

Introduction: The Scandinavian *Bonde*

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“Why do you insist on calling them peasants? Were they not really farmers?”. Roughly such was the reaction of a distinguished English colleague to a talk I gave about manors and peasants – or whatever they should be called – in Schleswig-Holstein at an international conference. He stepped on a sore toe. I have often found it difficult to find suitable English translations of Danish – or, for that sake, Swedish, Norwegian, or German – historical social categories. No doubt, some of the explanation lies in my imperfect command of the English language. There are other reasons too, though. The social categorization in language is part of the social formation of society. Even though many categories can reasonably well be translated from language to language, others cannot. That reflects that social and conceptual development in that field has differed rather greatly.

To me the difficulty of translating categories from Danish or German into English emphasizes that the categories and institutions so central to society in Scandinavia or North Germany were far from universal. In that way the translation battle – even if a largely lost one – is a highly necessary eye-opener to national historiographies. For Anglophone historians this ‘exotic’ view of institutions on the continent is a given thing, supported by this linguistic experience. What tends to be forgotten, though, is the fact that English is also a language among languages developed in a specific social environment – if not so today, then historically. Most of the English words we use in descriptions of medieval or Early Modern rural society date from a time when England was one European nation among many.

This applies also to the words peasant and farmer. Even though the peasant-farmer theory is in principle a more universal, more abstract theory, it is nonetheless formulated in the English language with the use of English words that have a specific history on that island before they were put to more general use. Furthermore, they translate better into French which has reasonably parallel categories than into the continental Germanic languages.

In this session we shall discuss the Scandinavian social category of *bonde*. The word exists both in Danish, Norwegian and Swedish (spelled *bonde*, plural *bønder/bönder*). Both linguistically and in usage it is largely the same meaning as the German word *Bauer*. We shall do so as well from a semantic and conceptual point of view as from a socio-economic. We shall discuss both how the category has been perceived and how we can perceive it today..