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Neo-Serfdom in Hungary

In the particular case of Hungary, neo-serfdom is to be seen as an economic, political, and social evolution in which the political power of the nobility, especially that of the gentry, grew considerably; the demesne lands of the lords disproportionately increased at the expense of the serfs' rustical lands; the lords' seigniorial jurisdiction over their peasants increased; and the lords' management of their economy shifted from receiving rents to producing for markets. It was a system of social stagnation in which the evolution of cities and an urban middle class, a potential counterbalance to the nobility, was made impossible, and the serfs had no way out of their degrading environment and status. These conditions developed rapidly after the suppression of the Dózsa revolt of 1514, the greatest peasant movement of discontent in Hungary. As a result, the peasants were bound to the soil.¹ The national Diet of 1547, however, enacted the serfs' right of migration,² a freedom which was re-enacted several times more.

In the frenzy which followed the estates' victory in the István Bocskay movement,³ a law was promulgated in 1608 that fundamentally altered the legal status of the serfs.⁴ The right to give or withhold permission for peasant migration and all problems relating to serf-lord relations were transferred from the authority of the state to the counties. For more than a century the central government—king and Diet alike—had no say in such relations. This put a legal end to the peasants' freedom of movement, which had already long been a practical impossibility.

1. All the privileges of the estates as well as the punishments and future obligations of the peasants after the revolt were spelled out in István Verböczi's *Tripartitum* or *Hármaskönyv* [Book in Three Parts], first printed in 1517. Of the peasants' new situation it says (the edition of 1844 by the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Pest, is quoted): "From now on as perpetual serfs they are totally subject to their lords" (art. 25, sec. 2). The *Tripartitum* also defined the right of ownership of the land: "Beyond fees and rewards for his work, the peasant has no right whatsoever to his lord's land, except the right of inheritance; full ownership of the land belongs exclusively to the landlord" (art. 30, sec. 7). See also István Szabó, *Tanulmányok a magyar parasztság történetéből* [Studies on the History of Hungarian Peasantry] (Budapest, 1948), pp. 65–158.

2. Act no. 26 of 1547, in *Corpus juris Hungarici*, millennial commemorative ed., 7 vols. (Leipzig, 1902), 2:203 (hereafter cited as *CJH*).

3. Between 1604 and 1606 István Bocskay waged a successful war of independence against the Habsburg monarch. The Peace of Vienna of 1606, which ended the war, entrenched the privileges of the estates.

4. Act no. 13 of 1608, in *CJH*, 3:30–31.

The protracted wars with the Turks during the seventeenth century added to the misery of the serfs. In addition to their traditional obligations they were now required to put in twelve days' work a year building and repairing the country's extensive fortification system.⁵ Early in the following century the serfs enjoyed some temporary advantages following the liberation of the heartland of Hungary from Ottoman occupation. For a while the grinding oppression of neo-serfdom eased, at least for some, as large, uninhabited, and uncultivated lands became available to the plow and scythe again.⁶ A considerable migration began into the center of the Great Hungarian Plain. The owners of these virgin lands offered tempting advantages to the serfs who were willing to migrate to, settle, and cultivate them. Small groups or whole villages could conclude contracts with the lords. The total obligations of an entire village could be paid off in a lump sum, and that most-resented of all serf obligations, *robot* labor (corvée), was generally not exacted. The estates began to pass laws to prevent the flight of serfs and to provide for the return of fugitives to their masters.⁷ The Vice-Regal Council (*Consilium regium locumtenentiale hungaricum*),⁸ the executive branch of the Hungarian govern-

5. The immensity of this system can be viewed on maps in Bálint Hóman and Gyula Szekfű, *Magyar történet* [Hungarian History], 7th ed., 5 vols. (Budapest, 1941–43), between pp. 160 and 161; 224 and 225. For the general conditions of neo-serfdom in the seventeenth century see Géza Perjés, *Mezőgazdasági termelés, népesség, hadseregélelmezés és stratégia a 17. század második felében, 1650–1715* [Agrarian Production, Demography, Supply of the Army and Strategy During the Second Half of the Seventeenth Century, 1650–1715] (Budapest, 1963).

6. The heartlands of Hungary fell to the Ottomans in the mid-sixteenth century and were reconquered only during the War of Liberation (1683–99). This extended war, together with the War of Independence of Ferenc Rákóczi (1703–11), utterly devastated and depopulated the area. Tibor Mendöl, "Az új települési rend" [The New System of Settlement], in Sándor Domanovszky, *Magyar művelődéstörténet* [Hungarian Cultural History], 5 vols. (Budapest, 1939–42), 4:184. In the space of a century a remarkable repopulation took place. By 1788 the population of Hungary was 8,560,180. See the final computation of the census of Joseph II in Hungarian National Archives, *locumtenentiale* 2900 (1788), conscr. no. 8, reprinted in Gusztáv Thirring, *Magyarország népessége II József korában* [The Population of Hungary in the Era of Joseph II] (Budapest, 1938), p. 37. See also József Kovácsics, *Magyarország történeti demográfiája* [The Historical Demography of Hungary] (Budapest, 1963). For an example of the lords' effort to gain settlers (*inpopulatio*) see the reprint of "Károlyi Ferencz gróf pátens-levele" [Letter of Patent of Count Ferenc Károlyi], May 23, 1753, in Gábor Éble, *Az ecsedi uradalom és Nyíregyháza* [The Estate of Ecsed and (the town of) Nyíregyháza] (Budapest, 1898), pp. 145–46. See also István Szendrey, *Egy alföldi uradalom a török hódoltság után* [An Estate on the Great Hungarian Plain After the Turkish Occupation] (Budapest, 1968).

7. Act no. 101 of 1715, *CJH*, 4:517. Act no. 6 of 1725, *CJH*, 4:610.

8. The Vice-Regal Council, the first permanent Hungarian central government in a modern sense, was set up by Acts nos. 97 through 122 of 1723 (*CJH*, 4:642). The Council continued as the central government organ in Hungary, with several reorganizations, until the first ministry was established in 1848. See Ibolya Felhő and Antal Vörös, *A helytartótanácsi levéltár* [The Archives of the Vice-Regal Council] (Budapest, 1961), pp. 16–17.

ment established in 1723, made it one of its first tasks to put a stop to serf migration on a national scale. Its efforts availed little more than earlier ones.

Flight, however, was not the only means of escaping from the lords. Those few who succeeded in saving enough money redeemed themselves from servitude for cash. Several of these freedmen (*szabadosok*) were eventually knighted and absorbed into the large stratum of landless nobles (*bocskoros nemesek*). A small group of rural freedmen lingered on the fringe of society.

Neo-serfdom had scarcely reached its climax when the agonizing process of dismantling began. Leopold I (1658–1705) initiated the intervention of the state into lord-and-serf relations, a function abandoned since the Diet of 1608. The expanding central administration and the standing army needed more and more money and men, both of which were furnished by the peasantry, the main source of revenue. The peasants had to be protected by the state against the lords so that the state could extract more revenues from them. That is why Leopold I tried to curb both confiscation of rustical lands and excessive demands by the lords.⁹ In this same spirit a measure was introduced in 1723, when the Diet at the insistence of King Charles III (VI as emperor) passed a law ordering the counties to protect the serfs against excesses of the lords. That stipulation, however, remained more or less on paper. The enactment of the right of the state once again to interfere in the lord-and-serf relationship was more significant for the future than its practical effects meant for the present. Maria Theresa, following her father's example, issued a royal order in 1751 to the counties "to take the tax-paying population under special protection."¹⁰

Of far greater impact, however, were the *Urbarial Patent* (or *Urbarium*) of Maria Theresa, and the *Leibeigenschafts-Aufhebungspatent* of Emperor Joseph II.¹¹ In the last years of neo-serfdom, these measures of the state rendered limited protection to the serfs: what Karl Grünberg calls *Bauernschutz*. The elements of this he defines as the regulation of peasant renders, the rein-

9. See Jerome Blum, *Noble Landowners and Agriculture in Austria, 1815–1848: A Study in the Origins of the Peasant Emancipation of 1848* (Baltimore, 1948), p. 46.

10. Ignác Acsády, *A magyar jobbágyok története* [The History of Hungarian Serfdom] (Budapest, 1906), p. 343.

11. Edith Murr Link, *The Emancipation of the Austrian Peasant, 1740–1798* (New York, 1949), pp. 31–88. György Spira, ed., *Tanulmányok a parasztság történetéhez Magyarországon, 1711–1790* [Essays on the History of the Peasantry in Hungary, 1711–1790] (Budapest, 1952), pp. 345–56, 454–69. William E. Wright, *Serf, Seigneur, and Sovereign: Agrarian Reform in Eighteenth-Century Bohemia* (Minneapolis, 1966), pp. 38–40, 71–76, 142. For a most comprehensive study of Transdanubian Hungary see Ibolya Felhő, ed., *Az úrbéres birtokviszonyok Magyarországon Mária Terézia korában* [System of Ownership of Rustical Lands in Hungary in the Era of Maria Theresa] (Budapest, 1970). See also Emil Niederhauser, *A jobbágyfelszabadítás Kelet-Európában* [The Freeing of the Serfs in Eastern Europe] (Budapest, 1962), p. 81.

forcement of the peasant's right to the use of the land he tilled, the strengthening of the peasant's personal status in the judicial system, and the preservation of the peasant's possession of his tenement.¹² Both of the foregoing proclamations contained most of these elements and helped to secure for the state an increased share of revenue from a less-exploited peasantry. Under the strains and stresses of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, however, the Habsburg dynasty abandoned its policy of *Bauernschutz*, at a time when more, rather than less, protection was needed by the peasantry. Francis I, in order to woo the Hungarian estates, issued an edict on September 1, 1798, that all further changes in the status of the serfs were to be settled by "free" bargaining between the lord and his peasants, a principle that was reaffirmed on July 24, 1821.¹³ During the remaining quarter of a century of neo-serfdom, the status of the serfs changed very little for the better; it rather worsened, notwithstanding the efforts of the liberals, who wanted an early emancipation of the serfs.¹⁴

The pivotal question of the peasant's economic and social position was his legal relation to the land he tilled. Following Grünberg's definition, in Hungary and her neighboring countries, with numerous variations and exceptions, the peasants had either "strong rights" to their land (*Erbpächter*, *Erbzinsleute*) or "weak rights" (*Lassbauern*, *Lassiten*). Many concepts were involved in "strong" rights to land, the most important of which was the peasant's perpetual tenure and proof against arbitrary eviction. The land was held, in principle, by the lord, who had legal ownership (*dominium directum*) of it, and by the peasant, who had beneficial ownership (*dominium utile*) of it—the right to the fruits of it. Márton Sarlós stresses the immense importance of *dominium utile*, but Stefan Kieniewicz denies it as an illusion. Land held with

12. Karl Grünberg, *Die Bauernbefreiung und die Auflösung des gutsherrlich-bäuerlichen Verhältnisses in Böhmen, Mähren und Schlesien*, 2 vols. (Leipzig, 1893–94), 1:125. Blum, *Noble Landowners*, p. 47. Link attributes peasant protection to "the emergence of a powerful, mercantilist, anti-corporate central government" (*Emancipation*, p. 24).

13. Link, *Emancipation*, p. 149. Niederhauser, *A jobbágyfelszabadítás*, p. 90. Grünberg, *Bauernbefreiung*, 2:378–79. For an historical evaluation of the peasant policy of the Habsburgs see the analysis, "Alliance Between the Dynasty and the Oppressed Classes of the People," in Oscar Jászi, *The Dissolution of the Habsburg Monarchy* (Chicago, 1961), pp. 43–44. For the myth of the "good emperor" see Spira, *Tanulmányok*, pp. 441–44. For a Hungarian viewpoint see Jenő Berlász, "A magyar jobbágykérdés és a bécsi udvar az 1790-es években" [The Problem of the Hungarian Serfs and the Court of Vienna in the 1790s], in *Yearbook of the Hungarian Institute of Historical Science for 1942* (Budapest, 1942), esp. pp. 40–56. For the peasants' reaction to the increased suppression see László Hadrovics and Imre Wellmann, *Parasztmozgalmak a 18. században* [Peasant Movements in the Eighteenth Century] (Budapest, 1951).

14. See Béla K. Király, "The Emancipation of the Serfs of East Central Europe," *Antemurale* (Rome), 15 (1971): 63–85. For the special local circumstances of Transylvania see Zsolt Trócsányi, *Az erdélyi parasztság története, 1790–1849* [A History of the Transylvanian Peasantry, 1790–1849] (Budapest, 1956).

“strong” rights was also a hereditament that might be fee simple (Hungarian pattern), fee tail by primogeniture, or entailed to the son of the lord’s choice (Cisleithanian pattern). A peasant with “weak” rights was a tenant at the lord’s will, sometimes for life, with no security of tenure. He owed renders, or rent, or both, for his tenement, which was only rarely inheritable.¹⁵ The Hungarian serfs then had a “strong right” to the land they tilled. But this right penetrated the soil about as far as their plows. The serf did, however, have three fundamental prerogatives: the right to cultivate his holding, the right to stay on it, and the right of inheritance.¹⁶ If the serf performed all his duties, the lord had no right to evict him. His heirs were entitled to inherit all his chattels and land along with the obligations that went with them. To ensure the continued cultivation of his land, the lord could compel the serf to marry. The serf, on the other hand, had to ask for his lord’s permission when he wished to wed.

Maria Theresa’s *Urbarium* of 1767, although it safeguarded the existing feudal relation between lord and peasants, set down the minimum size of the serf’s holding (*jobbágytelek* or *sessio*), on the one hand, and his maximum obligations, on the other. One of its chief virtues, in fact, was its strict definition of the size of one *sessio*, the basic measurement of rustical lands, which was divided into two parts: the *fundi intravillani* (internal lot) and the *fundi*

15. For a comprehensive study of the ownership of the serfs see János Varga, *A jobbágyi földbirtoklás típusai és problémái, 1767–1849* [The Types and Problems of the Ownership Rights of the Serfs, 1767–1849] (Budapest, 1967); Márton Sarlós, “Deák Ferenc és az úrbéri földtulajdon az 1832/1836-i országgyűlésen” [Ferenc Deák and the Question of Servile Landownership at the Diet of 1832–36], *Jogtörténeti tanulmányok* [Studies of Legal History] (Budapest), 2 (1966): 193–94; Stefan Kieniewicz, *The Emancipation of the Polish Peasantry* (Chicago, 1969), pp. 4, 248–49; László Révész, *Der osteuropäische Bauer: Seine Rechtslage im 17. und 18. Jahrhundert unter besonderer Berücksichtigung Ungarns* (Bern, 1964), pp. 1–9. See also Zsigmond Pál Pach, *Nyugateurópai és magyarországi agrárfejlődés a XVI–XVII. században* [West European and Hungarian Agrarian Developments in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries] (Budapest, 1963).

16. The other main rights and obligations of the serfs were to cultivate a specific area of plowland and hayfield; to graze enough cattle on common land free to meet his family’s needs; *lignatio* (to cut timber in the lord’s forest to supply his needs for building lumber, kindling, and maintaining his agricultural implements); to cut reed from the lord’s reed beds for heating and thatching his home; *pannage* (to feed his pigs on the mast in the lord’s forests); *educillatio* (to run a tavern for the community); *robot*; *kilenced* (to give the lord one-ninth of his crops and newborn calves every year); tithe (to give the bishop one-tenth of his crops and newborn calves every year); to give the lord chickens, capons, and eggs on such occasions as Christmas or the wedding of one of the lord’s sons; to cart logs for the lord; to pay the lord a fee for each hearth in use; *subsidiæ* (to pay ransom if the lord should fall captive and also to mark the lord’s wedding and first mass); and *macellum* (to buy meat exclusively at the lord’s butcheries). See Ferenc Eckhart, *Magyar alkotmány és jogtörténet* [Hungarian Constitutional and Legal History] (Budapest, 1946), pp. 206 ff.

extravillani (external lot). The internal lot was a small area, enough to accommodate a house and a vegetable garden; the external lot consisted of plowland and hayfield. The minimum provisions held good throughout the country, but the actual area of land involved varied from place to place according to the fertility of the soil and the estimated crop yields. The guiding principle in determining the size of a *sessio* was that one-eighth of its full area should yield enough to support a serf and his family and to fulfill his obligations toward state, lord, and church.¹⁷

Before the beginning of neo-serfdom the peasantry had formed a more or less homogeneous social stratum. Every family occupied a plot large enough to support it and produce the means to pay taxes, feudal fees, and other obligations. The eldest son inherited the serf's possessions, and when the other sons married, the lord gave them new land to farm. There was not much accumulation of wealth, nor was there great poverty. This balanced social system was upset by the advent of neo-serfdom. One of the consequences of this was the unprecedented stratification of the Hungarian peasantry. These divisions were considerably more complex than in any of the neighboring countries.

Aside from the small group of freedmen, the highest level of the peasantry was the serfs who owned sizable lots and had accumulated some capital. The lowest on the ladder were the poverty-stricken manorial farmhands and subcottagers who owned neither land nor house. Between these limits the bondmen were customarily grouped into six basic categories: serfs with one or more *sessiones*, serfs with half a *sessio*, serfs with a quarter of a *sessio*, serfs with one-eighth of a *sessio*, cotters (*zsellérek* or *inquilini*), and subcottagers (*alzzsellérek* or *subinquilini*). The *inquilini* owned the internal parts of a *sessio* (*fundi intravillani*) with a dwelling. They might also possess arable and hay land, but less in area than one-eighth of a *sessio*. The *subinquilini* owned neither the internal nor the external lots of a *sessio*, nor did they have a dwelling of their own. They lived in the houses of serfs or *inquilini*; in fact, a *subinquilinus* was a man who had a hearth under someone else's roof. The *inquilini* and *subinquilini* could not support their families out of the yield of whatever land they occupied.

As the eighteenth century progressed, the economic and social plight of the peasants became steadily worse, for reasons to be discussed shortly. This steady decline gradually depleted the upper levels of the peasantry and caused

17. In Mosony county, for instance, one *sessio* contained twenty to twenty-six acres; in Pest county, twenty-four to thirty acres; in Sopron county, upwards of sixteen acres; and in Csanád county, upwards of thirty-six acres. The size of a hayfield on a serf *sessio* was from six to twenty-two *falcastra*. A *falcastrum* or *kaszáló* was an area that yielded a wainload of hay at the year's first mowing. See Eckhart, *Magyar alkotmány*, p. 217. See also the abundance of data in Felhő, *Az úrbéres birtokviszonyok*.

a tremendous increase in the number of destitute, landless *subinquilini*. Their numbers swelled particularly rapidly after the 1750s, and by the end of the century the complex structure of the peasantry had radically altered. In 1767 there were only 46 landless serfs for every 100 landed peasants; by 1828 there were 104 landless serfs for every 100 possessing land; and only twenty years later, at the time of emancipation, this ratio had climbed to 147 to 100.¹⁸ More than half of the peasantry was emancipated without land.

Neo-serfdom was made such an ugly and stagnant society by two major objective factors—the growing expropriation of rustical lands by the lords and the continuation of *robot* labor, a great obstacle to modernization. A third factor, subjective and irrational, was the lords' derogatory treatment of the serfs and the peasants' reciprocal hatred of the lords. All of these germinated an unhealthy psychological climate.

The pivotal feature of neo-serfdom was, of course, the protracted increase of the lord's demesne lands at the expense of the rustical lands of the peasants. This phenomenon deserves some close scrutiny here. A profitable domestic market was created in Hungary as early as the Turkish wars of the seventeenth century by the garrisoning of foreign troops in the country. After these wars the establishment of a standing army in Hungary in 1715 also offered a domestic market for the lords' food products. The market boom continued throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth-century wars, the War of Austrian Succession, the Seven Years' War, the French Revolution, and the Napoleonic Wars. With an expanding market,¹⁹ the manorial system of cultivation became more and more profitable and brought in its wake fresh disaster for the serfs. The expropriation of serf holdings and their consolidation into large demesne lands took various forms in different parts of the country.²⁰

18. Gyula Mérei, *Mezőgazdaság és agrártársadalom Magyarországon, 1790–1848* [Agriculture and Agrarian Society in Hungary, 1790–1848] (Budapest, 1948), pp. 7–8. Between 1768 and 1848 the number of *inquilini* among the bondsmen on the Festetics estate increased as follows: 300 percent on the Manor of Keszthely, 240 percent on the Manor of Keménd, and 168 percent on the Manor of Csurgó. Imre Szántó, *A parasztság kisajátítása és mozgalmái a dunántúli Festetics-birtokon, 1711–1850* [The Expropriation and the Movements of the Peasantry at the Transdanubian Festetics Lands, 1711–1850] (Budapest, 1954), p. 124. For further details see Spira, *Tanulmányok*, pp. 271–76. On the consolidation of huge estates see Péter Agoston, *A magyar világi nagybirtok története* [A History of the Hungarian Lay Great Estates] (Budapest, 1913).

19. The boom in grain sales reached its peak during the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars. The produce market did not, however, collapse with the disappearance of the grain buyers at the end of these wars. In the early 1820s a boom in wool started to bring in even better profits than the grain sales had. In 1846–47 Hungarian grain exports to Austria earned 9.1 million florins, and wool exports to Austria fetched 17.1 million florins (Mérei, *Mezőgazdaság*, p. 25).

20. Szántó, *A parasztság kisajátítása*, pp. 45–49.

The landlords sometimes simply confiscated the serfs' holdings outright. If a serf became ill or his draft animals died, his land might be taken on the excuse that he was unable to fulfill his *robot* obligations. Common pastures or parts of them were plowed up and attached to demesne lands. All the lots that the serfs had farmed prior to the promulgation of Maria Theresa's *Urbarium* which were in excess of the serf holdings defined in that edict (*maradvány földek*) were confiscated. Vineyards were taken in exchange for barren lands.²¹ Finally, the serfs were bereft of cleared lands (*irtvány földek*). Even after the liberated territories had been completely resettled in the mid-eighteenth century, the serfs were still able to extend their holdings by putting in years of toil clearing forests and scrub land and draining swampland. The serf had the right to dispose of the land he cleared, exchanging or mortgaging it, under the sole proviso that he reported the transactions to the lord or his bailiff and recorded them in the land register. He owed no *robot* obligations and paid no taxes for cleared land. In token of the lord's property rights, however, the serf paid a nominal clearing fee (*irtásdíj*).²²

These benefits were a tremendous incentive to the serfs, who cleared vast tracts of land. During the thirty-odd years between the completion of resettlement and 1790, there was a mass movement to bring uncleared wasteland under the plow. The social consequences of this movement were considerable. It offered a livelihood to many in an era of shrinking work opportunity; it enriched the better-off farmers; it provided land for the landless cotters; it increased the number of peasant free-renters. The expropriations promptly reversed this trend, and in certain cases attained devastating proportions.²³ The Esterházy family, for example, increased its demesne lands by 47 percent, the Széchenyi family by 70 percent, by confiscating the cleared land of their serfs.²⁴ Many former cotters lost all their possessions. In several instances the peasants resisted the seizures, which had to be carried out by military force. The bulk of the expropriations took place between 1790 and 1830, with 1793 as the peak year.²⁵

In eighty years a large part of the peasantry had been fully or partly dis-

21. Miklós Wesselényi, *Balítéletek* [Misconceptions] (Buda, 1833), pp. 225, 228; also János Hetényi, *Robot és Dézsma* [Robot and Tithe] (Budapest, 1947), p. 57.

22. Mérei, *Mezőgazdaság*, p. 138.

23. Szántó, *A parasztság kisajátítása*, pp. 60–65.

24. Mérei, *Mezőgazdaság*, p. 139.

25. Imre Wellmann, "Mezőgazdaság történetírásunk új útja" [The New Road of Our Agrarian Historiography], *Domanovszky Emlékkönyv* [Domanovszky Commemorative Album] (Budapest, 1937), pp. 690–95; also Gábor Éble, *Az ecsedi százéves úrbéri per története (1776–1877)* [The History of the One Hundred Year Serf Lawsuit of Ecsed] (Budapest, 1912), pp. 16–18. Imre Soós, *Az úrbéri birtokrendezés eredményei Sopron megyében* [The Results of the Settlement of Servile Ownership Relations in Sopron County] (Sopron, 1941), pp. 45–48.

possessed of their former holdings, so that a large, mobile labor force came into being for the first time in Hungarian history. In the absence of any simultaneous industrialization, there were no jobs for these new landless peasants in the towns. The extent of industrial underdevelopment can be gauged from the fact that as late as 1846 only one-seventh of the population was engaged in any form of industrial work.²⁶ In 1782 there were only 352,000 people living in the towns and mining cities.²⁷

Maria Theresa's *Urbarium* prescribed a uniform *robot* obligation for all serfs. After it was promulgated the lords began to exact *robot* labor from all serfs indiscriminately, including many who had not had to perform it before. This was particularly galling for contractual serfs and freedmen who were previously exempt from it. The more that *robot* labor was enforced, the less efficient and productive it became.

In the early days of the feudal system, a complex of material, legal, technical, pecuniary, and emotional elements created a peculiar human interdependence between man and master. Under neo-serfdom, however, any direct relation between lord and peasant had become a thing of the past. The aristocrats living in Vienna had little or no contact with their serfs. Most of the lesser nobles who lived near the peasants looked on them as their "subjects" or even as an untouchable caste.²⁸ The aristocrats in general believed that they were entitled to use the labor of the serfs as they pleased. The contemporary liberal intellectual, Gergely Berzeviczy (1763–1822), wrote: "The landlord looks on him [the serf] as a tool necessary to cultivate his lands and as a chattel which he inherited from his parents, or purchased, or acquired as a reward. He demands that the serf pay dues and perform *robot* labor for him and regards [the serf] as one with whom he can deal however his self-interest dictates."²⁹

26. Mérei, *Mezőgazdaság*, p. 8. See also Zsigmond Pál Pach, *Az eredeti tőkefelhalmozás gyarmati korlátai Magyarországon 1848 előtt* [The Obstacles to Original Capital Accumulation in Hungary Prior to 1848 Which Originated in the Colonial Status (of the country)] (Budapest, 1950).

27. Elemér Mályusz, "A magyarországi polgárság a francia forradalom korában" [The Hungarian Burghers During the Era of the French Revolution], *A bécsi Magyar Történelmi Intézet Évkönyve* [Yearbook of the Hungarian Historical Institute of Vienna], 1 (1939): 227.

28. The Hungarian untitled (lesser) nobility comprised the *possessionati* and the *bene possessionati*, or gentry. The *possessionati* owned land cultivated by a few serf families. The *bene possessionati* owned middle-sized estates, several villages, and a great number of serfs. They were men of learning, and many of them had an advanced education. Only a few *bene possessionati* were to be found in each county, but they dominated the county administration and were the natural leaders of the lesser nobility. For details see the author's *Hungary in the Late Eighteenth Century* (New York, 1969), pp. 24–42. For the status of the peasantry prior to neo-serfdom see Szabó, *Tanulmányok*, pp. 5–30, 31–64.

29. Gergely Berzeviczy, "De conditione et indole rusticorum," in Jenő Gaál, *Berzeviczy*

The main psychological repercussion of the lords' unbridled power over the serfs and their growing arbitrariness was a similarly unbounded distrust of the lords on the part of the serfs. These mutually negative attitudes were a fundamental obstacle to normal labor relations. The peasant showed an inborn distrust toward all his superiors, even those who were not responsible for his plight—says Berzeviczy—and believed that he was entitled to extract benefits by craft from those who, because of their superior status, had so many advantages over him. Even innovations initiated by the lords were suspected and hated by the peasants; they opposed them stubbornly because they were aware that the interests of the lords were contrary to their own. The serfs suspected that such innovations were efforts of the lords to increase their own advantages at the expense of the serfs.³⁰

Thus even when a lord tried to introduce an improvement, serf resistance lessened its efficiency. The *robot* labor that the lords exacted so rigidly was perhaps the most formidable obstacle of all to innovation and progress. The lords tried to counter the low yield from *robot* labor by increasing the amount of it gradually, especially during boom years. The demands of the lords sometimes became so high that the serfs had no time to cultivate their own holdings. The more controls and force the lords and their bailiffs introduced, the less they gained from the serfs' work. Berzeviczy wrote: "When the time for urgent work comes on the lords' lands, so it does on the peasants' holdings. They [the serfs] try to avoid unpaid labor, but it must be done, so they send the feeblest members of their families to fulfill the *robot* requirement. . . . If the bailiff objects, the serfs quote the law [which did not specify which members of a family were to perform the work]. . . . This is true at plowing time, when the serfs come for *robot* work with their weakest draft animals and worst plow and other tools with which no substantial or good work can be done. . . ." ³¹

The cumulative effect was an era of smoldering unrest in feudal society and agriculture, which was to flare into a full-scale crisis in the 1820s. The reform era of István Széchenyi was a result of this very crisis of neo-serfdom. Széchenyi and the other reformers of the second quarter of the nineteenth century traveled widely in the West and were aware what an impediment neo-serfdom (with its *robot* labor, the entail system, obsolete tilling methods, and primitive crop rotation) was to the modernization of Hungary's agriculture. These were the problems which the reformers set out to cure.

Gergely élete és művei [The Life and Works of Gergely Berzeviczy] (Budapest, 1902), p. 142. Lengthy quotations are made from this remarkable work, for there is very little else that better characterizes the nature of neo-serfdom in Hungary than what this enlightened Hungarian so forcefully wrote at the time when neo-serfdom was at its height.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 151.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 147.