

Modernising Agrarian Societies: The Interwar Global East through the Lens of Polish and ILO Agrarian Experts

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Almost two decades ago, the British specialist for European Economic History Derek H. Aldcroft published a handbook entitled »Europe's Third World. The European Periphery in the Interwar Years«.¹ In the introduction, he defined Europe's peripheral countries as »the poor ones, those which largely missed out on the industrial revolution of the 19th Century«.² According to him, one of the main factors involved was the »backwardness of agriculture«, along with »enormous potential surplus population in agriculture« and low agricultural productivity.³ As surplus populations and agricultural productivities are measured by comparisons, the author drew largely on a study by Wilbert E. Moore from Princeton University, »Economic Demography of Eastern and Southern Europe«, which was commissioned by the International Labour Organization (ILO) shortly before the outbreak of World War II and published in 1945.⁴ As is often the case when using data from International Organizations (IOs), the material appears in a series of statistical data, in many cases with repetitions in different forms (and sometimes also in different languages).⁵ This minor example illustrates the powerful imprint of data selected and provided by IOs on socioeconomic as well

as historical research. Such research separates Europe's past economies into developed and less developed, thereby shaping and replicating scientific as well as political attitudes towards the East and so producing and reproducing mental maps.

Against this background, it seems worthwhile to examine more closely how interwar experts described the underlying socioeconomic problems and how they envisaged overcoming them. Furthermore, the present state of research provides an opportunity to critically question the administrative logic behind the hierarchisation of developments. The present contribution aims to do both. Hereby, it exposes the impact of what Madeleine Herren calls the second League of Nations (LoN). The author distinguishes between a first, second and third League of Nations. According to her, the first League of Nations describes its function as an international organisation composed of representatives of nation-states (the surface); research on the second League of Nations focuses on its members (networks, habitus, performance, etc.); and the third League of Nations refers to the social movements involved. Following this concept, the focus below is on the second ILO (by analogy with the second LoN).

This second ILO, it is argued, shaped perceptions of the agrarian question. It was at the point of interaction between its perceptions and those of the first ILO that the frictions⁶ I address arose.

With the help of this concept, I analyse the administrative practices of the ILO concerning the agrarian question during the interwar period. I will identify the East-Central European countries as those where the agricultural issue was of great significance. For various reasons, the ILO had failed to gain a prominent position in the agrarian question. My analysis deals with this failure. The ILO's loss of influence on the topic was, on the one hand, due to its guiding principle of tripartism, whereby delegations to International Labour Conferences (ILCs) consisted firstly of governments, secondly of trade unions, and thirdly of employers' organisations. The underlying concept of labour did not apply to agricultural work. On the other hand, the interventions of the fascist Italian regime further contributed to the failure. As will be explained in more detail below, these two aspects are already well researched. I will go beyond this state of research by focusing on the newly established states of East Central Europe. By broadening the corpus of sources, I will provide further insights into the topic. East Central Europe is a region that has received little research attention to date. I will begin with the ILC and its labour conventions. In a second step, the largely unsuccessful work of the Mixed Advisory Agricultural Committee (MAAC), a working group set up in 1922 by members of the International Institute of Agriculture (IIA, Rome) and the ILO, will be examined. With the IIA dominated by Italian Fascists, collaboration soon wavered.

On the basis of the findings of the study of East Central Europe, I interpret the history of the agricultural labour agreements and the history of the MAAC as the surface of the ILO's involvement in the agricultural issue. The surface, so to speak, tells the story of failure. On the surface, the impact of the ILO has been marginal. However, as I will show further, there were other actors behind the scenes who have rarely been recognised, actors from the »Third World of Europe«. My analysis gives an impression of how those actors conceived the agrarian question and how they dealt with the failure of the MAAC as with the Italian (Fascist) domination in

this field. The analysis sheds light on the international involvement of East Central European (and South-Eastern European) actors in the agrarian question. It, therefore, uses material from the ILO Governing Body (Conseil d'administration) with the Director at the helm. As the Governing Body was responsible for correspondence with a large number of individuals, organisations and governments, its files offer a deeper insight into the efforts of the various actors, insights which are just as valuable as the protocols of the ILCs and the labour conventions. In addition, since its creation in 1918, the ILO has functioned and still functions as a »social library«, with a large number of administrative staff who have contributed to the development of a vast body of knowledge within the Governing Body.⁷ For instance, the Bulletins and other information materials were produced with the ILO's secretariat, the Governing Body.⁸ Hence, the protocols of the ILCs, the files of the MAAC as well as the material from the Governing Body function as sources here. These materials are additionally supplemented by published sources from East Central Europe, particularly the press organs from ministries, agrarian organisations, and trade unions. Finally, I will illustrate the problem using the example of the Polish land reforms and, in particular, the interventions of one of the main actors behind them, Adam Rose (1895–1951), who was also the Warsaw correspondent of the ILO. His work on the agricultural question will be interpreted as an example of expertise from the region. It reflects the ILO's idea of development as well as its positioning of East Central Europe and its economic circumstances in global markets. As will be shown, property played an exceptional role in the national and international encounters that took place.

Planning and Social Engineering as Common Measures

The agrarian question and the problem of landownership were closely linked. By showing how the land reforms were presented as cornerstones on the road to modern economic development, this article aims to counteract the belief that interventions in the property system can only be understood as national-chauvinist measures against the German population in the East. By removing

the taboo from the rejection of property claims, I hope to explain two things in particular: Firstly, the redistribution of land can also be viewed as an attempt to modernise agrarian societies, and secondly, this draws attention to the redistribution of property as a means of economic politics and social engineering. According to Ribi Farclaz and Carolyn Taratko, the ILO »became interested in ways of optimizing labor practices but also guaranteeing employment in the rural countryside«.⁹ This corresponded to the ever-greater overlap between social and labour politics as the initial field of ILOs' engagement and application of economic knowledge. After the experiences of the Great Depression and the accession of the USA to the ILO, planning became an increasingly important component of ILO's attempt to improve living conditions.¹⁰ The ideas of the East Central Europeans in focus can be located precisely in this intersection of social policy and state intervention in the (agricultural) economy. In accordance with these observations, I will return to the agrarian question in the conclusion. Using the example of the Piłsudski coup d'état, I will discuss the systemic implications of property regimes as well as of planning and social engineering.

During the interwar period, the idea of economic development functioned by setting a European normative standard with the so-called Europe A as a constitutive norm. According to the underlying basic concept of Francis Dalaisi, Europe consisted of industrialised parts, labelled Europe A, and agricultural parts, labelled Europe B.¹¹ Consequently, Europe B was a candidate for development because of its agricultural nature. Most of the continent consisted of nations with an agrarian character (defined by more than 50 percent of the populace subsisting on agricultural production); the countries of East Central Europe were among them, as were, for example, Turkey, Spain and Portugal, and Estonia.¹² This idea proved to be very influential as, for example, the first director of the ILO, Albert Thomas (1878–1932), used the same mindset, dividing Europe into countries which were already developed properly and others which appeared to be rather problematic.¹³ The example shows how a single idea of development hierarchised the understanding of economies. In this perspective, the administrative goal would have been for all countries to experience the same development

(industrialisation). Nevertheless, the example reveals different approaches to Europe A and Europe B. Both the headquarters in Geneva and the actors in the region were aware of the fact that the agrarian countries were undergoing a different development, with the agrarian economy as the core element. It was exactly this state of knowledge which motivated ILO's engagement for Europe B and especially for the countries of East Central Europe.

While there are significant attempts to counter the logic of European standards in the case of the so-called Global South,¹⁴ the East continues to function as a semi-periphery, which has little to add to generalised conclusions.¹⁵ This has to do with the ill-understood end of communism,¹⁶ but not just that; as the above-mentioned examples reveal, the described attitude rests on a long tradition of standardisation: one which placed East-Central Europe in the blind spot of international knowledge production, as it has rarely any image of the region than that of backwardness compared to the West. Preconceptions from the Cold War reinforced these notions and strengthened the influential misinterpretation that the socialist period was merely an accidental event which ended with the regime change of 1989. This kind of perception leads to a conceptual trap since it hides continuities as well as international collaboration during the Cold War and the modernistic character of socialist rule.¹⁷

The Agrarian Question

The industrial revolution – as can be seen from the sources quoted above – apparently led to a proper development, bringing those countries which experienced it into category A. The countries which missed out not only appeared to be underdeveloped but also faced an imbalance between agricultural and non-agricultural economies and between production capacities and markets in the context of globalised markets.¹⁸ The following questions arise from this state of reflection: How have politicians and experts (sometimes in the same person) explained the problem? And what solutions have they proposed? These questions address the agrarian question as I would define it. The agrarian question was concerned

with imbalances among national economies within the framework of international trade. Evidently, many experts concluded that the solution to the given problems could not be achieved by simply catching up to level A. It was precisely against the background of the interdependence of markets and developments that contemporaries had an idea of what made the difference in agrarian economies, and they drew their conclusions from the underlying analysis. One of the differences they observed was in the property order, which in East Central Europe was still shaped to a large extent by so-called feudal structures.¹⁹ As will be shown, the relicts of feudalism were identified as one of the main problems in the attempt to reorganise agricultural production in a way which would make it more productive and also more useful for national economies. This concept corresponded to the extremely problematic social situation of the rural proletariat, which had led to riots and violent seizures during the Russian Revolution, the Russian Civil War, and the Polish-Bolshevik War.²⁰ In light of this, the redistribution of land was a means of satisfying the rural proletariat and dissuading them from Bolshevism.

While the attempt to fight Bolshevism and to establish a liberal order were in line with the ideology of the League of Nations (LoN) and its subsecretaries,²¹ the idea of redistributing land was rather problematic. In effect, the agrarian question was at the heart of two rationales constitutive of the Versailles Order: Firstly, minority politics and (in general) a right to property as enacted by the LoN, and secondly, social peace as promoted by the ILO. In the following, I will highlight the frictions which emerged at the intersection of the given rationales, and I will argue that these frictions are fundamental in different respects: Paradoxically, the IOs contributed to the measurement of the development of countries and not of other entities, since they consisted of member states and the statistical data used for this purpose were selected in accordance with national considerations. By doing so, they also repeated the logics of development which had shaped European nation-building processes during the 19th century.²² Further, the states erected by the Versailles Order on the territories of the defeated Habsburg, Tsarist, German and Ottoman Empires were perceived as nation-states; nevertheless, the reality of the national heterogeneity

of those territories led to the implementation of minority protection in the peace treaties with Poland, Czechoslovakia, Greece, Romania and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes / Yugoslavia.²³ The question of the expropriation of Germans was of high political significance since the affected landowners used the arbitration courts to protest.²⁴ A further problem was that the reorganisation of property touched the core of social stratification. In this respect, the right to property contradicted the idea of social justice.²⁵

The Administrative Story (ILCs and Governing Body): The Failure

Within the ILO framework, it was often unclear who represented whose interests. In particular, the principle of tripartism did not work in the agricultural sector.²⁶ Additionally, the logics of development were based on the Industrial Revolution and herewith on the worker and the employer as main players. The labour conventions, which were one of the ILO's major concerns since the 1920s, were directed towards the fully employed worker and proved difficult to implement in rural economic settings.²⁷ Against this background, it is easy to recount the history of ILO interference in agricultural matters: In 1921, the third ILC adopted three relevant conventions, namely No. 10: Minimum Age (Agriculture) Convention (the minimum age for employment was fourteen); No. 11: Right of Association (Agriculture) Convention; and No. 12: Workmen's Compensation (Agriculture), Convention (Compensation of employees for personal injuries resulting from accidents occurring in the course of their employment). During the interwar period, two more conventions touched on agriculture: namely, No. 25: Sickness Insurance (Agriculture) Convention (compulsory sickness insurance with expectations in national laws was introduced simultaneously in 1927 in industry and in agriculture) and No. 36: Old-Age Insurance (Agriculture) Convention (compulsory old-age insurance with expectations in national laws was introduced simultaneously in 1933 in industry and in agriculture).²⁸

But there were further forces at work: (Technical) agrarianism and the story of the MAAC. According to Amalia Ribi Forclaz, the MAAC increasingly became a

mouthpiece of the Italian Fascist regime. Between 1926 to 1933, the meetings of the MAAC had »largely been influenced« by IIA's president Giuseppe de Michelis (1872–1951), who also represented Italy at the Eleventh and Twelfth assembly of the LoN and at the Governing Body of the ILO.²⁹ Due to the different agendas of the participating organisations, the MAAC had rarely enjoyed success; the ILO had never officially criticised the »highjacking« of the IIA by the Italian government under Mussolini. Given this situation, Ribi Forclaz concludes that the dominance of de Michelis, to whom she attributes »strong interest in theoretical Fascism but little agricultural expertise«, had paralyzed the work of the MAAC.³⁰ Her article, which presents the state of research on the agricultural work of the ILO in the interwar years, only mentions the participation of East Central European actors in connection with agricultural trade unions, which attracted the interest of ILO's director Thomas, who (according to Ribi Forclaz with little response) called for a »Green International« in 1926.³¹

Beyond the Failure: The East Central European Promoters of Technical Agrarianism

Additionally, Forclaz's article quotes the Third ILC in 1921, which had called for »a methodical system of enquiry with a view to the efficient organisation and development of the means of agricultural production«,³² without further elaborating on this point. With reference to East Central Europe and especially Poland, the problem warrants a second glance: At its thirteenth meeting, the Governing Body of the ILO discussed the collaboration with the IIA, which in fact proves to have been quite conflicting from the very beginning. By reading the minutes, one can also learn about the role of the Polish delegate to the ILO, Franciszek (François) Sokal (1881–1932), one of the most important figures in the relations between Poland and the ILO,³³ as the »Chairman of the Mixed Committee of the International Institute of Agriculture in Rome and the International Labour Office«. Referring to a preparatory meeting, the committee to be created should »co-ordinate the work of the two organisations in

the study of questions interesting them both« and should consist of three members of the ILO's governing body and three members of the IIA.³⁴ From an administrative standpoint, the work of the MAAC was complicated by the fact that the institutions involved had different ideas about the subject of their cooperation. Even though the administrative success of the MAAC was limited, some basic questions do emerge, such as: What ideas of the agrarian questions were controversial, and how and where could they be followed up? What is meant by an »efficient organisation and development of the means of agricultural production« as envisaged by the Third ILC? And what role were the Polish and other East-Central European actors to play? Asking these questions leads to the ideological (rather than the data-producing and norm-setting) dimensions of the subject. In 1921, the annual ILC discussed the proposals of the first meetings of the MAAC, whereby the last one on technical education and the right to associate provided the most input. Deputies from different European, American, and Asian countries underlined the importance of education for agricultural workers. A member of the governmental delegation from the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes pointed out how this would even contribute to social peace.³⁵ The issue of rural education was also raised at the Twelfth ILC in 1929.³⁶ The controversies surrounding the right to association reflected not only the different interests of the social partners but also the difficulties of uniting the rural proletariat in different parts of the world.³⁷ The bulletin of the Polish Ministry of Work and Social Care (Ministerstwo Pracy i Opieki Społecznej) entitled »Praca i Opieka Społeczna« also referred to the ILO's goal of working for a lasting peace by ensuring social justice. With regard to the agrarian question, the magazine emphasised that the measures carried out by the Third ILC were of immense importance for Poland, as the education of the rural population would improve the social and national status of the peasantry as well as productivity in agriculture.³⁸ This statement seems typical of an approach which strove to harmonise social and economic aims in agriculture in the name of national and international public interest. This approach did not unfold strongly within the ILO, but it was nevertheless internationally followed up by East Central Europeans and other actors. I would define this approach as »technical agrarianism«.

Agrarianism emerged from the attempt to implement peasant-friendly policies after World War I and the Russian Revolution. On the one hand, the term *agrarianism* refers to a political movement seeking a »third path« between socialism and capitalism, without having a unified ideology. The agrarian parties in East-Central and Southeast Europe pursued different and contradictory goals, relying on left-wing arguments in some cases (and also in some situations) and on right-wing ones in others.³⁹ On the other hand, one can observe an academic and administrative approach to the agrarian questions which can be labelled »technical agrarianism«. Within the ILO, the different commissions (such as the MAAD) were referred to as *technical units* because they collaborated with each other to propose practicable solutions. In reference to this, I define the attempt to solve the agrarian question as technical agrarianism; most of the specialists involved were educated economists who tried to explain the differences between industrial and agricultural economies and especially the specific relationship between capital and labour in agriculture.⁴⁰ National and international agricultural economists collaborated with zeal, to draw conclusions on the specific functioning of agriculture with the intention of improving economic standards in the agrarian countries. Primarily, their proposals were not peasant-friendly, but rather pragmatic (meaning technical in the sense mentioned above). One result of these deliberations was the establishment of agricultural education, while another was the fight against rural poverty, for example by providing credits, guaranteeing social security, or increasing yields, and a third was the regulation of land ownership.

In 1929, representatives of different Polish and Czechoslovak organisations which were engaged in agricultural concerns met in Cracow and agreed to collaborate more deeply; this event gained international attention.⁴¹ According to the ILO's bulletin »Informations sociales« (with an English equivalent titled »Industrial and Labour Information«), their collaboration was targeted at the following:

An increase in agricultural production should be ensured by a policy which would guarantee to agriculturists adequate prices and markets for their produce; in other words, by a policy dealing with

*credits, customs, and fiscal and social problems, in such a way as to correspond to the needs of production and to encourage the accumulation of capital.*⁴²

The idea of the agricultural sector as a component of economic development that is expressed in this quote is exactly what I mean by »technical agrarianism«. The gathered representatives additionally demanded »upon the International Commission of [sic!] Agriculture [hence, not the IIA and not the MAAC; the author] to act as an effective central organisation for all bodies dealing with any branch of agricultural production«.⁴³ Although this far-reaching claim was not fulfilled or repeated, it does suggest encounters occurring behind the scenes.

One of the organisations represented in Cracow was the Czechoslovak Academy of Agriculture (Československá akademie zemědělská; ČAZ),⁴⁴ which was an academic organisation and obviously an important player in the game. A photo of the meeting shows seventeen persons (among them one woman), who are listed only by surname.⁴⁵ As far as the persons in the photo can be identified, most of them were agrarian specialists. It is also evident that both governments had a strong interest in the issue. The Polish side was represented by the former minister of agriculture Jerzy Gońicki (1879–1946; a national democrat) as well as the agrarian economists Jan Lutosławski (1875–1950) and Józef Mikulowski-Pomorski (1868–1935); the latter had also been a member of the governmental groups delegated to the Third ILC.⁴⁶ On the Czechoslovak side, the most prominent participant was Edvard Reich (1885–1943), one of the founders, and since 1925 the director, of the ČAZ who was also active internationally (which can be assumed from the fact that he is listed among WorldCat Entities).⁴⁷ Presumably in light of the above-mentioned demand of the Cracow meeting to be included in the governing bodies of the ILO, ILO Director Albert Thomas graced the annual meeting of the ČAZ in 1930 with a guest lecture (without attending in person).⁴⁸ As reported in a Polish newspaper of the Trade Union of Agrarian and Forestry Workers (Związek Robotników Rolnych i Lesnych), in his lecture Thomas underlined the importance of agriculture for national and international economies, pointing out that the world has many more agricultural countries than

non-agricultural countries, and that therefore, and because of the (still) enormous proportion of people employed in agriculture, it would be »unthinkable« (nie do pomyslenia) to exclude agriculture from the ILO's agenda.⁴⁹

The agrarian question had become even more acute during the Great Depression. It hindered the progress of ILO conventions in the field,⁵⁰ but it also directed the attention of the ILO back to agriculture. Reporting about the Congrès international d'agriculture (International Agricultural Congress)⁵¹ taking place 1929 in Bucharest, »Informations sociales« underlined the international impact of this congress with delegates from 33 countries.⁵² Referring to the economic crisis, ILO's information bulletin insisted the problem of agriculture was not production, but trade. Solutions discussed at the congress included the regulation of markets, collection and comparison of data (surveys), and increased collaboration between cooperatives of production and cooperatives of consumption.⁵³ Against the background of the world economic crisis, new encounters between East-Central European and international actors on the agricultural question began. In the same year in which Thomas gave his speech at the annual meeting of the ČAZ, the Polish government hosted a conference of the agrarian states, which took place in August 1930 in Warsaw. According to the Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs, August Zaleski (1883–1972), the initiative went back to a gathering in Geneva. The conference in Warsaw was the first meeting of the agrarian states, with delegates from Czechoslovakia, Estonia, Lithuania, Yugoslavia, Romania, Hungary, and Bulgaria; delegates from the LoN were also present.⁵⁴ Declaring that the economic crisis had a massive influence on the flow of agricultural goods, common action was demanded. The gathered representatives agreed to collaborate with each other as well as to exchange data in order to provide credits to regulate trade, and to enrich statistical knowledge.⁵⁵

Building on these examples, one can conclude that Polish and Czechoslovak actors collaborated constantly with the ILO as well as with each other, and further East Central and Southeast European countries as well, whereby they tried to promote the agrarian question on an international level. The IIA did not play a significant role in these endeavours. Following an academic,

technical and, to a certain degree, statist agenda, the aforementioned actors did not work according to the principle of tripartism and not primarily for sociopolitical issues, but rather, against the backdrop of the economic crises, for the improvement of the trade conditions for agricultural goods. Thus, the conclusion would also be misleading that they worked predominantly for the interests of the landowning classes.⁵⁶ Moreover, the East-Central European actors tended to counteract the Italian presence in the IIA, and thus also in the MAAC, with their own agenda.

Property Regimes, Concepts of Modernity and Poland

Two topics form the core of recent research on the issue of land redistribution in interwar Poland: Expropriations according to the roles of the Treaty of Versailles in the Western Provinces and the so-called colonisation politics, that is, the plan to allocate land in the eastern provinces (Kresy) to former legionnaires. The expropriations in the context of the Versailles Treaty (Article 297) targeted German citizens, which, to a certain extent, was seen as the reversal of the colonisation policy of the former Prussian-German rulers and, in the strict sense, had nothing to do with land reform.⁵⁷ Military colonisation – namely, the settlement of demobilised veterans in the Kresy (the former eastern territories of the old Polish-Lithuanian Union conquered during the Polish-Bolshevik war⁵⁸) – were a part of the land reform of 1920 and attracted a great deal of attention.⁵⁹ Both attempts had been interpreted as expressions of a national policy hostile towards Germans and Ukrainians, which ultimately went against the minority treaties.⁶⁰ It is obvious that both deal with problems of territoriality and that both nevertheless concern very different contexts. In the following, I will not focus on one or the other, but will take a broader perspective on the land reforms of 1920 and especially of 1925. I will not examine national conflicts, but rather the ideas of justice which motivated the actors involved in the land reforms.

The end of World War I coincided with the territorial reorganisation in Eastern Central and Southern Europe. The newly established or reestablished states in the

region were shaped by the former imperial order, which also influenced the emergence of time-specific social developments there.⁶¹ This affected Poland in a unique way. Apart from a few industrialised islands, the country was characterised by a backlog of modernisation, which stood structurally and rhetorically in a complex relation to the rule of the former partition powers.⁶² The reestablishment of the Polish state was based on these different legacies; at the same time, national policy aimed at legal standardisation (unification). Traditional conflicts among national movements and structural problems aggravated the situation. It is undisputed that the interwar period was fundamental for the formation of statehood, the expansion of social rights as an integral part of citizenship, as well as changes in ownership in terms of events, structures, and ideas.⁶³ Based on the state institutions inherited from the former empires (such as the beginnings of social security, general conscription and parliamentarianism), democratic nation-states were established in the region at the same time as the international organisations were established by the Treaty of Versailles (such as the LoN and the ILO).⁶⁴ Endowed with new power, the state actors understood the reorganisation of property relations partly as a modernisation task, partly as a national measure and partly as a sociopolitical measure. Hereby they understood the old order of land property as a relic of »feudalism« which grew out of »foreign rule« and was now to be eliminated. The land reform, like social and labour policy, was negotiated not only within the framework of the new nation states, but also within the framework of IOs.⁶⁵

The goal of the newly founded nation states was to modernise their economies on their own terms. They perceived the reorganisation of rural societies as their specific attempt to overcome the incorrect historical preconditions. By analysing the rule of the partition powers as an unjust anachronistic feudalistic order, the re-administration of the national territories was perceived as a task for developing the country by introducing modern socio-economic structures. But the liberal international institutions obviously avoided discussions about property reorganisation as a question of justice. Nevertheless, in the sources of the ILO and its Polish counterparts, ownership clearly appears to be a matter of social politics. This spread from the semi-

peripheral position of the European East as an agrarian region and its specific approach to property as a vehicle for social improvement. This – I would argue – is what made up the Global East⁶⁶ in interwar Europe. Land reforms were, of course, an administrative act. The national governments of the East Central and Southeast European countries collected data on the progress of land reforms and listed them statistically in tables. This documentation found its way, for example, into the ILO's Information »Information sociales« (while it never discussed the agrarian question systematically).⁶⁷ This observation adds another component to the puzzling picture of the ambivalent relationship between the ILO and Europe B: Officially, land reforms were not an ILO concern. Land ownership was not a subject of ILOs' conventions, and the ILC did not vote on issues of land ownership and redistribution. But while the MAAC has more or less failed, land reforms have gained some international notoriety. Thus, land reforms were seen as key to agricultural development at the national and international levels.

The agrarian question crystallised in the land reforms which expropriated (and compensated) owners of great properties and sold the land to the agrarian people. The idea behind this was to solve the above-mentioned problems by using knowledge about agrarian economic development and by enforcing those developments as a matter of social engineering. Whereas the agrarian question was not only about social standards but also about the property regime, it also touched on the systemic question of the meaning of ownership and wealth distribution in the liberal world. From a sociological perspective, social justice is »der normative Grundbegriff politischer Ordnung« [the basic concept of political order]. According to Rainer Forst, justice is not just about the distribution of social goods, but rather about how those goods are created. Therefore, justice does not begin with distribution, but with structures of ownership and production relations.⁶⁸ Property is not a value in itself, but it is a means of enforcing other norms. Unlike social policy, which tends to be characterised by (institutional) inertia,⁶⁹ the property regime is a subsystem of political order, which was renegotiated with every system change.⁷⁰ Thus, land reforms, as understood and promoted after World War I, were an instrument of »redistribution«,

which marked the regime change from imperial rule to a national liberal and democratic order.⁷¹ In designing land reforms, state institutions emerged as a body which was supposed to bring together, negotiate, and manage the demands of different actors. Since the end of World War I, the importance of the corresponding practices, such as evaluating, counting, and managing, increased on national as well as international levels. Hence, redistribution in its technical aspects corresponded with the norms and actions of the so-called Versailles system. Therefore, the question of redistribution will be examined in the following in the context of national and international notions of justice granted by the state.

Land Reform and Property Policies in the Case of Poland

In the following, I will focus on the land reforms of 1920 and 1925 and on the question of how some leading experts grasped its essence: Which idea of social justice was behind it? How did experts tend to solve the basic problems of social justice and property regimes?

In 1921, the Polish economist and then-officer of the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs Zofia Daszyńska-Golińska⁷² wrote a brochure entitled »Land Reform in Poland«. In this brochure, she justified the need for the land reform. After a political revolution has taken place, she stated, a social revolution has to follow, the aim of which was to improve the social structure. According to Daszyńska-Golińska, it was important to provide the land proletariat with land. For the Polish state, which was still at war over its eastern borders, she quoted the figure of 1,220,000 members of the rural population without land.⁷³ In her understanding, together with the workers, the peasants, who had only been free in the Kingdom of Poland since 1863, constituted the people whom the policy of the new state had to serve. For her, the people were a social, not a national, unity, consisting of an urban and a rural proletariat. Hinting at the negative social consequences of the imperial traditions of the partitioning powers, Daszyńska-Golińska emphasised the necessity for the newly established state to react to this. Finally, she also referred to the high number of Polish labour migrants and argued that the migration of agricultural and seasonal workers was a social problem

which needed to be addressed.⁷⁴ She summarised the land reform, which was adopted by the Sejm on July 15, 1920 as follows:

*The reform which abolished the privilege of processing large estates, that is, which abolished the remains of the privileges of the gentry, was passed unanimously by the Sejm, in which there sit representatives of all classes and parties. When it was necessary to save the country, the privileges were sacrificed.*⁷⁵

The author invokes national unity for the sake of social justice. The law in question provided that all private goods exceeding 60, 180 or 400 hectares in size should be parcelled out. Part of the land could remain in the hands of the previous owner; compensation corresponding to half the price of the average market value should be paid for the other parts.⁷⁶

After the change of government, this land reform was not carried out; partly because it was not considered to conform with the constitution, partly because the implementation failed, and partly because the government feared accusations from the LoN courts of arbitration.⁷⁷ It was not until December 28, 1925 that the new Land Reform Act was passed, which now stipulated that the large estates should initially be parcelled out on a voluntary basis. Only if the parcelling carried out in this way did not meet the set targets of 200,000 hectares of parcelling per year, should expropriation be carried out.⁷⁸ Up until the outbreak of World War II, 44 percent of the large estates were parcelled out in this way, a total of 2,700,000 hectares.⁷⁹ Hence, the success of the land reform was small compared to the scale of the problem in Poland. Only a small amount of land actually changed hands, and rural overpopulation and land hunger could hardly be contained in the interwar period.

Adam Rose as a Major Expert Behind the Land Reform of 1925

One of the main architects of the land reform of 1925 was Adam Rose (1895–1951). Rose was the correspondent of the ILO from the opening of its Warsaw Correspondent Office in 1922 up until the year 1929. At the same time,

he was also an officer of the Ministry of Agriculture (Ministerstwo Rolnictwa i Dóór Państwowych). Hence, he was one of the main personalities embodying the exchange of knowledge between the ILO and East Central European actors in the field of agricultural economies. He had studied at the Agrarian Academy in Berlin and at the Economics Faculty in Jena before he obtained his Warsaw posts. Most of his writings were about the Agrarian Question.⁸⁰ In the following, I will analyse his booklet *»Le problème agraire en Pologne«*, published in 1926.⁸¹ The booklet was only published in French, and it aims to explain and justify the Polish land reform to the international public and herewith also to the representatives of the IOs and especially the ILO. It is the very core of Rose's work and that is why I am referring to this French booklet.

Rose looks to the past to explain the specifics of the Polish situation. The first chapter explores the agricultural structures at the time when Poland had gained independence. His country had, and this was his main argument, missed the development which had begun with the French Revolution. And this was, according to Rose, due to the neglect, disinterest, and exploitation of the partition powers. Rose was interested in the interrelations between the industrial and the agrarian sectors and, in particular, in demographics. With the help of a lot of statistical data arranged in tables,⁸² he showed the high population density in the Western and Southern districts and the lower density in the Eastern districts. Rose saw the main hindrance to normal economic development in the fact that the people who did not find employment in the agrarian sector had no chance to migrate for a job in industries. Only in the Western provinces did Steins' and Hardenberg's reforms modernise the agricultural sector, which, as Rose pointed out, was also a blueprint for national government policy. Conditions in the Russian partition were *»quasi-feudal«* in stark contrast to the West; Rose also cites the figure of 500,000 families without land in the country of former Congress Poland.⁸³ Having examined in detail the situation in each of the divisions as well as in the *kresy*, Rose highlights three problems which land reform was intended to solve: First, the abolition of serfdom in the former Russian division; second, the consolidation of fragmented property, especially in the south; and third, the parcelling of larger estates.

Even though each area had its own characteristics, the reform had to apply to the entire country.⁸⁴ The aim of the reform was to establish medium-sized estates which would be productive and would employ the population. Modernisation was also about management.

This type of perception is consistent with the conclusions of other agrarian experts, such as Waław Ponikowski (1884–1919)⁸⁵, who published an article on *»Polish Agricultural Land Organization since the World War«* in the well-known journal *»Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science«* in 1930. At that time, Ponikowski was a lecturer at the Szkoła Główna Gospodarstwa Wiejskiego w Warszawie (Warsaw Agricultural University). He also discussed the difference between the Eastern and Southern parts of Poland on the one hand and the Western parts on the other, concluding with a paragraph on *»governmental assistance«*. Drawing a line from 1920 from 1929, when state interventions in the grain markets massively increased, he stated: *»In the course of time, the conviction grew among Government officials that agricultural production, and particularly grain production, needed some protection.«*⁸⁶ Therefore, the government favoured the interests of the consumers over the interests of the *»agricultural classes«* (the intention of the government appears to be to involve different levels of the rural population, which illustrates the interventionist power of the government, and to submit the interests of the population to the interests of urban consumers).⁸⁷

From Rose's booklet, we learn about the importance of experts in the eyes of the architects of the new national and international order. The second chapter of Rose's work focuses on institutions and experts while in the third chapter, he describes the measures which were implemented from 1919 to 1925, and in the fourth chapter, the new measures. He stressed that the older reforms suffered due to the lack of well-educated local staff.⁸⁸ Hence, we can assume that the administrative body was still not sufficiently able to solve the problems of the Polish agrarian sector after 1925. Additionally, Ponikowski's assumptions hint clearly at the *etatist* arrangement and how it became reinforced in the concept of the so-called *Sanacja* (recovery), politics which had been established after the Piłsudski coup d'état. There were, of course, a lot of conflicting interests to negotiate. The landowners naturally had interests

other than those of the so-called land proletariat, and it was not only about the parcelling and reorganisation of land; about possible expropriation, compensation and redistribution of land; but also about working conditions, social insurance, pay and modes of production.

Conclusion: Reflecting on Regime Changes in the Light of the Agrarian Question

In his introduction, the above quoted economic historian Aldcroft lists factors which had a negative impact on economic development in the agricultural countries. In addition to the surplus population in agriculture and low productivity, he mentions factors such as high birth rates, national heterogeneity (minorities), high illiteracy rates, the influx of foreign capital into the few modern industrial enterprises, the low degree of urbanisation, the dominance of primates in the export trade, as well as the lack of a middle class and low social mobility.⁸⁹ He also states that those countries were politically inexperienced, as most of them had been founded after World War I; because of »weak, often corrupt and unstable administrations« most of them had dismantled their parliamentary regimes by 1938. He referred to Italy and Germany as totalitarian states, whereas the others had turned into »tyrannical, [...] authoritarian regimes.«⁹⁰ While he reflexively associates a non-democratic political system simply with a poorly functioning country, Aldcroft fails to explain the concrete interaction between an agrarian country and regime change. In this view, the experiences of the period before World War I do not count as political experiences, nor do the structural preconditions before the founding of nation states play a role. His chapter on Poland nonetheless highlights the immense war destruction and the problem of reunification in that country, as well as the fundamental role of the state as a driving force in the economy and the failure of land reform to transform agriculture into an »engine of growth«. In the end, he does not return to the question of political experiences and regime change in relation to Poland.⁹¹

Hence, if we take Aldcroft's explanations as an example of meaningful socioeconomic thought

reflecting the attitude of the IOs and the ILO in the above-mentioned way, we can assume an explanatory gap in development theories. Comparisons such as those made by him and many others do not explain the driving forces behind political changes (which seems to be one reason why IOs have trouble recognising them adequately⁹²). Taking into account the various arguments presented in this article, one cannot help but consider the possibility that regime changes were precisely aimed at solving the problems of an agrarian country, which would also mean that the actors behind them generally shared development logics which had set them back behind the European standard. In other words: The presented idea of development started from the rationale of Western economic superiority, a superiority which by conviction (but without deeper explanation) depended on democratic statehood. But in the end, the goals (increased production rates and better market conditions) and the methods defined for the less-developed countries (planning) could be reached as well or even better by political regimes which ignored fundamental institutions of democratic governance, as, for example, the division of power. From this perspective, regime changes did not violate the given rationale of development but could even serve the concern. The attempt to enforce development by avoiding democratic processes might be read as a matter of shared convictions. Finally, I will substantiate this thesis with the example of the Piłsudski coup d'état.

My article explored justice as an idea mediating between the democratic promise of equality and the social inequality of citizens by redistributing social goods among them. However, this idea can potentially also undermine the democratic order by propagating other principles of redistribution. What defined Polish politics, as advocated by Daszyńska-Golińska, Adam Rose and others, was the great need of the Polish Inteligencja and the Piłsudski camp to fundamentally change society in the sense of a modern economic order; Janusz Żarnowski uses the term *social engineering* (inżynieria społeczna) in order to describe this political goal. He shows how this task, or even mission, shaped the self-image of the new elite after World War I and how this was combined with a pronounced etatism.⁹³ The land reform fitted exactly into this framework, but without having a corresponding effect. Żarnowski's understanding

that it was this type of failure and frustration with the system that ultimately resulted in the Piłsudski coup d'état of 1926 appears convincing. It appears that after the establishment of an authoritarian regime, those in power simply continued the previous policies. But in reality, modernisation was being hindered.

The interrelation between welfare, property regimes, and regime changes must be read in synchronic and diachronic comparisons. Such comparisons underline the systemic evidence of underlying frameworks (without missing the specific character of each regime change). Using the example of interwar Italy, Frederico D'Onofrio distinguishes between »democratic agrarianism« and »productivist agrarianism«; the former emphasises social utility to increase the number of farm owners (and puts the people first); the latter enables a technocratic leadership to make agriculture development the subject of state bureaucracy (and puts the state first).⁹⁴ This kind of statist political logic proves true for the Polish regime change of 1926 as well (even though it was far from »totalitarian« in Aldcroft's sense and it was also neither strictly nationalistic, conservative or rightist). East-Central Europe in general was already characterised by a tendency towards state intervention and public ownership before World War II; this tendency became reinforced under socialism.⁹⁵ D'Onofrio interprets agrarianism as an optimistic ideology⁹⁶ because it sought a way to protect agrarian countries and agrarian economies from the hardships of capitalism; socialist thought shared this way of thinking to a certain degree. From the perspective of post-socialism, one must assume that this hope failed. After 1989, the post-socialist countries became even more concerned with the idea of catching up with Western developments (this time from industrialisation to service economy and digitalisation).⁹⁷ Against this backdrop, the fact that the economies of East Central Europe at the end of World War I had been faced with specific difficulties, which still shaped the economic development during socialism,⁹⁸ seems to be of little importance.

It seems that on the one hand, the interwar contemporaries in East Central Europe as in Western Europe shared the same idea of development; on the other hand, the East Central Europeans had a vision of the transformation of agrarian societies which did

not simply follow the line of the West. Directing the glance (in reference to Herren's idea of the second LoN) towards the second ILO – beyond the failure of the ILC's conventions and the MAAC – there is a further agenda to explore. In the correspondences and publications of ILO's Governing Body further actors from the East Central European countries appear, such as agrarian organisations, people involved in international entanglement, and multipliers. Experts from the region were aware of the importance of agriculture for national and international economies, and they had an idea of how the rural economy could be improved for the benefit of a higher (national) good (a common good, which did not necessarily correspond to democracy). In my view, it is nevertheless too short-sighted to assume that the idea of intervening in the property system must be regarded as evidence of non-democratic tendencies as such. Just because the ownership policy was to some extent taken up by the minority policy, which could lead to the assumption that it was unfair to the former owners, we cannot avoid looking at the complex more systematically. The problem as such has a much higher political relevance when placed in a diachronic perspective: The actors of the interwar period had obviously been thinking about a problem which would take on even greater significance in the context of decolonisation after World War II.⁹⁹

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Abstract

This article analyses the ILO's administrative practice on agricultural issues in the interwar period. On the surface, the ILO did not succeed in assuming a prominent position in the agricultural question. However, the article goes beyond this failure by focussing on the newly founded states of East Central Europe. It interprets the work of the tripartite actors and the experts from the region and works out how these actors shared a common conception of developed and underdeveloped countries with the Western internationalists and how they tried to overcome their weak position through statism and social engineering (e.g. land reforms).

About the Author

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