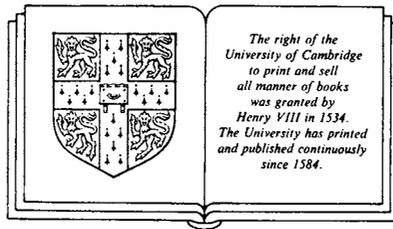


# Rural society and the search for order in early modern Germany

---

THOMAS ROBISHEAUX  
*Duke University*



CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

*Cambridge*

*New York New Rochelle Melbourne Sydney*

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE  
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK  
40 West 20th Street, New York NY 10011-4211, USA  
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia  
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain  
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

<http://www.cambridge.org>

© Cambridge University Press 1989

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception  
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,  
no reproduction of any part may take place without  
the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 1989

First paperback edition 2002

*A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data*

Robisheaux, Thomas Willard.

Rural society and the search for order in early modern Germany / Thomas  
Robisheaux.

p. cm.

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

ISBN 0 521 35626 1

1. Württemberg (Germany) – Social conditions. 2. Württemberg (Germany) – Rural  
conditions. I. Title.

HN458.W85R63 1989 88-27450

307.7'2'094347–dc19 CIP

ISBN 0 521 35626 1 hardback

ISBN 0 521 52687 6 paperback

# Contents

<i>List of illustrations and tables</i>	<i>page</i> viii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xi
<i>A note on usages</i>	xiv
<i>Glossary</i>	xv
<i>List of abbreviations</i>	xvi
Introduction	I
Problems	I
Methods, sources, and limits	4
Arguments	9
<b>Part One: Agrarian expansion, revolt, and the decay of community</b>	
1 Anatomy of a rural society	17
Setting	17
Farmers and winegrowers	23
Patrimonial domination and the House of Hohenlohe	28
Decay of the church	36
2 Peasants' War and reformation	41
Origins	42
Dynamics of revolt	48
The Neckar Valley–Odenwald Army and Hohenlohe	53
Peasant reformation?	61
Defeat and aftermath	65
3 Rich and poor	68
Land of paupers	69
Old families and the market in land	79
Wealthy tenant farmer, poor smallholder	84

## *Contents*

### **Part Two: Search for order**

4	Reformation, patriarchy, and marital discipline	95
	Reformation and patriarchy	96
	Marital discipline in the village	105
	Rites of passage	116
5	Defending the patrimony	121
	The state and peasant property	122
	Power, property, and inheritance	127
	The widow	133
	The son	136
	The daughter's husband	141
	Inheritance, kin, and the social order	145
6	The unchristian economy	147
	Market expansion	148
	Peasants and the market economy	153
	A moral economy?	162
	The new paternalism	167
	Property and hierarchy	173
7	Threat of revolt	175
	The empire, the small state, and taxes	176
	The making of a tax revolt	181
	Storm over labor services	186
	Return of order	191
	Terms of domination	194
	On the eve of the Thirty Years' War	197

### **Part Three: Crisis and recovery**

8	Crisis	201
	The onset of crisis	202
	Turning point	210
	End of the old order	216
	The rule of troops	223
9	Agrarian order restored	227
	Weakness of the patrimonial state	228
	Domination restored	232
	Economic recovery	237
	Agrarian class structure	243
	Peasant capitalism	247
	Eighteenth-century epilogue	254

## *Contents*

10	Village society and the practice of state power	257
	Appendix A: Distribution of wealth in Langenburg district, 1528–1581	264
	Appendix B: Grain production and the peasant household	266
	<i>Manuscript sources</i>	269
	<i>Bibliographical essay</i>	272
	<i>Index</i>	291

## Illustrations and tables

Figure 1.1 The House of Hohenlohe

page 31

### Maps

1.1	Southern Germany, ca. 1500	18
1.2	The old County of Hohenlohe	19
1.3	Langenburg district and nearby villages	21

### Tables

1.1	Seed-yield ratios in Langenburg district, 1623	25
3.1	Cotters in Langenburg district, 1553 and 1581	73
3.2	Distribution of wealth in Langenburg district, 1528-81	85
3.3	Propertyholders in Langenburg district, 1581	87
3.4	Land distribution in Atzenrod, 1606	88
3.5	Land distribution in Bächlingen, 1606	88
3.6	Distribution of movable wealth in Langenburg district, 1581	89
4.1	Marriage court cases in Hohenlohe-Langenburg, 1550-1680	108
4.2	Groups initiating marriage court cases in Hohenlohe-Langenburg, 1550-1679	109
6.1	Median prices of spelt in Langenburg district, 1601-70	150
6.2	Famines in Langenburg district, 1570-1683	150
6.3	Average yearly income in rents from Langenburg district, 1550-1689	169
6.4	Average yearly income in entry fines from Langenburg district, 1590-1689	169
6.5	Average yearly income from death duties from Langenburg district, 1590-1689	170
6.6	Petitions from Langenburg district, 1594-1602	172

### *Illustrations and tables*

6.7	Petitions for economic relief from villagers of Langenburg district, 1594-1602	172
8.1	War levies in Langenburg district, 1620-51	211
8.2	Oberregenbach assembly I: Participants from Langenburg district, 1630 (Thoma)	218
8.3	Oberregenbach assembly II: Participants from Langenburg district, 1630 (Johannis)	219
9.1	Livestock in Atzenrod, 1681	253
9.2	Livestock in Bächlingen, 1681	254
A.1	Distribution of wealth in Langenburg district, 1528	264
A.2	Distribution of wealth in Langenburg district, 1553	265
A.3	Distribution of wealth in Langenburg district, 1581	265
B.1	Peasant households and surplus grain production in Langenburg district, 1622	267

### **Graphs**

3.1	Number of taxed heads of households in Langenburg district, 1528-1681 (1)	71
3.2a	Number of taxed heads of households in Langenburg district, 1528-1681 (2)	75
3.2b	Number of taxed heads of households in Langenburg district, 1528-1681 (3)	76
3.3	Distribution of wealth in Langenburg district, 1528-81 (Lorenz curve)	85
4.1	Contested engagements before the marriage court, Hohenlohe-Langenburg, 1550-1659	111
6.1	Self-sufficiency of peasant households in Langenburg district, 1605-30	155
6.2	Land use in Bächlingen, 1606	157
6.3	Land use in Bächlingen, 1630	158
6.4	Debts of winegrowers from Langenburg district to the state, 1628-73	159
8.1	Counts' loans to villagers of Langenburg district, 1570-1683	206
8.2	Debts of villagers from Langenburg district to the state, 1591-1683	207
9.1	Yearly reductions of revenues in Langenburg district, 1606-71	239
9.2	Landholders of Atzenrod, 1606-81	244
9.3	Landholders of Bächlingen, 1606-81	245
9.4	Landholders of Binselberg, 1606-81	246
9.5	Landholders of Langenburg, 1606-81	246

*Illustrations and tables*

9.6	Livestock in Atzenrod, 1581–1681	251
9.7	Livestock in Binselberg, 1581–1681	252
9.8	Livestock in Bächlingen, 1581–1681	252
9.9	Livestock in Langenburg, 1581–1681	253

# Introduction

## Problems

This study began ten years ago as a history of rural society in the age of the German Reformation. At that time scholars knew that the majority of the population lived and worked in the countryside, that the village formed the foundation, the cornerstone, of ecclesiastical and secular power, and that the Peasants' War had played a decisive role in shaping the course of the early Reformation. The old view of Leopold von Ranke no longer rang true. To him German villagers exploded onto the scene of the Reformation with the fury of a storm; but they then vanished, as does every storm, within a short time. What had vanished from the history of the Reformation was not the peasantry, however, but Ranke's interest in it. Yet, despite the attention paid the Peasants' War in the mid-1970s and the earlier pioneering work of Wilhelm Abel on the agrarian cycle, little was known of how villagers came to terms with the wrenching changes of the "long sixteenth century" in the German countryside. And these changes had only just begun to be felt in 1525.

This strange neglect of the history of the German peasantry after 1525 was a symptom of a deeper problem. Astonishingly little attention had been paid to German social history as a whole in the early modern period. The historical literature on early modern German history at that time resembled a painting of Caravaggio, Titian, or even Goya. Much that one would have liked to see, much that was essential to grasp the meaning of the whole picture, remained hidden in the shadows or only hinted at in a strained manner. Robert Scribner could argue, in fact, in the late 1970s that the outlines of a social history of the most thoroughly studied subject of early modern German history, the Reformation, remained poorly understood, the major trends hardly yet grasped.<sup>1</sup> The state of research for the period after the Reformation was even more poorly developed. Only a few beams of light had been cast into some of the darkest

<sup>1</sup> Bob Scribner, "Is There a Social History of the Reformation?" *Social History* 4 (1977), 483-505.

## Introduction

corners. Scholars had concentrated their attention on the two great events of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries – the Protestant Reformation and the Thirty Years' War – and, while never leaving the period between them entirely blank, they had more often than not filled the gap with a narrow kind of political and religious history. The outlines of early modern German history – Reformation (1517–55), Confessional Age (1555–1618), Thirty Years' War (1618–48), the Age of Absolutism (1648–1789) – were, and still are, conceived in strictly political and religious terms. The idea that the social history of this period demands a different conceptual framework has not had wide acceptance.

The canvas has never been entirely dark, of course, and a few masters have recently let in more light here and there. The social history of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, as a result, now appears far more complex, far richer and more fascinating, than it did ten years ago. From a number of recent studies one now knows that peasant revolts did not come to an end in 1525: They continued to threaten the stability of large areas of Central Europe right to the end of the Old Regime.<sup>2</sup> And when villagers did not actually go over into rebellion, they showed a disturbing aggressiveness – disturbing to their masters, that is – in carrying out their disputes in the courts and before imperial commissions of arbitration.<sup>3</sup> Yet these studies, welcome and important contributions though they may be, raise more questions than they answer. What conditions led some villagers to stride to open defiance of their lords and rulers, and what kept others obedient, loyal, and compliant? How did this chronic instability, this pervasive fear of unrest, disobedience, and revolt, shape lord-peasant relationships and villagers' relations with the state? Above all, in a time when the administrative structures of the state still proved weak and fragile, when they all too easily broke down altogether, how were social order and hierarchy imposed and maintained and then reproduced?

A number of historians point out now how religion remained inseparable from the problems of social order, political control, and state building in the decades after the Reformation. In the confessional cultures of Germany religion became more than a sparring field for theologians carrying out their bitter doctrinal debates. Religion remained, perhaps more so than in England or France, the language of community, the language of politics and social orga-

<sup>2</sup> See Helga Schultz, "Bäuerliche Klassenkämpfe zwischen frühbürgerliche Revolution und Dreißigjährigen Krieg," *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft* 20 (1972), 156–73; Peter Blickle, Peter Bierbauer, Renate Blickle, and Claudia Ulbrich, *Aufbruch und Empörung? Studien zum bäuerlichen Widerstand im Alten Reich* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1980); and Winfried Schulze, ed., *Aufstände, Revolten, Prozesse: Beiträge zu bäuerlichen Widerstandsbewegungen im frühneuzeitlichen Europa*, Geschichte und Gesellschaft: Bochumer Historische Studien, vol. 27 (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1983). See also Thomas Barnett-Robisheaux, "Peasant Revolts in Germany and Central Europe after the Peasants' War: Comments on the Literature," *Central European History* 17 (1984), 384–403.

<sup>3</sup> Winfried Schulze, *Bäuerlicher Widerstand und feudale Herrschaft in der frühen Neuzeit*, *Neuzeit im Aufbau*, vol. 6 (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1980).

## Introduction

nization, of power in all its complex forms. One cannot simply set “religion” aside as one category of analysis, as some historians do, separating out the “social” and the “political” from the “purely religious.”<sup>4</sup> Yet these recent studies, focused as they are on the elites, the state, and the cities, still leave many questions about the relationship of church, state, and society in the village unanswered. How did villagers respond to the relentless efforts of elites to establish new confessional cultures? From other studies about popular culture in early modern Europe one would expect villagers to reinterpret cultural ideas and symbols in light of their own needs. But what forms did this take? How *did* villagers reinterpret village culture to explain, to tame, to bring under control, if that was at all possible, the rapidly changing social world of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries?

This study therefore focuses on one central problem: the search for social order, discipline, and hierarchy in a time of disturbing change and disorder. But this complex problem must be approached on several levels and with more careful attention to the interconnectedness of social, cultural, and political history than has yet been paid. Anyone familiar with social anthropology, for example, understands that kin relations, inheritance practices, and property-holding play dominant roles in shaping a peasant society, and so a careful treatment of these themes naturally represents the core of this work. This focus is important, for an extraordinary amount of attention focused on the patriarchal family, on family roles, marriage rituals, and inheritance practices, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Yet this portion of the study makes little sense when treated in isolation from the most fundamental social and economic changes of this period: the steady growth in population, the growing shortage of arable land, the erosion of wages, and the inflation of food prices. How did rural communities deal with the massive threat to social order created by poverty, landlessness, and chronic famine by the 1570s? What role did market relationships, everywhere far more important at the end of the sixteenth century than at its beginning, play in fostering social order in the countryside? Or did these economic ties also undermine order and help spread chaos and confusion in years of famine?

This study also looks at the problem of social order as a part of another problem, a timeless and disturbing one: the exercise of power. Religious discipline, social order, the control of wealth and property, obedience, and loyalty

<sup>4</sup> Almost all of such studies have built on the original insights of Ernst Walter Zeeden, *Die Entstehung der Konfessionen: Grundlagen und Formen der Konfessionsbildung im Zeitalter der Glaubenskämpfe* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1965). See, for example, Heinz Schilling, *Konfessionskonflikt und Staatsbildung: Eine Fallstudie über das Verhältnis von religiösem und sozialem Wandel in der Frühneuzeit am Beispiel der Grafschaft Lippe*, *Quellen und Forschungen zur Reformationsgeschichte*, vol. 48 (Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1981); and, more recently, Jane Abray, *The People's Reformation: Magistrates, Clergy and Commons in Strasbourg, 1500–1598* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1986).

## *Introduction*

were all variations on this theme. This naturally leads to an exploration of the exercise of state power in the village.<sup>5</sup> But in order to answer those ancient and always relevant questions about power – who exercised it? how? at whose expense? – one must penetrate the village itself. Once that is done, once documents are found that reveal the byzantine complexity of social life in the village, the old questions about the building of the early modern state must be cast in new forms. For it involves understanding not simply the growth of state power as it shaped the social order, but also discerning the limits to state domination, the subtle use and ironic consequences of paternalism and deference, and the ways, fascinating in their implications for the whole agrarian order, in which villagers shared in the fruits of their own domination. Power was widely and diffusely spread within the village, its exercise very often tentative and conditional. For villagers themselves knew where the power lay in their communities, and they understood how to lay their hands on a share of it. This study stresses the fact that villagers, then, and not simply their masters, played a more central role in creating and maintaining order, discipline, and hierarchy than many scholars commonly assume.

### **Methods, sources, and limits**

One cannot examine a problem as complex as this for all of Germany, of course, not even for one whole region. The best approach remains the tightly focused local study, one preferably carried out with a comparative perspective. No doubt some scholars will argue that one cannot generalize about the social history of early modern Germany, that a study of this type runs the risk of interpreting Central European history through the narrow experiences of one small land. The argument is still made that the territories of the Holy Roman Empire differed so thoroughly from each other, that localism weighed so heavily on the history of early modern Germany, that any effort to seek out common patterns of social change is doomed to failure. One cannot deny that villagers and, yes, most German princes too, played out their everyday lives in small local worlds before 1800. But this argument for the peculiarity of German history has often undermined the effort to write its modern social history. Scholars of early modern France and England have long noted the pervasive regionalism of these countries. Yet the social history of these countries has made rapid progress because attempts have been made to see patterns in the diversity, to identify problems and themes that cut across narrow regional and political boundaries.

<sup>5</sup> I am particularly indebted to David Sabean for helping me see this problem. See his *Power in the Blood: Popular Culture and Village Discourse in Early Modern Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

## Introduction

For only in this way can truly comparative history be written. Only in this way can one understand, more clearly than ever before, just how peculiar or unusual certain lands or case studies indeed are.

This study is therefore meant as a contribution, and a spur, to a comparative social history of Germany in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. As such it aims to rise above the narrow objectives of local history to pay careful attention to the broader historical patterns and trends of which this one small land was, or was not, a part. Any scholar who sets sail on the wind-tossed sea of this period of history, with only a few poor and outdated maps to guide him, comes upon a new and strange land. The central focus of this work, the major point of reference, is the land of Hohenlohe, a lonely land of rolling plains, picturesque river valleys, and imposing Renaissance castles in the German Southwest. The search for social order in this rural society is examined at several levels. In places comparisons with other areas of South Germany or the German West point up essential similarities and differences. In other places attention shifts back and forth among the Holy Roman Empire, the region of which this land was a part – Franconia or South Germany as a whole – and Hohenlohe itself. Only in this way can one see the interconnectedness of the agrarian order in a handful of small, seemingly remote villages with conditions in the territories around them, indeed with the structure of the Holy Roman Empire as a whole. In a venture such as this, one should never mistake a barren island in the Caribbean as an outpost of civilization off the coast of Cathay, to claim more for one small corner of the world than is right and due. The success of this enterprise the reader will have to judge.

Most social historians today build their work from the ground up by first identifying a well-defined region and then exhaustively analyzing its social, political, and economic institutions from several angles. This method provides the foundation of this study as well. But how large an area can one examine meaningfully? The whole Hohenlohe? That proved impossible from the start, for the records are far more voluminous than any individual could possibly handle in a reasonable amount of time. A single village? The village study, though quite popular today and an important undertaking in its own right, would have restricted the broad view that is the goal of the work.<sup>6</sup> Social patterns vary from village to village, from group to group, even from family to family, and the best social histories take the rich variation of experience into account. That old question “How typical could one village be?” can never be satisfactorily answered. Yet the advantage, indeed the necessity, of having a detailed understanding of at least some villages

<sup>6</sup> See the excellent recent example of this type of study for a Hessian village by Arthur Imhof, *Die verlorenen Welten: Alltagsbewältigung durch unsere Vorfahren – und weshalb wir uns heute so schwer damit tun* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1984).

## Introduction

seemed undeniable. How else could one precisely plot population movements, the distribution of wealth, the rise and fall of debts, or land-use patterns? The questions that guided this work from the start demanded quantitative answers to some questions. Still, the goals of the work required moving beyond the limits of the village study.

The statistical foundations of this work therefore rest on an exhaustive study of one district in the County of Hohenlohe, the district of Langenburg, one of ten or twelve districts in the principality as a whole. This solution to the methodological problem represents a compromise. In this way the strengths of the village study can be combined with the broader and comparative perspective of a regional study. The one offers methodological rigor – crucial when dealing with questions that demand statistical analysis – while the other adds the necessary comparative perspective. In this way one can begin to develop a sense of what was typical and what was not. One finds in this district, for example, a variety of different types of communities, twelve in all, not at all unlike the others in the region as a whole: a small market town (Langenburg), site of one of the castles and an administrative center of the territory; seven compact villages, all of them densely populated; and four small hamlets, each one settled by two to seven households. These communities were also scattered across the two major ecological niches of the region. Some, dating back to the old Alemannic settlements in the region, were to be found along the floor of the Jagst River valley. Others, carved out of the dense forest, the Ohrwald, which once covered the area, were founded in the great wave of land clearing in the eleventh and twelfth centuries; these settlements were on the flat, now open, plain above the river valley. The names of these villages are therefore the ones that fill the pages of this book.

Other methods the reader will find employed, less systematically, at various points in this study. Given the wide variety of questions essential to answer, some having to do with lordship (*Herrschaft*) and power, others with kinship and inheritance, and still others with economic history, this study draws on the insights of sociologists and social anthropologists in an eclectic way. Some of the insights about the exercise of state power in the village, about domination in its various forms, and about the ways in which power pervaded social relations in the village rest on ideas drawn from Max Weber and Pierre Bourdieu.<sup>7</sup> The sections dealing with the meaning of marriage in village society and the social consequences of certain inheritance practices rest, to a great extent, upon insights gained from the work

<sup>7</sup> Max Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft: Grundriss der verstehenden Soziologie*, 5th ed. (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1985); and Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

## Introduction

of Jack Goody.<sup>8</sup> This work also benefited from the work of other anthropologists, too many to name, who have shown how land and various types of movable goods circulate in separate spheres of exchange and carry far more than a strictly economic meaning.<sup>9</sup>

In none of these cases, however, does this work follow blindly any single theory at the expense of the data. Some scholars will find shortcomings in this eclecticism and the controlled use of sociological and anthropological theory, and will wish for a more rigorous theoretical interpretation of the material. But this study rests, as most good social histories do, more on the principles of Occamism than on those of Thomism. Theories, processes, or even discussions of abstract legal rights have little meaning except insofar as they can actually explain social behavior. Throughout this work the focus therefore remains on individuals and groups acting in specific historical circumstances. What is always foremost, what keeps the use of theory in check, is this question: Does the theory help explain the emergence of a new sense of order, hierarchy, and social discipline in the village?

Most historians of early modern Europe who write history "from the bottom up" lament the limits of the sources and complain about the sparseness of archival records before 1650. The problems with the sources for Hohenlohe, however, are of a different order. They are the problems of working through mountains of records, sources that illuminate village life in astonishing, at times overwhelming, detail, and this from a remarkably early period at that, from roughly 1580 on. For when it came to cleaning out the cellars of their castles, bundling up and throwing away all those everyday records from the local courts, district officials, and, yes, from peasants themselves, the counts of Hohenlohe never seem to have made much headway. From Langenburg district complete series of rent books, tax registers, and surveys of assessed taxable wealth survive for much of the the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Other records are available as well: chancellery records, petitions, the marriage-court records of Hohenlohe-Neuenstein, visitation records, and district reports. In addition, a virtually complete set of district account books illuminate the everyday practice

<sup>8</sup> Jack Goody, *Production and Reproduction: A Comparative Study of the Domestic Domain*, Cambridge Studies in Social Anthropology, no. 17 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

<sup>9</sup> See, to name only a few recent theoretical works of importance, Paul Bohannan, "Some Principles of Exchange and Investment Among the Tiv," *American Anthropologist* 57 (1955), 60-70; Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood, *The World of Goods* (New York: Basic Books, 1979); Mary Douglas, "Primitive Rationing: A Study in Controlled Exchange," in Raymond Firth, ed., *Themes in Economic Anthropology* (London: Tavistock, 1967), 119-47; Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. Ian Cunnison (New York: Norton, 1967); Claude Meillassoux, "From Reproduction to Production: A Marxist Approach to Economic Anthropology," *Economy and Society* 1 (1972), 93-105; and Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* (Chicago: Aldine, 1972).

## Introduction

of domination in the village for almost every year after 1600. These last records are essential for understanding population trends, the distribution of land and wealth, and economic change. But they also reveal, in surprising detail, how paternalism and deference worked on an everyday basis. Together these records allow a detailed reconstruction of village life.

Even with the advantages of the exceptional archival records for this territory, several limitations of this study must be kept in mind. The weight of the evidence, for one, comes from the period between 1550 and 1700. Few records illuminate village life for the decades around 1500 and for the Peasants' War. The early sixteenth century is therefore not as thoroughly and soundly documented as the later period. Second, the attention of this study tends to fall primarily, though not exclusively, on the peasantry. Writing a social history of Germany's rural elites – the petty princes, nobles, state officials, Lutheran reformers, and pastors – would require a separate undertaking altogether. That does not mean that this work underestimates the central role these elites played in imposing order, hierarchy, and social discipline in the village. But all too little is known about the social histories of these groups in early modern Germany. Indeed, readers familiar with the history of other European countries may be surprised to note the complete absence from this study of one of these groups: a landed nobility. In most of the small states of the German Southwest the nobility had long since retreated into their own small enclaves independent from the princes. Hohenlohe, and a number of other states as well, therefore had by the sixteenth century no landed nobility to mediate peasants' relationships with the state.

The focus of this study falls on a small patrimonial state. This choice was a deliberate one. Historians have paid too little attention to developments in these small states, although more careful studies of the social structures that supported them would help illuminate a sorely neglected problem: the limits to state building in early modern Germany. What this work says about the exercise of power at the village level therefore will not necessarily illuminate the patterns one may find in the larger states of Germany. That is, however, by no means always the case.

Any discussion of a small early modern German state can easily run into conceptual and terminological problems. Chapters 1, 7, and 9 make it clear that one should not confuse the personalized and concrete relationships of authority and power in this territory with the more abstract and impersonal structures of domination in a modern state. The German term *Herrschaft* can convey more precisely the meaning of these relationships. *Herrschaft* always referred to specific relationships of power, all of them rooted in law and entailing personal relationships with reciprocal obligations. One can understand the term abstractly, of course, but throughout most of the period covered here the term was always understood concretely, that is, inseparable from the exercise of

## Introduction

specific types of power over villagers: *Herrschaft* over the land (*Grundherrschaft*), serfs (*Leibherrschaft*), or the courts (*Gerichtsherrschaft*), to name only a few examples. With each of these authorities came the right to extract certain surpluses (rents, dues, labor services, and so forth) or the right to command obedience and loyalty from those under a jurisdiction. But lords had always to provide protection (*Schutz und Schirm*) in exchange for these rights, or their authority could be called into question.<sup>10</sup> In the chapters that follow, various English terms are employed – “authority,” “dominion,” “lordship,” “rule,” “domination,” “small state” – but none of them can capture the full range of meaning of *Herrschaft*.

This small territory also became Protestant, and one cannot doubt the importance of Lutheranism in shaping its social history. But this study makes no systematic effort to compare the changes in this land with changes in a Catholic territory. Some important differences, but also many similarities, would have become apparent. But such comparisons can also be misleading, for they implicitly ascribe to the confessional cultures of Germany a causal role in shaping social change that they did not necessarily have. Whether patterns of social change can be traced to a particular confessional culture is a problem far more difficult to solve than is commonly supposed, and one that will require a number of other studies before firm answers present themselves.

## Arguments

The chronology and overall framework of this study are not set by the history of state building or by the events of the Reformation. In order to understand the search for order, hierarchy, and discipline in the countryside in this period, one must begin by looking at social change in the light of one inexorable movement: the long cycle of population expansion, contraction, and recovery between 1500 and 1720. State making, the drive for religious discipline, the reform of the family, and economic expansion: Each of these changes was decisively influenced by agrarian conditions created by this cycle. The study that follows therefore falls into three parts. Part One introduces the reader to rural Hohenlohe at the beginning of the sixteenth century and then examines the upheavals that came with agrarian expansion in the first three quarters of the sixteenth century. In Part Two attention shifts to the attempts to impose order, hierarchy, and social discipline between 1550 and 1620 as the agrarian cycle reached its peak, as land became scarce and the demands of the state and the marketplace began to place village society under additional stress. Part Three

<sup>10</sup> For a short discussion of the terminological and conceptual problems involved here see Sabean, *Power in the Blood*, 20–7. See also “Herrschaft,” in Otto Brunner, Werner Conze, and Reinhart Kosseleck, eds., *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1982), vol. 3, 1–102.

## Introduction

then examines the agrarian crisis that set in between 1620 and 1640, its profound consequences for village society, and how, after 1640, order was slowly restored.

One cannot escape the conclusion that the first half of the sixteenth century was a time of massive upheaval in rural Germany. The beginnings of sustained population growth, the making of the territorial state, market expansion, the Peasants' War, the appalling end of Christian unity, and the perceived erosion of the family all contributed to a sense of unease, and at times desperation, that reached into every princely and peasant household. But from the vantage point developed here, with all of these changes understood, as much as is possible, from the perspective of the village, some familiar problems and themes take on a slightly different appearance. The authority and power of the princes, for one, appear less secure, less certain, than is sometimes supposed. This followed not simply from the poorly developed structures of princely authority and domination in the countryside, but also from the fact that power rested, to a degree still not fully understood, on villagers sharing in the process of their domination. When that obedience vanished, as it did in 1525, the power of lords and princes withered away with breathtaking speed.

One other conclusion from this section may seem surprising, but it is nonetheless inescapable. When placed within the context of the agrarian cycle, the Peasants' War appears less important as a watershed in lord-peasant relations than is often assumed. The evidence supports a view of the Peasants' War as an extension of the early evangelical movements; it also suggests that the suppression of the rising marked the end of popular support in the countryside for the early reformation.<sup>11</sup> This certainly left the masters of the countryside – the princes, the lords, and the nobles – largely in control of religious reform when it was eventually introduced. But the rising, and its suppression, left most of the problems in the agrarian order unsolved. Of far more importance in this first half of the sixteenth century was the gradual erosion of the social foundations of the village commune. This problem deserves more study than it receives here, and one hopes that others will explore the transformation of communal life after 1525 with greater care.<sup>12</sup> For, from the vantage point developed here, the growth of massive rural poverty, the polarization of the village between wealthy tenant farmers and smallholders, between property-holders and the propertyless, had more lasting consequences for agrarian society than did the events of 1525.

Part Two focuses on the foundations for renewed social order and stability

<sup>11</sup> In this regard, my study confirms the major view put forward by Peter Blickle in *Gemeindereformation: Die Menschen des 16. Jahrhunderts auf dem Weg zum Heil* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1985).

<sup>12</sup> The recent work by Heide Wunder is therefore welcome, and an important contribution to this problem. See *Die bäuerliche Gemeinde in Deutschland* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986), especially pp. 80–113.

## *Introduction*

by 1600 or 1610. Here careful attention is given four major problems: the reform of the patriarchal family, property and inheritance, market and class relationships, and the relationships of villagers to the state. Several themes appear repeatedly in these chapters, but two of them become particularly important clues to our understanding of rural society in these decades.

Social relationships, first of all, appear to have been in an almost continuous state of flux by 1560. In some ways the princes set the pace in trying to bring order in the midst of this change, to reinforce the structures of hierarchy. The princely reformation, the reform of the peasant family, the development of broader and more complex market relationships, a heavier burden of taxes, all allowed the princes to penetrate village society more thoroughly than was possible early in the sixteenth century. The erosion of communal loyalty played a crucial part at this time in allowing the state a firmer control over village life than ever before. Yet this flux, and the flexibility in many key social and political institutions, made it possible for villagers to turn reforms to their own advantage, to refashion old relationships in new ways, to carve out new ones, even to set strict limits to the power of the state. For in none of these areas did any single group, the German princes and their servants included, have the power to refashion rural society in the image it wanted. The order that emerged came out of conflict, compromise, and, at times, cooperation. A village elite of tenant farmers secured their domination of the village through the patriarchal family, their landholdings, their place in the market economy, and their power to resist some of the incursions of the state. And other groups carved out places of power at times as well: widows, even on occasion youths, craftsmen, and the village poor. By 1600 the places of all of these groups began, slowly, to become more certain and secure.

But this search for social order, laced as it was with a heavy emphasis on patriarchal authority, a rigid sense of hierarchy and status, and calls for obedience and discipline at every turn, created new tensions in the village. One of the features of this society on the eve of the Thirty Years' War was therefore the continual alternation between order and disorder, stability and instability, harmony and security, and unbearable tensions and uncertainty. In this way the striving for order in the village mirrored the political and religious climate in the territorial state and the Holy Roman Empire as a whole on the eve of the Thirty Years' War. The search for order took place on three levels, each linked up with the others. That princes and peasants concerned themselves with bringing order out of a world understood as dangerously unstable should come as no real surprise. Yet too often the focus in this period falls on the sources of instability: the peasant revolts, the wage-price scissors, overpopulation, land hunger, famine, and the destructive cycles of war. In this section the argument is made that a measure of stability was also achieved, but that it came at a terrible price.