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978-0-521-34778-5 - Power in the Blood: Popular Culture and Village Discourse in Early Modern Germany

David Warren Sabean

Excerpt

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Introduction: Perspectives on the analysis of early modern state practice

Where there is no faith, there is no conscience but only the mark of the beast.

Johannes Brenz, 1530

Rebellious opinion: that the external, oral preaching of the Holy Gospel of Christ is only an external action and letter, unserviceable for the inner life of the spirit.

Württemberg Church Ordinance, 1559

Everyone babbles the words, but few obtain thereby a stronger faith.

Johann Valentin Andreae, 1622

In our Evangelical, so-called Lutheran, churches and congregations [there is] one great defect, greater than with all other religions . . . that the majority of teachers [teach] according to the external letter.

Georg Gottfrid Bregenzer, 1699

The freedom which you acquire today is an external freedom of your bodies . . . and not an inner freedom from your consciences.

Superintendent Lang, 1745

The common man has . . . little receptivity for purer notions.

Canzlei Advocat Bolley, 1796

This book is composed of a series of episodes strung out over two and a quarter centuries. All of them deal with village or small town life in the duchy of Württemberg in southwest Germany. The first chapter describes attempts on the part of magistrates during the 1580s to enforce attendance at communion, and shows how for villagers the sacrament revolved around enmity and friendship. In the second chapter, a peasant prophet appears who in 1648, the last year of the Thirty years' War,

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met an angel in the vineyard above his village. The angel gave him a message about sin and repentance to take to the duke, but beneath the strongly encoded message there were hints of a tax revolt. The third chapter deals with an incident from the year 1683, when a thirteen-year-old girl spread the rumor that she was a witch. The metaphorical structure of her language opens up central issues about communal life and state domination. The fourth chapter deals with the career of a pastor at the turn of the eighteenth century, whom we would today probably regard as paranoid. His activities put into relief the complex problem of the relation of spiritual to temporal power. Shortly before mid century, the death of another pastor developed into a murder investigation. This story takes us into problems of kinship and conscience, local power and state ideology. The sixth chapter, taken from the very end of the eighteenth century, examines an incident involving a village which sacrificed a live bull to a cattle epidemic. The way the event was related to village discourse takes us further into problems of understanding local power and popular culture.

In every chapter, difficult problems of textual analysis confront us, and it is no simple matter to distinguish what exactly popular opinion on an issue was. Historical sources written by members of the popular classes are hard to come by until well into the nineteenth century, which gives the impression that the vast mass of the rural population remained silent witness to the progress of time. Whatever sources there are for studying peasant culture implicate in one way or another those people who to some extent exercised domination over the peasant.¹ Even court disputes between people at the local level usually involve clerks, notaries, or judges who wrote down what villagers said. What appears as direct testimony in a judicial text may well be a paragraph redaction of something that took quite a long time to say. In addition, evidence about what peasants thought or how they acted is largely anecdotal in character and subject to the distortion that story telling brings to a situation. Such evidence is often so repetitive or deals with trivial details in such a way that the historian has difficulty escaping its banality. These two problems, then – the entanglement of peasant views in sources deriving from various levels of authority and the nature of the evidence as anecdote – present issues of great importance to the student of popular culture.

We might start by pointing out that what is a fact about sources is not necessarily a weakness. Documents which perceive peasants through the eyes of rulers or their spokesmen begin with relationships of

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domination. After all, the notion of 'peasant' implies more than just 'rural cultivator' and takes into consideration his involvement in productive, legal, and religious relationships which dominate part of his existence. There is irony in the fact that because we cannot get to the peasant except through the lord, our evidence is often a good starting place for considering the relationships which we want to investigate. The issue is to examine the constitution of peasant notions within the dynamics of power and hierarchical relations, and the chapters in this volume are exercises in the use of sources generated by state authorities to study the peasants' view of this process.

As for the story-like character of the evidence, two kinds of narratives are presented here. Some are repetitive, such as the reports in the first chapter about people in different villages refusing to take part in communion, or the testimony in the last two, where successive villagers were questioned about matters which they all knew about or had experienced. Repetitive stories of this kind are close in form to that of peasant communication, a form which may exist in most communities with 'face-to-face' relationships.² This form involves concrete language of symbolic content, which constantly reiterates central aspects of social relationships. Its repetitiveness and its seeming triviality is a pointer to what in fact we want to investigate. The other forms of narrative, non-repetitive in character, lead to much the same end, for close attention to the structures of action or ideas reveals their logic and shows how the logic is remapped on to new situations or is interconnected with other pieces. We will be concerned with examining symbols and metaphors and the language of concrete experience, in order to understand ways in which villagers presented the flow of social processes and the nature of social relations to themselves and among themselves.

This book offers views into particular situations. Since the source material in one case seldom overlaps with that in another, we are confronted with disjunctions that make analysis of the same issues over the whole period difficult. Nonetheless, a goal of the book is to follow changes in village social relations and their representation over time. An issue is whether in fact there are constants in rural structures and culture based on an unchanging productive routine or the conservation of peasant thought.³ One view seeks to find the essential peasant culture, the underground tradition, so to speak, hidden away from the lords and deeply rooted in the past. We are only offered glimpses into this world from time to time. Another position argues for relatively unchanging structures, which receive different modes of expression over time,

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pointing to enduring constraints and the constant reception of elements of high culture. In my view, the social relations inside Württemberg villages were constantly undergoing change during the period under consideration. Inherited items of culture continually changed shape as they were situated in new contexts. We will be taking each case separately and examining the logic of social relations and the pattern of discourse peculiar to it. We will discuss certain of the historical forces which converged at each particular point. We will also examine recurring problems and investigate some of the long term processes which brought about change.

Productive forces and social change in Württemberg

The description below is not meant to be a thoroughgoing introduction to the agrarian or economic history of southwest Germany from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century. I will pick and choose only those elements that will be helpful as background to the information and arguments in the chapters that follow. The object is to sketch some of the salient features of the social forces inside the villages of Württemberg and their articulation with the outside, stressing those particular aspects relevant to the story I want to tell. The important fact to emphasize at the outset is that Württemberg was a land of small peasant producers, although the regional towns had an active trading life as service centers for agriculture, and provided locations for professional and administrative elites. Certain areas, notably around Urach on the Swabian Alp and Calw in the Black Forest, developed proto-industrial activity, especially in the eighteenth century. However, our stories are centered mostly in villages dominated by small agricultural producers. There was no nobility as such in Württemberg, at least not after they won status for themselves as Imperial knights in the early sixteenth century. Their territories, occasionally no more than a village, remained foreign enclaves inside Württemberg and could have some importance for such matters as trading. But the nobility itself was not a class situated between the rural population and the duke. It provided no dynamic in the process of expropriation. As far as property rights were concerned, peasants held some land in private ownership, but much of the land in the territory was in a tenure arrangement with the duke of Württemberg or with some institution such as the university or one of the numerous foundations.⁴ Already in the sixteenth century, the peasants, for the most part, had inheritable tenures. Tithes on grain, as well as rents,

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ended up in one way or another with the duke or with institutions of the territory. Taxes were levied on all land, whether owned privately or held in tenure.

It is important to understand that a large proportion of the 'feudal rent' was levied in kind in Württemberg until well into the nineteenth century. Although there were many small levies and fees, three basic forms of extraction of surplus accounted for the bulk of the approximately thirty per cent eventually taken from what peasants produced. Ten per cent of the grain harvest went for tithes (on all land – tenure and free). Approximately another ten per cent was paid for ground rents, most of which were paid in kind.⁵ Both of these parts of the feudal rent did not vary significantly in proportion from the early sixteenth to the nineteenth century. The 'dynamic' element, levied in money and subject to fluctuations and long term rises, was taxes. By the end of the eighteenth century, these too amounted to a rough tenth of the agricultural product.

From the beginning of the sixteenth century, Württemberg had a higher tax burden than the neighboring territories.⁶ There was an important rise at the end of the sixteenth century and another associated with the period during and after the Thirty Years' War, both involving costs of the military establishment. Taxes, of course, went directly to the state. A myriad of officials, concerned with the annual movement of considerable amounts of produce and money from villages to central institutions, determined one major way in which the villages interrelated with the state. But officials of the state were not the only ones concerned with expropriation of the peasant surplus, for at the village level the collection of all dues was mostly carried out and supervised by a set of local officials, people who were members of the village itself. A further fact important for local relations is that the pastor in a village often received the small tithe (on garden produce and the like) and was one of the few officials who dealt directly with the primary producer and enjoyed his fruits immediately.⁷

It is often stressed that in Württemberg a strong urban/rural dichotomy never developed. No large agglomeration arose with radically different modes of production or with capital structures capable of effecting transformations in the countryside. No expropriation process characterized relations with the city.⁸ Even politically, villages were able to prevent a taxation structure which favored cities.⁹ In the small towns, many inhabitants carried on agriculture, and artisans there were often not distinguishable from village artisans. Although town and

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village provided no radical disjunction, regional administrative, religious, and economic elites were centered in the towns, and wealthier town dwellers were usually a good deal richer than the wealthiest villagers. The strategy of location gave the artisanal and merchant groups of the town entrepreneurial functions with regard to building trades and the marketing of agricultural production. But probably more important was the fact that the town contained the intermediate church and state administrative officials. The latter were concerned with collecting and channeling twenty or thirty per cent of what villagers produced in agriculture to the more central state distribution centers. They also exercised judicial and political functions. Between the village chief administrative official, the Schultheiss, and the town representative of state authority, the Vogt, the social gap was considerable.

With these structural aspects in mind, we can consider some of the central facts of social and economic change over the period dealt with in this book. The sixteenth century was generally characterized by economic expansion and a rise in rural population until at least the 1580s. Although some of the population increase was absorbed by cities and armies, growth in rural areas was also considerable.¹⁰ It brought pressure to break up the large farms formed in the late Middle Ages, a move which was successfully resisted in such areas as Upper Swabia and the Black Forest.¹¹ In the central areas of Württemberg, there was some division of the larger farms, but this was generally held within bounds.¹² There too a class of land poor grew up in the villages alongside peasants with relatively large enterprises. In comparison with the eighteenth century, the rise in population and the expansion in agriculture – which was driven on by an enormous rise in agricultural prices, particularly grain – were not accompanied by the growth of a village class of artisans. There were, of course, some regions where spinning or weaving became widespread on the land. But as the price scissors went ever more against the rural producers, they had to be tied to agriculture in order to survive.¹³ In general, however, increased regional specialization – wine, flax, milk products, timber, etc. – was specialization in agriculture involving an ever more complex network of interregional trade.¹⁴ But the complexity of the market structure to be found in the eighteenth century did not yet exist.

Peter Kriedte has recently summarized the dynamic and blockage of the sixteenth-century economic expansion.¹⁵ The rise in population was accompanied by a revolution in prices, with agricultural products,

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led by grain, at the forefront. More land was brought into cultivation at the cost of reduced marginal returns, leading to rising production but falling productivity. The expansion eventually led to a destruction of the ecological balance – soil exhaustion, harvest failures, depleted resources. As one result, the share in the agrarian product of the feudal classes was constantly threatened, and one way they reacted was by putting restrictions on the partitioning of viable farms by land-hungry heirs. Where feudal rent had been transformed into money terms, new forms of expropriation and arbitrary exaction were necessary. But in Württemberg, with rents and tithes largely in kind, the lord and state institutions participated in the general economic rise. Württemberg did not change the form of tenure from an inheritable one. What drove it to higher money extraction in the form of taxes was the monetization and higher costs of a military force which developed in the sixteenth century.¹⁶ To characterize the market in the sixteenth century in rough terms is to stress the urban/rural differences: commodity production in the city and agricultural production in the countryside, with the market place as the point of exchange. Also, regional specialization emphasized the market place as the location of exchange relations. By contrast, in the eighteenth century, these kinds of markets were overlaid with an internal market, and the *market place* as the mediator between manufactured commodities and agrarian products did not maintain its exclusivity.

By the 1580s, the population growth came to an end or slowed down considerably. The mechanism of this blockage was a series of harvest failures, coupled with waves of epidemic, notably bubonic plague, which began in the 1580s and recurred at the end of the first decade of the seventeenth century and again in the middle decade of the Thirty Years' War. It is hard to avoid the notion that the great waves of mortality were closely related to the limits of expansion in agriculture.¹⁷ The poorest members of the population were subject to a vast decrease in real wages. Wages need not necessarily have been the primary part of their subsistence in order to be used as an indicator of their status, and all the wage series that we have for Western Europe in the sixteenth century show a large and dramatic fall.¹⁸ This is part of what lay behind the increasing use of the social category of 'poor' in the records of the late sixteenth century.¹⁹ Those with few resources confronted those with property and fought battles over the use of forest land and other common rights. Since agriculture formed the basis of the economy, one would expect the links between people to be tied closely to land

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ownership, and the reciprocities in a village to be largely mediated through non-monetary links. Illustrating how social relations could be embedded in the daily subsistence activities of agricultural production and exchange, a diary of a pastor from the 1680s shows how much of his day was spent going from meal to meal and collecting rents in kind.²⁰ This can be contrasted with the eighteenth century, when a large part of pastors' incomes were composed of interest on money lent out to various peasants, salaries, and often expanded and commercialized small tithes.²¹

It is hard to grasp the economic changes associated with the Thirty Years' War. Plague and warfare took their toll so that many Württemberg villages had populations of no more than forty per cent of their pre-war levels.²² The fall in population and in agricultural prices and the low level of capital savings and available labor led to more extensive farming, but under the burden of heavy taxation. An important consequence of the war seems to have been the stabilization of agricultural production as the dominant basis of social reproduction, but in a way different from that of the sixteenth century.²³ During the subsequent half century, partible inheritance clearly came to dominate the Württemberg villages, and by the end of the period a rural artisan class was firmly established. The artisan class which grew up in the villages may well have been the result of relatively high costs of labor in a depression period, since they could support themselves partly from agriculture. It is also important to see that the conjunction of feudal exactions, in the form of agricultural products, with new heavy taxation helped to support partible inheritance because of the difficulty in maintaining a balance between capital and land. Capital needs of peasants also forced them to accept usurious loans.²⁴

It was during this period that the characteristic Württemberg distribution of wealth developed, with no great disjunctions between classes of *Vollbauer* (large peasant proprietors) and cottagers. However, production remained fully oriented to agriculture, and the practices of state domination centered on ground rents or on forms of extraction based on property ownership.²⁵ Despite economic decline in the second half of the seventeenth century, activity on the part of the state continued to increase. Of course, the presence of the state in the form of competing armies during the Thirty Years' War and the growth of taxation instruments and exactions before, during, and after the war can be seen as fundamental agents of long term economic difficulty. Claims within the structure of the reorganized feudal state based on the needs

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of a permanent military force brought permanent heavy taxation. It was not the shock of the Thirty Years' War²⁶ so much as the heavy, continuing taxation exactions that led to the slow recovery of and reinforced difficulties in peasant reproduction.²⁷

The issues of taxation and other forms of transfer stamped relations between state and village ever more clearly. The instruments of the state were local officials in village and town, and the sources give the impression that the post-war period for them was one of corruption and booty. Parallel to growing exacting bureaucracy with control from the center – as any investigation into witchcraft can show – were usurious activities, rake-offs, and conflicts over the spoils of office on the part of officials. In this period, villagers were making room for immigrants, confronting enormous problems of capital formation – borrowing money from officials at high rates of interest – and dealing with the inexorability of taxation.²⁸ Inside villages, public support of the poor became central issues, and families were less likely to recognize responsibilities to distant relatives.²⁹ The after effects of the war cut many people loose from their original homes and left them deposited around villages with no effective ties, creating disputes over who belonged where and to whom.³⁰ Village and town consciousness developed over disputes with state officials about residence rights and public responsibilities to support individuals. Villages and towns also increased their own internal self-regulation with regards to quartering troops and collecting tithes and taxes. As the dialectic between village and state increased its tempo, issues of legitimate authority became more acute. Pastors, for example, devised new forms of discourse against rapacious officials, and the theme of spiritual and temporal power came to be a focal point for many conflicts.³¹ While the Thirty Years' War left many clergymen impoverished, they entered the second half of the century with new instruments of power in their hands: institutionally, the village church consistory, and ideologically, a theory of repentance.³²

To characterize the eighteenth century briefly is not simple either. Looking at the period 1720–50 when the pre-Thirty Years' War population levels were again attained, we can see that the situation had altered significantly. More regular employment in the army for young men took a small but certain percentage of people from the villages for a time. Above all, depending on the size of villages, a more-or-less extensive corps of village artisans had been established, which grew in number with the sharp rise in population after mid century. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, artisans could be found among the

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wealthiest members of a village, but by the end this was very seldom the case except for the bakers, butchers, innkeepers, and millers.³³ While at the beginning of the century, artisans had a secure place among the village magistrates, increasingly all such positions came into the hands of landed peasants. The rise of a village artisan class must be distinguished from the growth of proto-industrial producers, such as the spinners and weavers to be found in the Black Forest region around Calw or on the Swabian Alp around Urach and Laichingen. By contrast with the sixteenth century, town and country differences were not so marked, since small commodity production of a complex set of handicrafts had become so well established in the countryside. Although this was a general German phenomenon, nowhere was the class of artisans so large as in Württemberg. There it reached a density and complexity equal to that of an East Elbian city.³⁴ Around 1730, that class made up about a quarter of the working population, and by the end of the century about a third.

Artisans were clearly among the land poor and were dependent on their handicrafts for survival. Their existence and growth attests to an increasing division of labor and penetration of market relationships,³⁵ which had two correlative aspects. The growth of the artisan class was closely associated with agricultural intensification and specialization – the production of fruit, wine, and industrial crops, all of which entered the market. At the same time the development of village and small town people dependent on wage labor also provided a market for artisanal commodities.³⁶ Although this group remained a stable percentage (about fifty per cent) of the population, with the demographic rise its absolute numbers grew considerably.³⁷ Schultz characterizes the period in terms of a social differentiation taking place inside a homogeneous peasant/small peasant society.³⁸ According to Kaschuba and Lipp, the process involved a progressive dependence of village producers on market relations and the purchase of commodities, such that commodities subject to long distance trade entered the local economy. This implied a step-by-step substitution of subsistence economy by commodity consumption and production.³⁹

A dominant trend was the growth of market relationships and specialization. In central Europe, there was even the appearance of such characters as the one who gathered from hedges wool left by passing sheep – or the other who gathered horsehair.⁴⁰ Their products were sold for cash. But it was not just people who specialized; whole villages also came to specialize in various ways. There was, for example, a