres)	Selions per farm, minimum-maximum
Godsted	9	78	40	30.6	.76	.39	26-114
Bursø	32	60	39	27.3	.70	.46	12-142
Hejninge	19	95	89	55.4	.62	.58	n.a.
Grøfte	6	98	56	41.3	.74	.42	85-104
Snekkerup	5	183	120	86.5	.72	.47	141-218

\*Data for Godsted and Bursø are from Widding, Ole (1949), *Markfællesskab og Landskifte. Studier over Lollandske Markbøger 1681 og 1682*, Copenhagen, pp. 176-77 and 192-93, for the other villages from Hansen, C. Rise and Axel Steensberg (1951), "Jordfordeling og Udsiftning i tre sjællandske Landsbyer, Med et Bidrag af Verner Christensen," *Det Kongelige Danske Videnskaberne Selskab, Historisk-Filologiske Skrifter*, Vol. 2 No. 1, Copenhagen, pp. 162-63, 444, 197-98, 221-2.

"A plot may consist of one selion or of two or more selions located side by side and belonging to the same farm.

counterpart of obligations that rested upon him. The owner received certain tenant fees, but his right to the tenant's labor service, *hoveri*, including his tools, wagons, and draft animals, was generally far more important. The owner had to collect the taxes levied on the peasant's land and make up any deficit, in return for which his demesne was tax-free if his peasant farmland amounted to at least 200 *tønder hartkorn*.<sup>4</sup> Under an important law of 1682 he was not allowed to add peasant land to the demesne and existing peasant lands must be maintained as separate operating units. A new tenant must be found at time of vacancy. Also, the lord had to provide soldiers for the militia from among his peasants, their number depending on the extent of his peasant land. Thus he had not only a strong interest in, but a pressing need for, having tenants on all his farms, and specifically a need for able-bodied young men. Because of their obligation to perform *hoveri*, this obviously served his own purposes well, not least when he wanted to intensify the cultivation of his demesne.

In 1733 a bond of domicile (*Stavnsbaand*) was introduced.<sup>5</sup> It required that young men must live on and serve the estate on which they were born from the age of 14 to 36, later extended to ages 4 to 40. In form it was a military measure, designed to secure manpower for the militia, whether or not this purpose was uppermost in the mind of the lawmaker, but in 1746 an onerous stipulation was added which had no military justification whatsoever. Under it the peasant *must* remain on the estate after his actual or potential service period and *must* take over a tenant farm there if the lord demanded it.

The nobility had lost much of its political power with the establishment of an absolute monarchy in 1660, but they retained certain administrative and police powers on their estates, in part because it took time to develop a countrywide civil service. At its best, the manorial system gave the peasant a paternalistic lord, to whom he could turn for guidance and aid in an emergency, but it lent itself all too readily to abuse. The peasant lacked safeguards concerning tenure and *hoveri*, and the bond of domicile made it impossible for him to escape. Since 1523 it had been the law that a peasant's tenure was for life if he fulfilled his obligations, but it was easy for an assessor appointed by the lord to claim that he had failed to do so, that the farm had deteriorated, so that the peasant could be evicted, or, in the case of his death, that his estate was in debt to the lord.<sup>6</sup> And while *hoveri* had originally been limited by local custom, it had in the course of time become customary for the lord to demand whatever amount of *hoveri* he felt he needed.<sup>7</sup> Corporal punishment added further indignity. Little wonder if peasants were lazy, ignorant, and without initiative and landowners ill served by them. Around the middle of the eighteenth century the thought that something must be done to break this vicious circle began to surface at the highest level of the bureaucracy.

<sup>4</sup> The *tonde hartkorn* is a land measure that takes the quality of the crop land into consideration, measures meadows in terms of hay output, and outlying commons in terms of heads of livestock pastured there. Peasant farms averaged about 5.5 *tønder hartkorn*.

<sup>5</sup> A somewhat similar bond, *Vornedskabet*, had existed for at least a couple of centuries on the islands of Sealand, Lolland, and Falster, but not in Jutland. It had been abolished in 1702.

<sup>6</sup> Only some 40 percent of the tenants actually kept their farms for life (Skrubbeltrang, 1938, p. 17).

<sup>7</sup> It has been estimated that an average tenant farm was required to supply 250 days of manual labor, by the peasant or his servant, and 100 team days. Many had to keep additional draft animals in order to satisfy *hoveri* requirements (Hansen et al., 1925-45, vol. 5, p. 66).

## SYSTEM OF ADMINISTRATION

The bureaucracy that had been developed under the absolute monarchy was patterned after the prevailing *kollegie* system of some of the German states (Albrow, 1970, p. 27). Under it a number of boards or ministries (*kollegier*) were created, each headed by a chief or minister who was assisted by a number of deputies and lower civil servants. Commoners could be appointed to all positions, even those that had formerly been reserved for the nobility. The outstanding feature of the system was that all matters within a ministry's jurisdiction were discussed by all of its officials and decided by majority vote, before they were placed before the king. All of the ministers and a few other high officials met regularly in council with the king.<sup>8</sup> While the king's decisions were final, they were in fact heavily dependent on the proposals and information he received from the ministries and the council of ministers (Jensen, 1931, pp. 9-11, 14; Friis, Linvald, Mackeprang, 1927-29, vol. 4, pp. 81-87).

In the two centuries of absolutism (1660-1849), the center of power sometimes shifted to the king's more personal cabinet,<sup>9</sup> but it was under the *kollegier*, with the aid of a gradually strengthened local civil service around the country that most of the agricultural reforms were carried out. On the major issues specially appointed agricultural commissions, most of whose members held regular positions within the bureaucracy, explored the issues and hammered out proposals for legislation before they were put into regular channels.

## THE REFORM PERIOD

*Forerunners of the Reforms and Early Legislation, 1755-72*

A forerunner of reform was the government's call in 1755 for all persons so disposed to submit to the court marshal, A. G. Moltke,<sup>10</sup> treatises concerning any matter which might "serve to maintain the flowering of the country." The treatises were granted freedom from censorship and published during the years 1757-62. The project created a forum for passionate discussion of agricultural problems. The common field system, the three-field rotation, the socioeconomic issues of *hoveri*, uncertainty of tenure, and the bond of domicile, were all sharply criticized. The authors of the treatises, like reform-minded people who followed them, were in varying degree motivated by direct observation of conditions around them, by the humanitarian ideals of the enlightenment, and by admiration for the high level of agricultural technology in England. Voluntary technical and social reforms on a few estates were also forerunners of the general reform legislation.

Between 1758 and 1810 some 35 laws were passed that dealt directly with

<sup>8</sup> This council was the *Gebejmeconseil* in 1670-1770, later the *Statsraad*.

<sup>9</sup> The power of the cabinet was particularly dominant during the brief period in 1770-72 when J. F. Struense was *Gebejmekabinetminister*. Struense had originally been physician to the king, whose mental illness was becoming serious, and he held the king's confidence. He was also the queen's lover. Struense dissolved the council of ministers in December 1770, reduced the *kollegier* to routine administration, and ruled from his base in the cabinet until he was deposed in January 1772. He was decapitated on April 28, 1772.

<sup>10</sup> Moltke had earlier called the attention of the king, Frederik V, to the low state of agriculture in Denmark and had already initiated reforms, chiefly technological, on his own estate.

agricultural reforms.<sup>11</sup> They fall into five groups: (1) enclosure (*udskiftning*, a term that evolved, acquiring added meaning in the course of time as will be seen); (2) determination of hoveri or its commutation into a fixed fee; (3) regulation of the conditions of tenure and encouragement of peasant farm ownership; (4) abolition of the bond of domicile; and (5) commutation of tithes to a fixed cash fee.

On a suggestion to the king by Moltke, a committee was established in 1757 to consider alleviation of the problems that beset agriculture, especially the common field system. Its four members were of the highest rank of the bureaucracy: Moltke himself, J.E. Holstein, and C. A. Berchentin, members of the council of ministers, and O. Thott, first deputy of the finance department. All were large estate owners (Jensen, 1936, vol. 1, p. 36 ff; Holm, 1898, vol. 3, part 2, p. 87 ff). By their instructions, which accorded with their own view of priorities, they were to propose improvements of cultivation practices. There was no mention of the social problems of the peasants. Moltke saw the need for enclosure of the outlying commons—with allocation of this land to specific villages in specific ownership—as a precondition for bringing these extensive areas under cultivation, and this was a major point of the three laws on enclosure that followed.<sup>12</sup>

They dealt only with situations in which several villages had grazing rights on the same common. The owner of a village or of the greater part of a village could request enclosure of such a common, i.e., allocation of specific areas of the common to individual villages and fencing of these areas, in place of their former sharing of rights to the entire common. Where intervillage use of land in the arable fields occurred, enclosure of the arable could also be requested. Be it noted that this was enclosure by land in one ownership, not by individual farms. The government relied on landowners voluntarily exchanging land to achieve enclosure, but this proved difficult and the committee was soon flooded with complaints and disputes.<sup>13</sup> With its respect for property rights the committee hesitated to use coercion, although a law of May 15, 1761 in effect opened the door to expropriation for enclosure purposes.<sup>14</sup> And not until 1769 were the chief county officials (*amtmaend*) given responsibilities with respect to enclosure. Progress was slow.

When the next agricultural commission was set up in 1767 under Christian VII—his mental illness not yet completely debilitating—it reflected a change in attitudes and aims. The king was greatly influenced by his former teacher, Salomon Reverdil, now appointed cabinet secretary, an idealist who felt deeply about the plight of the peasant and urged the king to institute reforms, including

<sup>11</sup> Agriculture was also affected by a dozen or so laws having to do with credit, taxes, and road works. The term "law" is used in this article for all measures enacted, though they took different forms: executive orders (*förordninger*), royal resolutions (*kongelige resolutioner*), and proclamations (*plakater*).

<sup>12</sup> The laws were as follows: December 29, 1758 for Sealand, Møen, and Amager; December 28, 1759 for Funen, Lolland, and Falster; and March 8, 1760 for Jutland.

<sup>13</sup> This is hardly surprising, since exchanges of land generally involved exchanges of farm structures, tenants, and their families as well as grazing or other rights.

<sup>14</sup> This law also prohibited future sales of land if such sales would cause renewed intermixture of ownership on land already enclosed. If it had not been superseded, this order would have prevented practically all sales of peasant farms to their tenants.



peasant farm ownership, on his crown lands. He was discharged in 1768, the outcome of a court intrigue, but left his imprint on the task with which the committee was charged. Thanks to Reverdil the attorney general, Henrik Stampe, also a man of the enlightenment with a strong belief in the blessings of peasant farm ownership, became actively involved. He drew up the instructions for the committee, contained in a royal rescript of October 27, 1767, which called for consideration of all matters that might serve to promote agriculture, but especially those that might serve to ease the condition of the peasant (Jensen, 1936, vol. 1, pp. 51-52).<sup>15</sup> The latter provision makes it a watershed in Danish agricultural policy. Though there would be bitter opposition on the part of many landowners who wanted no tampering with the existing lord-tenant relationships, much of the dispute of the next couple of decades was between men with different concepts as to goals and procedures rather than between friends and foes of reform. A major point of dispute was between those who, with the logic of the physiocrats, would accord personal freedom to the peasants, but insisted that it should have its counterpart in freedom for the landowner to use his property as he saw fit, and those who believed that such freedom would gradually make peasants landless laborers.<sup>16</sup> The reform legislation should, the latter insisted, be so framed that it preserved the peasant class as cultivators of most of the Danish land. This was the ultimate outcome.

Before the work of the committee of 1767 had led to new legislation it was made into a regular government department (*Generallandvaesenskollegiet*) by law of April 15, 1768, a promising move, even though the staff was increased by some large landowners whose chief interest was in technical changes. This was true of Moltke, its chief, who, however, was not blind to the need for improving the peasant's lot. Stampe had drafted the order creating the new department and was its moving spirit, strongly supported by A. Schumacher, an experienced civil servant who was also cabinet secretary and thus close to the king, and by Chr. L. Stemmann, who additionally was a member of the council of ministers.

Due to the upheavals of the Struense period (footnote 9), the life of the department was brief. Nevertheless, despite a two-year lifespan, despite highly negative responses to a request for reform proposals sent to local authorities, despite some trouble caused by peasants who thought they could now defy orders to perform hoveri, and despite a rebuff from the king (who otherwise, insofar as he was lucid, was in favor of its aims), the department was responsible for four laws enacted in 1769, bearing the imprint of Stampe (Jensen, 1936, vol. 1, p. 75 ff). They were: law of May 6 on hoveri; of May 13 on freehold peasants in Denmark; of

<sup>15</sup> Stampe had earlier, at Reverdil's request, drawn up a statement on the bond of domicile, rejecting this military measure as a tool of agricultural policy and recommending easing it. Moderate as his proposal was it caused much opposition within the government and was shelved, but helped nevertheless to foster a feeling that some action on behalf of the peasant was needed.

<sup>16</sup> Both groups pointed to England as an example. The "freedom and property" adherents pointed to the high technical level of English agriculture under free conditions, those who wanted to preserve the peasant class believed, rightly or wrongly, that this freedom was responsible for depopulation and poverty in rural England. The possible connection between enclosure and rural depopulation has been much debated in English literature. See, for instance, Tate (1967) and Yelling (1977), *passim*. A brief mention of the points of view of a number of authors is in Baack and Thomas (1974, pp. 403-08).

June 16 on penalties for abolition of peasant farms; and of July 28 on enclosure. The hoveri law required that every peasant be given a document specifying the weekly number of days of hoveri demanded and an indication of what constituted a day's work. The law on enclosure added little to the earlier one. The law concerning penalties for abolition of peasant farms (by adding their land to the demesne) made the old law of 1682 effective by making the penalties reasonable. Extremely severe penalties had heretofore left the rule unenforced. The law on freehold peasants broke new ground. It cancelled the provision in the 1761 law which in effect prevented the sale of a peasant farm to its tenant (footnote 14), and, pointing to the favorable results of peasant ownership on some crown lands, it encouraged estate owners to make such sales.<sup>17</sup> Also, the amtmaend were required to grant special protection to freehold peasants, to allay fears that peasants could not manage without the protection of a paternalistic lord.

*Reactionary Social Measures, Progress on Enclosure, 1772-84*

After the fall of Struense in 1772 the power to act for the king was for twelve years in the hands of a cautious, conservative trio with no interest in reforms on behalf of peasants: the king's halfbrother Frederik, the latter's mother, and his former teacher Ove Høegh-Guldberg, now his cabinet secretary. In January 1773 agricultural matters were placed in *Rentekammeret*, a ministry combining functions of a treasury and a department of the interior. Its first deputy, Gregers Juel, was a bitter foe of peasant reforms. A progressive law on hoveri adopted under Struense was replaced by a reactionary one of August 12, 1773. In sympathy with the manorial lords, the ruling clique did, however, look with favor on one aspect of reform: enclosure. A law of July 28, 1776 expanded the possibilities for enclosure somewhat, but the breakthrough came with a law of April 23, 1781, prepared under J. G. Moltke, who thus carried on the work begun by his father.

The aim was now clearly to end the common field system through *enclosure of every single farm*, placing each farm on its own consolidated land (Holm, 1898, vol. 5, p. 398; Hansen and Steensberg, 1951, p. 473). A complete plan for enclosure of every farm in a village must be prepared if just one landowner requested enclosure of his tenant farms. This was not a controversial subject among manorial lords, at least not in principle, and views of peasants, who generally dreaded this drastic change, were not considered because they did not own the land. The law spelled out in detail the complex procedures to be followed, the cost of which must be borne by all the landowners whether or not they wanted their tenant farms enclosed. If enclosure of village land and of land in individual ownership had not been achieved under the earlier legislation, this must be done before consolidation and enclosure of individual tenant farms could be tackled. The land of each village must be surveyed and mapped by authorized surveyors, assessed by court-appointed, impartial men, and a plan of reallocation of the land worked out between authorities and landowners. Individual tenant farms must be given the most practical shape possible. This was not always done

<sup>17</sup> They were allowed to retain the tax exemption for their demesne even if their total holding of peasant land fell below the required 200 tønder hartkorn due to the sale. They were also allowed to retain hunting and certain other seigneurial rights.

successfully, especially not in the early stages, and reallocation became necessary in some cases. To attain good layout it was generally necessary to relocate some of the farms on the more distant parts of the cultivated fields or on the common. The government granted financial aid for such relocation and the other tenants of the village had to assist in moving the farm buildings. Those relocated on the common were given additional land to compensate for the hard work and delay involved in clearing this land. The tenant farmers generally had to provide the labor for fence and road building required by enclosure. Local authorities must find ways to compensate cottagers for lost grazing rights on former commons, achieved generally by granting them a few acres of land, as a matter of fairness as well as an inducement for the cottager to remain on the land.

*The Great Agricultural Commission of 1786,  
Completion of Reform Legislation, 1784-1810*

The peaceful coup in 1784 in which the 16-year old crown prince Frederik seized power ushered in a period of reforms on behalf of the peasants. The cabinet rule of Struense and Guldberg was terminated. The kollegier and the council of ministers regained their former influence. Some young, progressive men were placed in positions where they wielded influence. Foremost among those who shaped the agricultural reforms was Count Chr. D. Reventlow, with support at the highest level from A. P. Bernstorff, prime minister in fact if not in name, and Ernst Schimmelmann, minister of finance. Well educated, Reventlow had entered government service in 1773, a humane, intelligent, practical man with an unshakable faith in the potential of the peasants. On his own estates he had carried out extensive reforms. As first deputy of Rentekammeret, he immediately resumed the work begun in 1766 of reforms on crown lands. But more far-reaching work soon followed.

As a result of a proposal received by Rentekammeret from a lower court official, which suggested that a court—not the estate owner—be empowered to appoint the assessor for the settlement of a tenant's estate, the whole question of how to secure the rights of the peasants under their tenure contracts was taken up. A lawyer in Rentekammeret, Chr. Colbjørnsen drew up a clear and eloquent statement to the effect that the rights of the tenants must be firmly secured in law, not left to the whim or goodwill of his lord. Reventlow agreed entirely and presented the matter to the crown prince in July 1786, warmly pleading the cause of the peasant and the need for reforms. The crown prince was impressed.<sup>18</sup> The outcome was the creation on August 25, 1786 of The Great Agricultural Commission, instructed to consider the whole legal position of the peasants. Of the commission's 16 members, 6 represented the central administration, Reventlow among them, 1 the military, 4 the judiciary, and 4 the landowners.<sup>19</sup> Reventlow persuaded Colbjørnsen to become its secretary.

<sup>18</sup> Though Reventlow apparently was the first to awaken his interest in agricultural reforms, credit for his open-mindedness, his readiness to see the needs of common people must go to John Bülow, his companion, adviser, and confidant from his sixth year, in an otherwise difficult childhood.

<sup>19</sup> Two of the landowners found themselves in very strong opposition to the reform-minded majority and soon chose to take little part in the proceedings.

Enclosure, begun so auspiciously under the previous regime, gained momentum with a law of June 8, 1787 and, especially, one of June 15, 1792 (Jensen, 1936, p. 108; Hansen and Steensberg, 1951, p. 255). The first directed that a tenant could not oppose the move of his farm. Fearing isolated life away from the village and the hard work of land clearing, peasants were generally unwilling to move.<sup>20</sup> The 1792 law permitted the landowner to charge tenants whose farms were enclosed 4 percent annually of the costs involved, apparently in perpetuity, or until the tenant acquired ownership of the farm, though no more than the "advantage" gained from the enclosure.

The major activities of the commission centered on three subjects: (1) the conditions of the tenure contract, (2) the bond of domicile, and (3) *hoveri* (Jensen, 1936, vol. 1, pp. 123-53, 185-205). Though the friends of reforms looked forward to peasant farm ownership—and a credit bank set up in 1786 could grant loans for this purpose—this was clearly a long-term task. In the meantime the conditions of tenure must be made secure. Colbjørnsen presented a memorandum on the subject. In May 1787 the commission sent its resulting proposal to the council of ministers and the king. It was accepted verbatim and became law on June 8.<sup>21</sup> Its first paragraph called for a complete inventory by an independent legal authority when a tenant took over a farm. Possible claims against the tenant or his estate at the termination of tenancy must be based on a comparison with this inventory. The law also specified other rights of the tenant, among them a right to compensation for necessary improvement on the farm. And it forbade the use of pillory and similar methods of punishment by the estate owner or his bailiff.

The bond of domicile was dealt with next. Because the military and agricultural repercussions of abolition of the bond would be far-reaching, there were differences of opinion as to the manner and speed with which it could take place. Reventlow combined the different ideas into a proposal, and Colbjørnsen drew up a report for discussion with the military authorities. Despite the latter's objections, the king and the council of ministers accepted it and it became the all-important law on the Abolition of the Bond of Domicile on June 20, 1788, a celebrated event in Danish history, the law that more than anything else raised the peasants from semiservitude to full citizen status. The bond of domicile was terminated immediately for peasants over 36 or under 14 years of age, and for all peasants by the year 1800.

Giving the new legislation time to be put into effect, the commission did not meet to tackle *hoveri* until 1790. In the meantime Reventlow had been promoted from first deputy to chief of *Rentekammeret*, and Colbjørnsen had become attorney general. Some measures supplementary to already enacted legislation were adopted without involvement of the commission. A law of March 19, 1790

<sup>20</sup> "My great-grandfather wept when he had to move and start clearing land. My grandfather toiled—my father also. Now my brother has a good farm," a twentieth-century farmer told a Danish author (Krarup and Stavnstrup, 1942, p. 11). The favorable results began to appear soon, even if it did cost toil, but there can be no doubt of the initial hardship for those who had to move.

<sup>21</sup> Another law of the same date specified limited circumstances in which a landowner could take land from a tenant farm against compensatory reductions in fees and *hoveri*; the same law stated that a peasant could not object to having his farm moved if enclosure made it necessary.

strengthened the often evaded rule that a tenure contract must be for the life of the peasant and his widow. Another law of March 25, 1791, was a logical result of abolition of the bond of domicile. Since the estate owner could no longer force a peasant to take over a vacant farm, he was now allowed (under specified conditions) to abolish such a farm and add its land to other peasant farms, up to certain limits, provided he establish two new cottages on the land. The purpose of this and similar provisions in other laws was to develop an adequate rural labor supply—cottagers—as replacements for lost hoveri services and was part of a deliberate effort to prevent rural depopulation.

Reventlow was the leading spirit in the work on hoveri, along with V. A. Hansen, his colleague in Rentekammeret and fellow estate owner. Recognizing the landowners' right to hoveri and the lack of other available labor for the demesne, they concentrated on assuring its continuation under reasonable conditions while encouraging its gradual conversion into fixed cash payments. A law of March 25, 1791 on "orderly conditions" of hoveri, which among other things forbade all corporal punishment, was followed by several orders and instructions (June 24 and December 23, 1791 and June 5, 1795) that called for voluntary agreements about the amount of hoveri, but held out the prospect of government arbitration if the parties were unable to reach agreement. The arbiters were also to encourage commutation to fixed cash fees. A law of December 6, 1799 was the capstone of this legislation. It specified that by May 1, 1800 all hoveri must be fixed, and once fixed could never be increased. If a landowner wanted to intensify his operations, the labor must be found elsewhere. He must avoid causing the peasants unnecessary inconvenience. Though it would be decades before commutations and peasant farm ownership put an end to hoveri, excessive demands and harsh and degrading conditions of hoveri had been eliminated without abrogating the landowners' legitimate claims to labor services.

The collection of tithes was the last subject to be dealt with, again under Reventlow's leadership (Holm, 1898, vol. 6, part 2, pp. 424-28). An "invitation" was issued on March 18, 1796 over strong objections from some church men, urging voluntary commutation, but it was almost fourteen years until a law on the subject was adopted. The law of January 8, 1810 gave every peasant the right to request that his tithe be converted into a fixed fee instead of the troublesome, indefinite collection in the sheaf. Special tithe commissioners would determine the size of the fee in the absence of voluntary agreement.

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

By 1810 the effects of the reforms were strikingly apparent. The two decades after the Abolition of the Bond of Domicile had been a period of almost feverish activity (Falbe-Hansen, 1889, pp. 71, 105-06).<sup>22</sup> The overwhelming majority of farms had been enclosed. Land had been redistributed, fences built, and roads laid out. Relocation of farms proceeded more slowly, yet it has been estimated that 10-20 percent of the farms in Jutland and perhaps 30 percent in Scaland had been relocated by about 1805 (Falbe-Hansen, 1889, p. 72). By 1818 nearly two-thirds

<sup>22</sup> Numerous examples of the progress that had occurred by then are found in a contemporary work (Begtrup, 1803-12).

of the peasant farms were peasant owned, most of the sales having occurred before 1807.<sup>23</sup> This meant that hoveri duty remained for less than one-third of the farms, since many tenants had converted their labor services to cash payments.

The effects of enclosure on productivity were apparent. Grain production is estimated to have doubled as compared with its magnitude before the reform period (Falbe-Hansen, 1889, p. 94). Much of the increase was due to an increase in arable land where enclosed commons had been brought under cultivation. Furthermore, after a century of near-stagnation grain yields had increased by an estimated 25 percent due to better crop rotations and better cultural practices, not unknown earlier, but impossible to put into effect on peasant farms until the severe restraints imposed by common-field agriculture had been eliminated. Clover and cultivated grass, potatoes and root crops were gradually introduced in the rotation as individual peasants who saw the wisdom of it could do so on their enclosed farms. (The use of red clover *Trifolium pratense* is considered by some the most important advance in Danish agricultural practices in that period [Hansen et al., 1925-45, vol. 2, p. 281].) The soil was more carefully prepared (two ploughings), new and better tools became available. A peasant could prepare the soil, plant and harvest his crops at the proper time for his particular fields instead of at the agreed-upon time for the whole village. No longer did the harvested grain fields have to be thrown open simultaneously for the village livestock to feed on the stubble. And no longer did harvested grain suffer losses by remaining in the field until the tithe collector could select his sheafs from the whole village field. With reduction of hoveri obligations the peasant could manage with fewer horses and therefore keep more cattle, increasing the output of livestock products. Improvement of breeds became possible when livestock were no more herded together on the common.

Thus the changes in technology on peasant farms due to enclosure with resulting greater productivity were both great and clearly demonstrable, but it was the social reforms on behalf of the peasant that gave him the incentive and self-confidence to tackle the work, risk, and sometimes lonely life on his enclosed, independent farm. Abolition of the Bond of Domicile raised his morale while giving him the necessary freedom, and security of tenure gave him assurance that he and his family would reap the benefit of improvements and hard work. With less time required for hoveri he could spend more time on his own farm. Ownership provided further incentives and the financial obligations that went with it compelled him to great effort.

The bureaucrats responsible for the later stages of the reforms did not relax until all the detrimental aspects of the manorial system had been dealt with, until legislation had been passed and implementation was well under way. By good fortune they continued able to secure the support of their royal master. The reform effort was aided by the lively literary debate of the period which had aroused recognition of the need for reform, and the favorable economic climate in Denmark in the second half of the eighteenth century as reflected in rising prices for farm products (Table 3) certainly eased the task of achieving it. The manorial system would sooner or later have been transformed in any event. However, the

<sup>23</sup> In 1807 Denmark became disastrously involved in the Napoleonic wars. Years of economic chaos followed and a severe agricultural depression lasted from 1818 to 1828.

TABLE 3.—RELATIVE PRICES FOR MAJOR FARM PRODUCTS  
AND FARM REAL ESTATE, 1751-1809\*  
(Average prices per decade)

Years	Rye	Barley	Oats	Pork	Butter	Farm real estate
1751-60	100	100	100	100	100	100
1761-70	124	116	101	119	130	109
1771-80	123	112	107	119	122	123
1781-90	136	144	143	131	148	151 <sup>a</sup>
1791-1800	159	148	156	156	170	170 <sup>b</sup>
1801-09	239	191	197	194	209	398 <sup>c</sup>

\*Farm product prices are based on the so-called *Kapitelstakster*, i.e., price data collected since the Middle Ages and used in determining church related salaries. Farm real estate prices are based on the price per *tønde hartkorn* of peasant farms. All are here taken from Nielsen, Axel et al. (1933), *Dänische Wirtschaftsgeschichte*, Jena, pp. 340, 342.

<sup>a</sup> Average of years 1781-85.

<sup>b</sup> Average of years 1791-95.

<sup>c</sup> Average of years 1801-06.

particular form which the new agriculture took is attributable to the men who directed the reforms, an agriculture based on the family farm that was protected by law from subdivision below a size thought to be appropriate for family operation and from elimination through merger with another family farm or absorption in a large estate. The men who guided Denmark's agricultural revolution were stout "liberals," but they drew the line at an economic freedom that might endanger the peasant farm.

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