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Pedro Lains and Vicente Pinilla (eds).

Agriculture and economic development in Europe since 1870

Abingdon, Routledge, 2009, 407 páginas

Before reading this book, I feared I might be something of a lone eccentric, in the world of economic and agricultural history, in applying the theories and approaches of development studies to the analysis of historical examples of economic development (in my case, that of Japan). However, here are no fewer than 18 contributors to a book that takes the theoretical framework created by development economists in the 1960s and 1970s for the analysis of agriculture's role in industrialisation and applies it to European economic history. There is surely much to be learned from this approach, since, on the one hand, development economists have as a rule thought rather more about the long-term role of agriculture in industrialisation than have economic historians or agricultural economists, while, on the other hand, the European cases, over the period covered, offer the opportunity to consider what happens to the agricultural sector over the whole process involved in the creation of a modern industrial economy. The book is also unusual in covering a wide range of countries beyond 'the usual suspects', with contributions on most of the nations of mainland Europe, from Spain and Portugal in the west, to Sweden and Denmark in the north and Greece and Turkey in the east (though the UK is isolated from the rest of Europe – relegated to the theoretical part of the book – as usual).

The framework adopted, as set out in the initial conceptual chapter, is broadly that of Johnston and Mellor and the approach is relentlessly two-sector and macro-statistical, defining agriculture's role in terms of output and productivity growth, the release of resources (almost exclusively labour) and international trade in agricultural products. This does make for rather dull accounts in places, with only passing references to institutions, environment, political economy and other more 'sexy' fields. It

also misses the opportunity to make use of some of the more recent approaches adopted in development studies (and to some extent economic history) that consider agriculture/industry relations in a more nuanced and less strictly macro way – virtuous circles, proto-industrialisation, pluriactivity and so on – as well as of the now large literature on the development implications of micro-economic factors such as land tenure, technological choices, demography and household structure. Nonetheless, the chapters contain a huge amount of useful data and information and although no-one is brave enough to attempt an overall synthesis of the cases covered – they do indeed turn out to be extremely varied – or even to bring some of the statistics together in a convenient format, the mere fact of presenting so many examples side-by-side is bound to provoke the reader into interesting and unusual comparative, if do-it-yourself, insights.

The opening chapters on macro patterns in relation to international trade and comparative productivity set the tone by arguing that the shift of resources out of agriculture has been an unavoidably central feature of the process of economic development and industrialisation. Agricultural exports or protection against imports might slow things down, but ultimately there is nothing that can be done about the low level of income elasticity of demand for food. Engel's law rules in the long run and ultimately agriculture's role in development has got to be one of releasing resources to sectors with higher income elasticities and labour productivity. However, there is more than one way of achieving this – in fact, the book suggests, almost as many ways as there are European countries.

Arguably the most successful of the examples presented, in terms of managing the transition towards a sustainable, equitable and reasonably high-income agricultural sector within a modern industrial economy, are those of Sweden, Denmark and the Netherlands. These appear more-or-less as models of agricultural adjustment on the basis of the family farm, with co-operative institutions, more intensive use of labour through the year and strong agriculture/industry linkages in investment and technology, together with high levels of education and social support for small- and middle-scale farmers, producing agricultural sectors and rural economies able to hold their own throughout the process of industrialisation. One can only speculate on the contribution of this form of agrarian transition to the emergence of the 'Swedish model' of egalitarian, welfare-based capitalism, but it seems paradoxical that the countries with (for different reasons) perhaps the least favourable environments for agriculture of those covered in the book should have produced the best result, for farmers themselves and for the rest of the economy and society.

The chapters on the biggest economies covered – France, Germany and Italy – raise rather different issues, in particular the question of how far the *mentalité* of peasant farmers and the institutions within which they operated limited agricultural change and acted as a brake on overall economic development. Vivier, on France, tentatively suggests that, when and where incentives existed, rural households responded in rational ways, but also points out the role, in accounting for the inter-war stagnation of French agriculture, of rural romanticism and the political concern of the state and landowning interests to preserve a socially and economically conservative rural world. Federico, on Italy, argues more forcefully against the view that institutional factors – principally large-scale absentee landlordism and state support for it – barred the way towards technical change and a positive role for agriculture in the growth of the economy. On the basis of revised data on output growth and productivity, he suggests that, given their environment and factor endowment, Italian farmers were not uninnovative and Italian agriculture did not perform its role in overall economic development all that badly, under the circumstances of the global economy of the time. Further examination of these cases in the light of the now quite substantial, post-Schultzian literature on farm household responses to market opportunities and new technology in the developing Third World would surely be worth pursuing.

The conditions of agriculture in Spain, Portugal and Turkey have in some respects been closer to those of the parts of the world on which models of agriculture's role have been based and Clar and Pinilla on Spain, together with Pamuk on Turkey, produce the most explicit and careful applications in the book of the Johnston/Mellor framework. Both chapters argue, as does that on Portugal, that the underlying cause of slow productivity growth and limited structural change in agriculture lay in the failure of the industrial sector to grow fast enough to be able to offer significant employment opportunities to the rural population. In Turkey, for instance, an import-substituting industrialisation strategy restricted the scope for industry to absorb rural labour, even when industrial growth accelerated after World War II, limiting the degree of structural transformation in agriculture and leaving much of the rural population poor, under-educated and without opportunities to enter urban industrial employment. In its greater similarity to the developing world for which the Johnston/Mellor framework was devised, the Turkish case highlights the extent to which factors such as the much earlier growth of first proto- and then modern industry, together with different factor endowments and technological conditions, may have made the experience of north-western Europe the exception rather than the rule.

It would have been interesting to test this argument against the 'intermediate' examples from central and eastern Europe (Poland and Hungary) that the book covers. However, factors such as complex boundary changes make the sorts of statistical analysis used elsewhere difficult to undertake and the authors of these chapters, as of that on Greece, are necessarily reduced at times to providing potted histories, focusing on particular local issues, rather than applying the general framework. In the case of Hungary, slow agricultural growth is explained as the result of institutional path dependence and the continued prevalence of large-scale, grain-growing, aristocratic holdings, to the detriment of the small-scale, family-farm sector, contrary to the argument used elsewhere that sees the root cause of agricultural stagnation as lying in the failure to generate labour-absorbing industrial growth. These chapters do, therefore, seem to be describing outliers but they nonetheless demonstrate that political history can have profound effects on agriculture's role in the development process, or at least on the ability to analyse it.

Routledge have not done their authors a service in allowing the book to appear without basic copy-editing by a native speaker – simple things like wrong prepositions and spelling mistakes (my particular favourite is 'American steal ploughs' (*sic*, p.126)) subtly undermine the authors' impressive efforts. Nonetheless, this is a very useful book, if perhaps more as a reference source and spur to comparative analysis than as the final answer on agriculture's role in European industrialisation. It is perhaps wishful thinking to imagine that one day, for the benefit of both historians and development economists, the authors might come together again to produce the grand European theory of agriculture's role in economic development.

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