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Neo-Serfdom in Bohemia

"Serfdom" is one of those conventions of historical nomenclature which, like "feudal" or "medieval," are intended to bring together in concept a number of similar elements for common consideration. Very often we are inclined to forget that the elements composing the whole may bear many marks of dissimilarity as well as marks of likeness. We should be on guard, then, not to allow the convenience of conventional terms to blind us to the great variety of characteristics and variations in quality to be found in the thing named. "Serfdom," just like "feudalism," means different things at different times and places, and it is well for us from time to time to examine more closely the several manifestations of it to determine if there may be important differences distinguishing one type from the other, even though they all seem to sail under the same colors.

It is, happily, no longer unusual to find East Central European serfdom treated separately and recognized as different from the serfdom that prevailed in Western Europe. Indeed, whether one is concerned with serfdom in the East or in the West, one readily discerns that it is a phenomenon most distinguished by an extraordinary range of variations in specific conditions. Moreover, one would not have to compare the extremes of East and West to find a bewildering multiplicity of terms and conditions of servitude and land tenure. Nevertheless, the institution of peasant serfdom in Bohemia does present a sufficiently clear and distinct development to be treated as a whole, and the purpose here will be to indicate the fundamental characteristics and the salient features in the evolution of Bohemian serfdom from the so-called neo-serfdom or second serfdom, beginning with the opening of the modern era, through the eighteenth century, when the institution became obsolete and fell under the reforming zeal of Maria Theresa and her even more zealous son, Joseph II.

In seeking to describe any given example of serfdom and its continuing elaboration over a period of years, one may look to three key areas of the peasant's life and status. First, the peasant's legal relationship to his lord, the law, and the state will indicate the extent of his personal freedom or thralldom; second, the peasant's security of tenure of his land is a very important test of his economic independence; and, third, the number and value of his obligations (in whatever measure—time, money, or kind) owed to his lord will also reveal the degree to which he can benefit from his personal freedom and his tenure of land. If one could imagine a scale running

from a condition of complete personal freedom and legal competence (with fee-simple title to land, and immunity from all demands for service or fees) to a condition of personal bondage (with precarious tenure or no land, and liability to prestations without limit or defense), then the experience of the Bohemian peasant could be portrayed as ranging broadly across the scale, with variations occurring both in time and in place. At no time during the period under discussion here was either extreme of the scale realized.

It is customary for historians to find the beginning of neo-serfdom in Bohemia in the legislation of the second half of the fifteenth century, especially the laws of 1487 which restricted peasant mobility, and in the codes of 1500, which granted political primacy to the landed lords of Bohemia and far-reaching controls over the peasants of that land.¹ The events of those years have been considered to be a great watershed in agrarian history in the lands of Saint Václav. From that period the peasant was supposed to have been driven from the sunlit uplands of freedom and prosperity and to have descended precipitously into the dark valley of subjection and economic ruin. However, the process was not that sharp and swift. The promulgation of the laws seems to have been more in the nature of an announcement of intention rather than a statement of immediately realizable legislative will.² Nor were economic conditions such as to encourage the lords to impose more onerous demands on the peasants. It appears that the laws were not strictly enforced and represented only milestones along a course which had been leading slowly, since the Hussite Wars, to the enservment of the peasants through a procedure which would not come to full effect until the seventeenth century.

On the eve of the Hussite Wars, after two centuries of favorable evolution in agrarian relations, the Bohemian peasant found himself in circumstances of relative advantage.³ The thirteenth-century German immigration to Bohemia had brought significant influence in agrarian affairs.⁴ "German law" spread far beyond the area of German immigrant settlement and was adopted in much of Czech agrarian society as well. In company with indigenous social and economic forces, it helped to render all peasants freer, German and Czech, and afforded them firmer tenure in their lands.⁵ The emphyteutic hereditary leasehold rights, with power to convey land by sale or testament,

1. See, for example, Francis Dvornik, *The Slavs in European History and Civilization* (New Brunswick, 1962), p. 335, and Frederick G. Heymann, *John Žižka and the Hussite Revolution* (Princeton, 1955), p. 480.

2. Alois Míka, *Poddaný lid v Čechách v první polovině 16. století* (Prague, 1960), chap. 5 and pp. 187 ff.

3. Heymann, *John Žižka*, p. 42.

4. Kamil Krofta, *Dějiny selského stavu*, 2nd ed. (Prague, 1949), p. 431.

5. Jerome Blum, "The Rise of Serfdom in Eastern Europe," *American Historical Review*, 62 (July 1957): 814-17.

made the peasant nearly a freeholder and assured that the benefit of his labor would accrue to himself or his heirs. At the same time, the grain market was rewarding, for Bohemia enjoyed a good export trade. Because the cities tended to dominate the trade in grain, the landed aristocrats were not great agricultural entrepreneurs; they were content to reap their harvests in money payments from the peasants in return for use of the land. The lords themselves kept little demesne land and were not greatly interested in farming the land for market sale on their own account. Beyond collecting their rental fees, the lords had little to do with peasants. The presence of a strong monarchy during Charles IV's reign was a further advantage for the peasant, for the likelihood of being curbed prevented the nobles from acting irresponsibly toward the peasantry.

At the turn of the fourteenth century, then, the Bohemian peasant was most frequently a nearly independent small holder who paid his rent and discharged his obligations to his lord by money fees and who had access to a wide market through the agency of the local bourgeoisie. To be sure, there were some seigniorial demands on the peasant. *Robot*a obligations were found almost everywhere, but they were usually very light and were most often commuted to money payments. At that time the most prevalent of all obligations of the peasant to his lord was that of performing *robot*a on piscicultural ponds. Although the lords of Bohemia were not interested in extensive farming of their own lands, they did come to conduct a kind of "pond economy" (*Teichwirtschaft*) or fish husbandry.⁶ They had existing ponds cleared and stocked with fish and had artificial ponds constructed for the purpose of breeding and bringing fish to market. This work was usually done by *robot*a, but although it was hard work, it required few days labor per year.

There were also other forms of *robot*a service required, such as maintaining roads, clearing drainage ditches, and the like, but seldom did any one peasant have to work more than a few days per year. At the beginning of the fifteenth century the course of peasant serfdom in Bohemia approximately paralleled that in Western Europe; however, with the outbreak of the Hussite Wars, the dynamic of Bohemian agrarian history is different from that found elsewhere.

The religious reformers of the late fourteenth century and, after them, the Hussite preachers had been advocates of the peasant's cause, proclaimed the equality of all Christians, and held the plain peasant folk to be as worthy as the aristocratic lords. Both Hus and the reforming preachers insisted that peasants should be free and that their lands should be held in hereditary tenure (indicating that there was already dispute on these scores).⁷ When the

6. Míka, *Poddaný lid*, pp. 111 ff.

7. Dvorník, *The Slavs*, p. 334; Heymann, *John Žižka*, p. 43; Krofta, *Dějiny*, pp. 88–92.

Hussite Wars erupted in their fury, the peasants acquitted themselves most effectively on the field of battle and won such esteem that in the Taborite community they heard themselves declared free from all obligations.⁸ The dislocations of the wars prevented the noble lords from maintaining control over the rural population, and, besides, the peasants were able to assert their independence, if necessary, by force of new-found armed might. However, in the end, the ravages of war were very costly to the peasants, and since they had no economic reserves to sustain them through the times of peril and destruction, their fortunes waned at the end of the wars. The final victories of the aristocracy left the peasants as the most grievously harmed victims of the wars.⁹

There had been fearful upheaval in rural Bohemia during the hostilities. Some peasants had left their lands to join the “warriors of God,” and some had been driven from their lands and villages by marauding armies. In general, an air of terrible uncertainty and restlessness prevailed. It would not have been difficult for the aristocratic lords, who then emerged again as the strongest element in Bohemian society, to profit from the confused conditions as the unhappy land approached mid-century. But for a time the lords were so occupied in pursuing their differences with the still-flourishing royal cities and were sufficiently restrained by Jiří Poděbrady, the “Hussite king,” that they did not immediately exploit their ascendancy to the full at the expense of the peasants. Nevertheless, there were straws in the wind during Poděbrady’s rule which indicated the trend in peasant-lord relations. In order to achieve stability in the realm, Poděbrady had to grant some of the aristocrats’ demands, including extended powers over the peasant population.¹⁰

After the death of the “Hussite king” the Bohemian nobility had recovered sufficiently from the damaging effects of the recent wars and were ready to press their claims for prerogative and power against the weaker successors of Poděbrady and against the rivalry of the royal cities. The re-found strength of the nobility was also turned to the subjection of the peasant. The peasant laws enacted from 1487 to 1500 signaled a return to serfdom which bound the peasant to the soil and subordinated him to manorial jurisdiction, but it would require yet a century to bring the full weight of serfdom to bear on the peasantry.

From the last quarter of the fifteenth century and through the years of the sixteenth century several developments were important to the evolution of serfdom in Bohemia. One of the most significant was the increase in population. It is obvious that an increase in population requires an increase in

8. Howard Kaminsky, *A History of the Hussite Revolution* (Berkeley, 1967), p. 386, reports that the city of Tábor nevertheless collected its full dues from the peasants when the due-date arrived. See also Heymann, *John Žižka*, p. 98.

9. Heymann, *John Žižka*, p. 480.

10. Ibid. Dvornik, *The Slavs*, p. 335.

the food supply, which in turn requires changes in agricultural production. Increased agricultural production may be won in two ways: more land may be put under cultivation without change of technique in cultivation, or improved techniques may induce more production from the same area of arable land. Of course, combinations of these two methods may be used—and in any particular case probably would be used. Unless there is very considerable improvement of technique, such as the application of capital machinery, more efficient plows, and more yielding strains of grains (and that kind of improvement was a severely limited possibility in the fifteenth century), an increase in labor becomes necessary. If the increase in population takes place entirely in the country, the greater need for labor is directly and naturally supplied, and if there is virgin land which can be broken and to which labor may be applied, the increase in production may nicely balance the greater demand. But the increase in population was not just on the land; there was a lively growth of towns and market villages. There were more mouths to feed than there were hands to feed them. Agricultural labor became valuable.

Another significant factor that paved the way to a renewed enserfment of the peasant was the change in relations between aristocrats and the cities. Even after the aristocrats' victory at Lipany (1434) the royal cities had continued to thrive for several decades.¹¹ But beginning late in the fifteenth century the Bohemian nobility successfully competed with the royal cities for brewing rights and control of trade. Noble towns increased in number and noble market controls grew apace.¹² In commerce the monopoly of the cities was broken—even their domination of foreign trade. Foreign trade, especially in grain, was increased after the Hussite Wars were over. Agricultural production for the market was then a more promising and profitable enterprise than ever before, and the noble landowners of Bohemia were in the best position they had ever known to pursue that promise and profit. The greatest growth in market demand had been in the Bohemian domestic market in precisely the noble towns where the lords would not have to suffer interference or competition.

The new market attractions brought about yet another of the important changes leading to the enserfment of the peasant. Enterprising noblemen began to pay attention to their demesne lands with a view to increasing their production for the market. They attempted to improve their agricultural operations by better fertilizing, more efficient plowing, and by greater use of horse teams rather than oxen. But substantial improvements in yields were not achieved as long as the three-field system prevailed. An appreciably augmented volume of production could be achieved only by the breaking of

11. Míka, *Poddaný lid*, pp. 64–65.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 71.

untilled ground and enlarging the amount of arable land. The lords began slowly to increase their demesne holdings by engrossing peasant-held lands through various means which ranged from fair purchase to forceful, illegal seizure. They also conducted programs of internal colonization, settling peasants on newly acquired lands. Both procedures encouraged the lords to tighten their controls over the peasants, to begin to enserf them. With their enlarged holdings, the lords needed more and more *robota* for their demesne lands, and to that end they needed controllable peasants to colonize the new lands. In addition, the spread of more intensive crop cultivation, such as viniculture, hops, fruit, and flax, which brought greater profit, also placed a premium on labor and encouraged landlords to draw closer their control over the rural population.

But these changes in social and economic relations were quite gradual. There was not an abrupt decline of the peasant class into complete serfdom. Until the middle of the sixteenth century, pisciculture was still the most important economic activity of the rural landlords in Bohemia.¹³ Until later in the century, most of the farming the great lords did of their own lands was for their own and their household's support. The "pond economy" did not occasion extensive seizure of peasant lands nor lead to great increases in *robota*. The relatively minor increases in *robota* that came late in the sixteenth century were often compensated by grants of privileges such as grazing rights, wood-cutting and gathering from seigneurial forests, swine foraging in the forest, and similar boons.¹⁴ Peasants who held land and were self-sustaining usually were obligated to do no more than two to six days of *robota* per year; cottagers and domestics and day laborers (*Häusler* and *Inleute*) seldom owed more than seven to twelve days annually. Many peasants performed no *robota* at all or paid only a fee of commutation in money or kind. Not even "pond work" lay excessively heavy on the Bohemian peasant during the sixteenth century.

In the late sixteenth century, as a result of social and economic changes since the Hussite Wars, and the reflection of those changes in the peasant laws, the Bohemian peasant was technically and legally a serf; he was bound to the land, he was subject to his lord's jurisdiction, and he was required to perform *robota* or pay fees in lieu thereof. His position was the more insecure in that the monarch no longer exercised his power at the rural level to counter the influence of the aristocratic lords. But the weight of the peasant's restrictions and obligations was not overly burdensome. The legal machinery existed, and precedent was established which would render the peasant's burden of serfdom heavy indeed, but there also existed customs and laws which defended him against capricious or rapacious lords. Even

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 111 ff.

14. František Majátek, *Feudální velkostatek a poddaný* (Prague, 1959), p. 308.

given the unequal socioeconomic strengths of lord and peasant, the erosion of customary safeguards could take a long time. However, should some cataclysmic event sweep away the validity of custom and destroy social stability, the peasant's condition could deteriorate swiftly. And that is precisely what occurred in the early seventeenth century.

The Thirty Years' War, which began and ended at Prague, was in many ways a pivotal experience for all the inhabitants of Bohemia, but to none more than to the peasants. The events of those thirty years ruined them, bled them, and left them in deep subjection.¹⁵

First, the devastations of war were even more enormous than those of the Hussite Wars, and the conflict of the seventeenth century was more socially disruptive. The physical destruction and loss of life may have been exaggerated by some historians in the past, but even a very cautious assessment of the effects of the war leaves a grim, dark picture. There were great migrations of refugees as well as the wanderings of persons who sought to improve their fortunes by skill or by guile in those most harrowing times. Lands were left unoccupied and untilled; food was scarce. Disease was often rampant, and death came more often from that cause than from casualty of war. Lawlessness was all too often the resort of both the wanderers and the established residents when they encountered each other. And even the more conservative estimates admit to a very severe reduction in the population of Bohemia during the war.¹⁶

The damage to property, as serious as it was, was probably not as significant a socioeconomic fact as the change in ownership of property. Abandoned peasant holdings were simply occupied by squatters or, what was more likely, were seized by the lords who then impressed roving peasants and settled them, enserfed, on the land seized. In view of the dangerously chaotic social situation it was not difficult for rural lords to claim that they should exercise extensive police powers to restore order in the land. Because food was so desperately needed and lands lay untilled, it was urged that even Draconian measures were justified to insure a steady, effective agricultural labor force. From the dire wartime conditions grew a vast accretion in the landholdings of the lords and the settling of most astringent terms of enserfment upon the peasants.

Finally, and possibly as important as any other factor in determining the austerity of the second serfdom, there were the social and constitutional changes which followed the defeat at the White Mountain. The old Bohemian aristocracy, which had accepted the restraints of custom and law and had exhibited a certain degree of paternalism in their relations with the peasants,

15. Kamil Krofta, *Nesmrtelný národ od Bílé Hory k Palackému* (Prague, 1940), pp. 592–96. Cf. Krofta, *Dějiny*, pp. 171 ff.

16. See Otto Placht, *Lidnatost a společenská skladba českého státu v 16.–18. století* (Prague, 1957), pp. 77 ff.

were decimated by exile and confiscation of property after the imperial victories.¹⁷ A new aristocracy replaced the old, took possession of much of the landed property of Bohemia, and therewith took control also of a large segment of the Bohemian peasant population. These new men were mostly foreigners and conquerors being rewarded for their services in defeating the “heretics” of Bohemia. They felt in no wise bound by the ancient and paternalistic restraints or the ameliorating customs and laws which tempered the old lords’ actions toward the peasants. They were there to make the heretics pay for the folly of insurrection, to wrest as much from their new situation as they could, and as quickly as possible to recompense themselves for their pains. Their patron, the triumphant Ferdinand II, was in no temper to curb his creatures in that respect. He would require the submission of new lords to his strong royal government, but in return for that submission he would abandon the peasants entirely to the lords’ governance.¹⁸

By the time the war was half over, the peasants of Bohemia were without any defense, either by custom or by royal power, between themselves and the noble lords. And every circumstance invited the lords to exploit the peasants harshly: they were common heretics needing punishment and absolute control; the products of the land were sorely needed, and much land lay fallow for want of husbandmen; labor was in short supply because of death and migration and was too precious to be left free; the lords had great tracts of land and needed an assured labor force to work them; and because marauding bands of peasants had been known to be abroad in the land, by association all peasants were held to be contumacious louts who required the knout and subjection to keep them in their place.

The socioeconomic confusion and destruction brought by the war, the constitutional change which removed the peasant from the state’s jurisdiction (even from its cognizance), and the metamorphosis in the class superior to him left the peasant only discouraging auguries for his future. Between the Thirty Years’ War and the late eighteenth century those auguries were all too painfully fulfilled. Neo-serfdom was given its fullest elaboration, and the peasant serf experienced the nadir of his fortunes.¹⁹

Many of the strictures on the person of the peasant were already enunciated in the late fifteenth century. He was bound to the soil, he could not marry without permission, he could not learn or ply a trade without his lord’s

17. Tomáš Bílek, *Dějiny konfiskací v Čechách po r. 1618* (Prague, 1882), p. cxlviii.

18. Josef Kalousek, ed., “Právo selské v Obnoveném Zřízení Zemském,” *Archív Český*, 23 (1906): 1–11; Ernest Denis, *La Bohême depuis de la Montagne Blanche*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1903), 1:335; Josef Kalousek, *České státní právo*, 2nd ed. (Prague, 1892); Otto Peterka, *Rechtsgeschichte der böhmischen Länder*, 2 vols. (Reichenberg, 1923–28), 2:138.

19. For a good description of seventeenth and eighteenth-century serfdom in Bohemia see Karl Grünberg, *Die Bauerbefreiung und die Auflösung des gutsherrlich-bäuerlichen Verhältnisses in Böhmen, Mähren und Schlesien*, 2 vols. (Leipzig, 1893–94), and Krofta, *Dějiny*, passim.

agreement. At that time, however, permission was not difficult to obtain; even a change of domicile could be managed if a suitable successor was presented. But after the White Mountain, permission to do these things became ever more costly or was refused entirely.²⁰ When grievances or questions of legal controversy arose, the peasant could, in the earlier time, appeal beyond the court of first instance—that is, beyond the manorial court of his lord—to a provincial or royal court to seek review of his litigation. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries it became, in practice, exceedingly difficult for a peasant to appeal beyond the manorial court. For a peasant to depose or give witness before a court of law he had to be emancipated temporarily and specifically for that purpose, for serfs had no legal personality. Needless to say, he immediately reverted to his previous condition once his testimony was finished. In his personal affairs and before the bar, the peasant serf was essentially a ward of his lord. This condition, of course, had the effect of more closely binding him to his lord and assured the lord a stable agricultural labor force. It also insured that the labor force would be nearly static, not just stable, and that it would be too immobile to meet the varied demands for quantity and quality of labor which would be necessary for the industrial revolution to begin in Bohemia.

Of first importance to the peasant was his tenure of land. The emphyteutic law had become widespread in the fourteenth century. Peasants held land in hereditary lease which could be conveyed by testament, could be sold, or could be mortgaged (up to two-thirds of its value). For this interest in land, the peasant paid, in kind or cash, an annual rental fee. He could maintain this leasehold, as could his heirs after their inheritance, for as long as the rental obligations on it were met, and provided that he did not too heavily encumber the land with debt and did not let the land deteriorate for lack of care. Only if the lord could prove dereliction could the peasant be dispossessed. But not by any means did all peasants hold land under such favorable conditions. Those who did not hold their “own” land, as the *Emphyteut* did, rented dominical land at short term and for greater cost in rental fees. Renewal of their rental contracts was dependent on the lord’s willingness and subject to his terms.

Size and fertility of landholdings varied extremely. A “full” holding was usually what one peasant and his family could work and would sustain them, but there were many who lived on half or quarter holdings as well as some who held several full holdings. Cottagers (*chalupníci* or *Häusler*) held house and adjacent gardens, but usually worked for the lord or well-situated, prosperous peasants, doing work in the fields and odd jobs. Domestic (*Inleute*) were household servants or day laborers to the lord or to the more affluent peasants.

20. For a brief outline of the peasant’s circumstances after the White Mountain see William E. Wright, *Serf, Seigneur, and Sovereign* (Minneapolis, 1966), pp. 13–20.

Tenure of land became quite uncertain after the White Mountain, for oftentimes records of the peasants' rights had been lost, destroyed, or deliberately mislaid by designing lords—or sometimes by equally designing peasants who wished to escape some recorded obligation. Peasant lands were increasingly incorporated into the dominical lands; or well-cultivated, fertile peasant land might be exchanged under duress for poor dominical land; or peasant land was forcibly bought at reduced or even nominal prices. A peasant could “buy in” his tenure rights, but the fee might be great and the guarantee flimsy. A cottager was usually a term-to-term renter, although he, too, might have some longer-term arrangement. Precarious tenure tended to discourage long-range improvement of land and generally tended to hold production at less than potential. In all cases the land was subject to the superior dominion of the lord, and its inhabitants were subject to his jurisdiction.

The third element of serfdom consisted in the obligations that rested upon the peasant. They were of two types: payments in kind or money, and services. Fees were exacted not only for the use of land but for use of pasture, woods, bake-ovens, mills, justice, and market access, and for permissions to marry, to learn trades, to exchange or devise land, or to be excused from some service obligation. Almost all peasants, no matter what their conditions, had to pay some kind of fees, whether in money or in *natura*. Demanding fees was not only a means of obtaining income for the lord, but it was also often an all-important symbol of the peasant's subjection as well.

Even more important to the lord than fees was the obligation of peasants to perform *robota*. Ever since the lords had begun to farm on their own account for the market, *robota* had been of utmost importance to them.²¹ Where money was scarce, and capital accumulation meager, labor—plentiful but unpaid—was essential. Demands for *robota* increased rapidly after the White Mountain and came to consume, in some cases, more than half of the peasant's number of workdays per annum.²² The most significant *robota* was the regular obligation to do work in the fields on the lord's demesne—sowing his crops, cultivating, reaping, flailing, plowing. Other regular chores included cutting wood, clearing ponds, repairing buildings, hauling, and so forth. Usually the lord could require extraordinary *robota* for unusual needs—for example, a one-time task such as clearing new land. Extraordinary *robota*, with the passage of time, often came to be regarded as ordinary and continuing duties—a devious way to increase the total *robota* of the peasant. Other measurements of *robota* had to do with the amount and nature of the work. Limited *robota* specified the task to be completed; unlimited *robota* referred to work such as flood control

21. Dvornik, *The Slavs*, p. 335.

22. Josef Kočí, “Robotní povinnosti poddaných v českých zemích po třicetileté válce,” *Československý časopis historický*, 11 (1963): 331–40. Cf. *Přehled Československých dějin*, 2 vols. (Prague, 1958–60), 1:429–30.

and damage repair which could neither be foreseen nor the amount of necessary work estimated in advance. Peasants who were without land or without draft animals performed "hand" or "foot" *roboty*; those who owned teams of animals could be required to use them for so many days of "team" *roboty*. *Roboty* might be demanded of the individual peasant by the peasant commune as well as by the lord.

From the foregoing discussion it is evident that, despite his enserfment, the Bohemian peasant did not live in a society composed of faceless, undifferentiated men.²³ There was a decided distinction between a well-to-do peasant with much land, who himself employed day laborers, and the cottager who worked for the lord or the wealthy peasant. The domestic servant of high rank in the lord's house would assume the airs of the manor house and despise the crude fieldhand. The peasant community even had its own "ruling elite." The lord's peasant overseers and the "judge," who represented the lord's justice and governance, held positions of special privilege and exemption from most of the usual services and fees. Where the community was large enough to permit specialization of labor, the tradesmen (harness-makers, smiths, coopers, cobblers, wheelwrights, brewers, bakers) and the tavern-keepers were a group apart from all other members of the agrarian society and considered themselves elevated above mere farmers or laborers. They were inclined to join socially with the administrators and judges. These tradesmen also enjoyed exemption from some of the normal obligations; usually they performed no *roboty*, for example.

When one views Bohemian serfdom as one might view any other historical institution, one is led to ponder whether it was a just and humane thing and to inquire whether, in light of its own time and objectives, it was successful in a pragmatic sense. The first judgment is a difficult one to make, because, in the nature of the thing, serfdom was a relationship of superior to inferior, of independent master and dependent subject, in which variations of personal attitudes and conduct could make important differences. Ideally, a peasant might be benefited so much as to make his dependency seem fully compensated and worthwhile. But ideal situations seldom, if ever, exist in the affairs of men. In practice, it was not only possible for the aristocratic lords to wring decidedly unbalanced advantage from serfdom, but, indeed, they frequently exploited their peasant subjects beyond endurance.²⁴ That the peasants, after their own lights, found serfdom to be unjust is attested by the numerous riots and rebellions, several of which in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries reached

23. Míka, *Poddaný lid*, pp. 134 ff., describes social differentiation of Bohemian peasant society.

24. Wright, *Serf, Seigneur, and Sovereign*, pp. 41-43; Josef Kalousek, "Nejvyšší rozhodnutí o úticích na Dobříšsku, 1770," *Archiv Český*, 24 (1908): 405-23.

quite serious proportions and required military execution to suppress them.²⁵ Even according to its own definitions, serfdom conduced too readily to social and economic injustice. There were only fragile restraints to prevent the powerful from using their power without heed for the rights and welfare of their weaker inferiors.

Furthermore, even in practical terms of economic efficiency, in its economic goal of providing the products of the soil for human sustenance and personal profit, serfdom was wanting. None of the factors of production were allowed to play their full and proper roles in the productive process. Serfdom did not encourage the amassing of capital; it provided too much very cheap labor for capital to seem very desirable. Throughout the eighteenth century and until the post-Napoleonic period, Bohemian agrarian entrepreneurs, in great majority, prized labor and the profits to be won by its exploitation above the possible profits to be gained by capital investment to refine the procedures of production.

And yet that very labor which was prized so highly was demonstrably inefficient. Peasants went to discharge their *robot*a obligations with a notable lack of enthusiasm, brought their worst tools, drove their oldest animals, malingered at work as much as possible, and generally performed at a level far below their potential. Man-hours, team-hours, and equipment-hours were wasted steadily, producing much less than they did when applied to the peasants' own landholdings. Every hour spent at *robot*a, then, reduced in varying degrees the economic efficiency of labor. As the noble lords sought greater profit through increased demands for *robot*a, they compounded the losses from its inefficiency. Less of the peasant's efficient energy was expended on his own fields; more of his meagerly productive energy was devoted to the demesne. The peasant lost more by *robot*a than the lord gained.

This misapplication of labor to the last factor of production, the land, reduced the coefficient of production of that factor also. Under the casual, or even resentful, attentions of the *robot*a-performing peasant, the lord's lands bore much leaner harvests than they might have. The lord's answer to this disappointment was to engross more land, often at the expense of peasant holdings. The net effect of engrossment was to reduce the amount of productive land and increase the amount of relatively unproductive land, both of these to the detriment of the common welfare, although gain might accrue to an individual lord. But again, as was the case with *robot*a, the peasant's loss was more than the lord's gain.

No matter how economically wasteful serfdom was, however, the lords would not lightheartedly relinquish their rights provided under it, for it was not judged solely by its purely economic efficiency. On the contrary, the

25. Josef Kalousek, "Robotní patent z 28. června 1680," *Archiv Český*, 23 (1906): 486, 487; Wright, *Serf, Seigneur, and Sovereign*, pp. 21, 22.

system had appreciable political and social advantages for the aristocratic landowner. His lordship and jurisdiction over the peasant interposed him between the king (the central state power) and the majority of the population and served as the foundation of the aristocrat's political strength. In all respects—in his obligations to perform *robotas*, in the precariousness of his land tenure, in his legal and administrative dependency—the peasant was reminded of his inferiority and subjection while the lord was satisfyingly reassured of his superiority among men. The intangible advantages of the system were worth the practical deficiencies.

Both because of its economic inefficiency and because of the political advantages that it afforded the provincial lords, Bohemian serfdom became vulnerable to criticism and reform in the eighteenth century. As Maria Theresa learned at stunning cost during the Wars of the Austrian Succession, only those states which could effectively marshal the resources of the realm (that is, centrally administered states) could survive in the political-military competition of her world.²⁶ Neither Bohemia alone nor the Hereditary Lands taken together could be counted among the efficiently administered states of Europe; one had only to compare the administration of Prussia—and Prussia's performance on the battlefield—to discover the need for reform in the Habsburg lands.

The queen and her more perceptive advisers accurately divined that the problem and remedy could be simply stated. The landed aristocracy stood between the state and the overwhelming majority of the people, the peasants—to the serious disadvantage of both. The state must therefore thrust aside the aristocracy and by agrarian reform ameliorate or abolish the conditions of serfdom and let the serf's resulting enhanced prosperity be made directly available to the fiscal needs of the state.

It was at this point that the knell of neo-serfdom was sounded. The reforms proposed during the reign of Maria Theresa, and so vigorously continued and enlarged in Joseph II's decade of strenuous rule, constituted a reversal of the decisive developments of the 1620s—namely, the state reasserted its direct interest and re-established its administrative powers in agrarian society.²⁷

The reforms which nearly emancipated the Bohemian peasant from serfdom in the eighteenth century, and showed the way toward the final emancipation in 1848, were not the result of blind economic laws working insensibly, but were rather the product of designs calculated to change agrarian relations to the economic benefit of the peasant and of the state. Equally purposeful were those aspects of reform that served the state politically and those acts

26. Heinrich Kretschmayr, *Maria Theresia*, 2nd ed. (Leipzig, 1938), pp. 95–96; Josef Kallbrunner, ed., *Maria Theresias politisches Testament* (Vienna, 1952), p. 44.

27. Wright, *Serf, Seigneur, and Sovereign*, is a study of the eighteenth-century reforms.

that showed humane concern for the peasant. *Raison d'état* prompted the first. Humanitarian preachments of the Enlightenment prompted the second.

The eighteenth-century reforms of serfdom began as restrictive decrees to prevent the worst excesses of seigneurial exploitation of the peasant serf.²⁸ *Robota* was limited to no more than three days per week, and various abuses were prohibited. Most significant, however, was the reform that took place on state-controlled estates where Maria Theresa and her collaborators had a free hand. A system of emancipation, *robota* abolition, and land partition, which bore the name of its exponent, Franz Anton von Raab, created a free peasant society of small holders who held their land in hereditary lease, and whose *robota* obligations were commuted to reasonable fees.²⁹ That is, the three disabilities of serfdom were removed from the peasant: personal bondage, uncertain tenure and insufficient landholding, and loss of work time to *robota*.

Joseph II not only pressed the extension of the Raab system to all the state-controlled lands—cameral, municipal, and ecclesiastical—but also expended great effort to win the same advantages for peasants on private seigneurial estates. His abolition, in 1781, of personal subjection and his recognition and redefinition of the peasant's legal rights were operative throughout Bohemia and applicable to all peasants whether on private or state lands.³⁰ His attempt to extend the other elements of the Raab system (land partition, *robota* abolition, reduction of various payments to the lord) to the private estates was thwarted until his death. But important precedents had been established. The state could intervene effectively in agrarian affairs; and abolition of *robota* and partitioning of land to the peasants was demonstrated to be profitable, even for the lord, if he would dare to do it. The landed aristocracy resisted admitting the implications of both these propositions, but by 1848 their own experience proved the desirability of final emancipation.³¹

Neo-serfdom came into being in response to two kinds of stimuli—socio-economic and political. The first developed slowly from the post-Hussite period to the end of the sixteenth century. The second also took shape slowly at first from the late fifteenth century, but the sudden political convulsions of the 1620s gave it full establishment. Neo-serfdom came to an end by a reversal of the introductive process. Swift constitutional changes first cut away political support of the system, and then gradual realization of its economic deficiencies persuaded men to accept its demise and formally to set aside its vestiges in 1848.

28. Josef Kalousek, "Robotní patent z 13. srpna 1775," *Archiv Český*, 24 (1908): 488–508.

29. Josef Kalousek, "Pravidla raabisační z 1. března 1777," *Archiv Český*, 24 (1908): 523–26.

30. For texts of the several patents see Josef Kalousek, *Archiv Český*, 25 (1910): 9–30.

31. Jerome Blum, *Noble Landowners and Agriculture in Austria, 1815–1848* (Baltimore, 1948), esp. chaps. 3, 5, and 6.