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Commons and Crises in the Seventeenth Century. Hardship and Development in Northern Sweden

Abstract

The seventeenth century is known as the Age of Greatness in Swedish history. However in many ways the period can be described as a crisis for the peasants. The crisis had three main reasons; 1) wars; 2) increased taxes, and 3) a cooler climate. The consecutive wars affected the peasant's in many ways, i.e. between 1620 and 1719, half a million men died in the wars. This corresponded to 30 percent of all adult men. The wars also caused increased taxes and peasants thus had to increase production. The Little Ice Age created a cooler climate and added to the crises since it affected agriculture.

In this paper I will show how the peasants reacted to these crises and how important the commons became to create solutions in response to the crises. The crises could be turned into development because the peasants utilized the commons more effectively. The increased use of the common was a result of more collective action and it created new institutional settings and new organizations. It led to a shift in agriculture practice and a development of complementary businesses that produced commodities for a market. Many resources from the commons became increasingly important at this time, like firewood and charcoal and there was an expansion of a transhumance system, here called summer farms. The establishment of summer farms was a way to use the vast woodlands as grazing areas.

The more intense use of the commons had impacts on institutions, organizations, labor division, land use and settlements. This created a use of the commons that lasted for more than two centuries and was essential for agriculture up to the beginning of the twentieth century. The self-governing of the local resources made it possible for the users to change production and create institution for its management.

Keywords: Commons, Crisis, Common-Pool Resources, Early modern Sweden, Collective Action.

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Introduction

I will in this paper focus on long-term changes that were an affect of crises in the seventeenth century and how these changes came to have long lasting effects on production and organization of work. Early modern Europe also faced many short time crises, such as bad harvest or witch-hunts, but I will leave these types of crises out of this paper and look closer at more long lasting crises. The crises I will discuss lasted over many decades and forced the peasants to make structural changes that affected the use of land, production and labor organization. Thus, they affected the foundation for the economy.

It has been shown that crises can devastate a society. For some societies it is impossible to recover after a crises.¹ But more often societies recover and start to grow again. Without exaggerat the similarities between a human being and a society one can describe a crisis in phases; after an initial phases of chock and reaction comes a phases of processing and finally reorientation. In this paper I will focus on the causes to the crises and well as the reorientation. A reorientation is a way of changing conditions and searching for new ways to solve problems. A crisis is in fact a time when it is possible to make larger changes in production. An analogy would be a depression in the economy when companies change production compare to a boom when a change is not necessary. However, in all societies there are path dependences that limit the direction a change could take.

In this paper I will ask questions about how the crises Sweden faced during the seventeenth century affected the economy and how peasants change their production in response to these crises? To change the production in a time of crises one need to have opportunities to make these changes. In seventeenth century Sweden these opportunities were; 1) an expanding market; 2) new recourses that had been used in limited way before; and 3) changes in the workforce. These opportunities lead to changes in production that were more suitable to the new conditions and served the households subsistence need.

The sixteenth century saw a rise in mining and ironworks in Sweden and a European market for copper and iron emerged.² The market for these products expanded in the seventeenth century and the expansion mainly took part in the more wooded areas of Sweden. The wooded areas also came to see an increase in animal husbandry at this time.³ These wooded areas were to a large extent commons and their utilization was dependent on collective action. The hypothesis for this paper is that the crisis peasants faced during the seventeenth century could be relived by using common-pool resources more efficiently. To do that they needed to use more collective action that led to more cooperation among peasants. However, a more intense use of the commons could lead to social dilemmas and the tragedy of the commons. To counteract this user groups had to create institutions to regulate the use. Earlier research has recognized the

¹ Diamond 2005.

² Söderberg and Myrdal, 2002, p. 214.

³ Larsson 2012.

more intense use of woodland, but has not paid much attention to the fact that it was a common-pool resource that were extracted and that the use of the resources only could be managed with collective action. If the hypothesis is right the crises gave an opportunity to change production, but it also promoted collective action and institutional change. It led to a new economy and relived households from the hardship the crises had created.

Three crises

The seventeenth century is known as the Age of Greatness in Swedish history and Sweden was viewed as a great power in Europe up to 1721. However the time was also a hardship for the peasants and in many ways the period can be described as a crisis for the peasants. Three crises hit the peasants in Sweden during the seventeenth century; 1) Wars; 2) Taxes; and 3) Changing Climate, the Little Ice Age. Number 1 and 2, wars and taxes are connected but affected the peasants in different ways.

1) Wars; from 1560 to 1721 Sweden was a country in permanent war. It was only peace for 50 of these 161 years, but since Sweden during many of these years was in more than one war the average number of wars were 1.2 wars per year through the period. Around three percent of the population was soldiers from the 1620s and onwards, compared to other European countries Sweden had the highest share of its population in the armed forces. The share of the population in the armed forces is a measure of the impact that war had, but even more important was the losses. All soldiers that died had to be replaced. Between 1620 and 1721 half a million men died in the wars and it corresponds to approximately 30 percent of all adult men. The vast majority of them did not die at battlefields, but in camps.⁴ The wars had a huge impact on the workforce and to keep up production more work had to be done by women. A way to avoid conscription was to pay a man to replace oneself. For that one need money.⁵

2) Taxes; as in many other countries in Europe, big changes in taxation took place in Sweden during the sixteenth and seventeenth century. The change had started in the sixteenth century and it increased the total amount of taxes and changed the way taxes were paid. Numerous extra contributions that peasants had to paid were added to the yearly taxes. The taxes were a way for the state to pay for an increasing military expense. During the seventeenth century the taxes became a heavy burden on the peasants.⁶ With increased taxes the peasants came to be more involved in the economic life outside their local community.

3) Little Ice Age; at the same time as the war and the taxes affected the lives of the peasants a climate change took place. The Little Ice Age was a period with cooler climate from the fourteenth century up to the nineteenth century. The coolest century during that period was the seventeenth century. In fact the seventeenth century was the coolest century during the last 8000 years in Europe as well as global. The cooler climate had a negative impact on agriculture.

⁴ Lindegren 2000, pp. 130-139.

⁵ Villstrand 1992.

⁶ Anderson 1974, pp. 32-34; Odén 1967, pp. 1-15.

The season for growing crops became around five weeks shorter compare to the warmer parts of the twenty century. The risks for crop failure increased and in marginal areas it was no longer possible to cultivate cereals. The risk for years of bad harvest increased during the seventeenth century and the century started and ended with really bad years. Especially the last decade hit many areas hard with up to 30 percent of the population deceased.⁷ The impact of the cooler climate have by some scholars been described as *“if there is one overwhelming condition that shaped the history of the seventeenth century more than any other, it is global cooling”*.⁸

The wars, taxes and a cooler climate had a profound effect on living conditions in the seventeenth century and one can argue that the impact of these changes could be described as a crisis for the peasants. The peasants reacted in many different ways to the crises, but what many of the solution had in common was that they; 1) used common-pool resources; 2) and where based on collective action. The seventeenth century saw an increase of collective action in production.

Changing production

Before going into a more detailed description of how the crises changed animal husbandry in the north of Sweden. I will give a few examples of how the crises changed production and how common-pool resources became more important to use. The examples include reindeer husbandry, tar production, charcoal burning and firewood production.

Reindeer Pastoral-Nomadism

One of the more important changes in animal husbandry in Northern Scandinavia has been explained by an increased tax burden on the Sami people. In the first decades of the seventeenth century a change in production took place in the Sami communities. It was a shift from a hunting and fishing economy to a reindeer pastoral-nomadism economy. It was a change that took place in a relative short period of time. Two important changes happened in the Sami community from the second half of the sixteenth century and the first decades of the seventeenth century. A great European demand for furs led Sami's to an increased activity in trade and an ability to feed more people in the area since the trade made it possible to buy more food, mostly flour and butter. In the beginning of the seventeenth century the supply of furs from Northern Scandinavia started to decline at the same time as an increasing amount of furs from Russian and North America came to Europe and changed the conditions of fur trade for the Sami's. This coincided with a profound change in taxation of the Sami's and the crisis was a fact. A change in taxation was introduced in 1602 and was in full effect from 1607. The Sami's where now obliged to pay tax in fish and reindeers. The reason behind the new taxation was that the goods paid in taxes were needed in the army's campaigns. The taxation came to be a heavy burden on the Sami families and in the 1610s the records tell us about the poverty the

⁷ Lamb, 1995, pp. 219-235; Ruddiman, 2005, p. 121, Ljungqvist 2011, pp. 441-445.

⁸ Brook 2008, p. 12.

new taxation created. The Swedish crown came to realize that they had to alleviate the tax burden and in 1620 only half the tax had to be paid. The hard years came to have consequences for the Sami's. The solution for the Sami's was to change production and they increased the number of domestic reindeers and meat became their main commodity. Once a large-scale nomadic reindeer husbandry had been introduced it was impossible to go back to hunting and fishing economy with only a few domestic reindeers.⁹ The large-scale nomadic reindeer husbandry that established in Northern Scandinavia was more labor intensive, but the yield was higher, and it came to change the use of the landscape.

Tar production

One of the best-described changes' in production connected to the wars the Swedish state was involved in during the seventeenth century has been the remarkable increase in tar production that took place in the Seventeenth century.¹⁰ The wars were a reality for all people in the seventeenth century and there were probably nothing more frightening and devastating than to be conscripted. Hardly anybody returned from the wars and losing men in a household did reduce the workforce. A way to avoid conscription was to pay someone else to take one's place: to hire a man to replace an already conscripted soldier. To persuade someone to take one's place one needed money, a lot of money. The fee was determined by supply and demand, and it was a seller's market. To obtain money one had to sell a commodity that was in demand. In the province of Ostrobothnia in Finland, then a part of Sweden, that commodity was tar. The need for tar was huge in early modern ship industry in Sweden as well as in Europe. Tar and pitch were established as the third most important Swedish export commodities after copper and iron. The sell of tar made the peasants dependent on the outside world and tied peasants in Finland to the European economy. The forests provided the raw material for tar-distillation and a quite flat landscape with a lot of streams, rivers and lakes facilitated the transport of the heavy commodity. Together they made the conditions for producing tar favorable in Ostrobothnia. Hardly anything needed for the production came from the outside world and the cost for production consisted solely of the peasants' own labor. Tar-distillation are both wood consuming and time-consuming. However, since most work was performed during seasons where they had little to do anyway, it did not affect agriculture in a negative way.¹¹

The tar distillation continued for a couple of centuries after the Age of Greatness and became an important area of production for the peasants. It required an organized use of the forests and the work was labor intensive and required collective action.

⁹ Lundmark 1982, pp. 88-89, 134, 172-173; Lundmark 2008, pp. 27-32; Lundgren 1987, p. 126.

¹⁰ Villstrand 1992; Villstrand 2000, pp. 298-302.

¹¹ Villstrand 2000, pp. 298-301.

Charcoal Production and Firewood

It was not only wars that put a heavily burden on the peasants. The wars, or the threat of war, became a reason for increasing the taxes. A way to do that was to launch taxes that facilitated the production of copper and iron. The greatest producer of copper in Europe was the Great Copper Mountain in Falun and the production and the revenues it created were of vital importance for the Swedish state. For the peasants in the region Dalarna, where the copper mine were situated, a new form of taxation were introduced that were aimed for the copper mine. From a tax mainly based on arable land and furs from squirrel in the sixteenth century, the tax code was change in the 1580s and more radically in 1606 and could from this time only be paid in charcoal and firewood. The peasant became involved in the mining and, as we have seen with the tar-distillation, more involved in economic matters outside the local community.¹²

The increased use of firewood and charcoal resulted in an increased use of common-pool resources, i.e. the vast forests in central and northern Sweden mainly owned and used by peasants. Like tar-distillation charcoal production was a labor-intensive work, which required collective action. Changes in reindeer husbandry, increased tar-distillery, and charcoal production were all reaction to crises in the seventeenth century that were based on using commons more efficiently and required collective action to be performed. However we know little from these systems about how the increased use of the commons changed the institutional settings for using the commons. To know more about how the institutions changed and how collective action were used to harness the vast forest we have to discuss the case of animal husbandry. The seventeenth century saw a rapid development of a transhumance system in Northern Sweden, called summer farms.

Summer farms

The first summer farms, i.e. a periodic settlement for using common pastures for grazing and processing milk into non-perishable products and with buildings for humans and animals, were established in the sixteenth century. It developed into a transhumance system and took of during the crises in the seventeenth century. In the late seventeenth century the summer farms were part of an agricultural system where peasants were required to have a summer farm.¹³

In the summer farms the three crises; cooler climate, wars, and taxes, came together. The cooler climate had an affect on agriculture. It became harder to cultivate at higher altitudes and even a modest change in temperature affected the season for cultivation. In Sweden where the summer even before the global cooling was short, the cooler climate had a profound affect and shorten the growing season by five weeks. The risk for frost in the spring and in the fall increased and if frost hit it had a negative impact on the yield. The result for agriculture was that arable land in marginal areas became meadows and this favored animal husbandry. An affect, but more favorable, of the cooler climate

¹² Ersgård 1997, pp. 94-95.

¹³ Larsson 2009; Larsson 2012.

was that it facilitated winter transportation. Snow and frozen lakes made it easier to bring home winter fodder stored at summer farms and barns located in remote areas to feed the animals. Since the winter was the time of the year when peasants went to markets it also facilitated selling and buying commodities. A sledge was easy to fill up with commodities and conveying it over snow.

The shortage of men in the seventeenth century was a result of the wars. As mentioned earlier 30 percent of all men died in the wars and this affected production; more work had to be done by women. The transformation of herding from a male task to an occupation for women started after the late medieval crises and was not completed until the seventeenth century. Animal husbandry, and especially dairy work, was to a large extent a female work.¹⁴ To put it short; the great knowledge by women in animal husbandry and dairy work combined with a cooler climate that favored animal husbandry led to an expansion of the summer farms. With fewer people in the households the organization of the summer farm had to be efficient. The solution was a specialized female workforce that spent the whole summer taking care of livestock at the summer farms and processing milk into non-perishable product.

For the third crisis, taxes, it might be harder to see the connection to the summer farms. However, increased taxes affected the establishment of summer farms in two ways. Taxes increased the peasant's involvement in the society outside the local area. Even if most of the production from summer farms were used for subsistence we know that some of the products, mostly butter, was sold on markets. Hides and wool were also products that reached the market. As discussed earlier the increased taxation led to an increased use of common-pool resources for firewood and charcoal. This use was to some extent favorable for the summer farms. When firewood and charcoal in large amount was taken from the forests it made them more open and improved pastures. It also facilitated also communication in the forests and they became safer to work in. Even if we do not know for sure, there might have been a third way the taxation affected the peasants. Since the Swedish tax system to a large extent relied on taxation of arable land, it could have been a strategy by peasants to expand animal husbandry that where harder to tax. For the peasants in the north, with vast forests this was an option that was possible to fulfill with summer farms. By having more of their assets in animal husbandry their production became safer in a cooler climate and they could avoid some of the taxes.

New institutions

The examples above about how the crises affected production have all something in common; they were all dependent on the use of common-pool resources and the production and the expansion of this economy required collective action. The changes in production were not only a way to overcome short time crises; after the changes in production were made they became important parts of a new economy for many centuries, for the user groups that had introduced them. Such big change's came to have an effect on institutions and organizations and new rules emerged to facilitate the use of the common-pool resources. The change in

¹⁴ Myrdal 2008.

production has been recognized in earlier research.¹⁵ But earlier research has paid little attention to the institutional changes that made the new production possible with the exception of summer farms.¹⁶ New institutions were required to avoid the tragedy of the commons and the user groups created these institutions with the help of the local court.

As in the case of the summer farms, some of the more important changes that took place during the seventeenth century were to create rules for when the summer farms could be used and not used. They had an open and a closed season and the animals had to arrive and leave at the same day. The seventeenth century was also the dawn of the summer farm communities that were an organization that set up many of the institutions necessary to manage a summer farm. A summer farm community organized most summer farms. Boundaries for the summer farms came to be determined so that a resource area for each summer farm was established. When the utilization of the summer farms increased the number of animals each user could bring was decided. Fines for breaking the rules were determined and users could bring cases to the local court to solve disputes. As the summer farms system intensified the summer farms communities were able to adopt and change the institutions to new conditions.

Even if we do not know for sure it is most likely that the seventeenth century also saw an increase in institutions for management of tar-distillation, charcoal production and reindeer husbandry. Like for the summer farms this increase in institutions was a way to protect the resources from over use and facilitate the work. Even if the pressure on the users were hard from the central government to deliver people and taxes to the state and the climate made arable farming harder, the self-governing of the local resources made it possible for the users to change production and create institution for its management.

Conclusions


During the seventeenth century Sweden was hit by many crises. In response to these crises different user groups used different solutions, but what many of them had in common was that they started to use common-pool resources in a new or/and more efficient ways. The more efficient use of commons required more collective action and the seventeenth century saw an increase in cooperative work to harness vast forests and mountain areas. To avoid the tragedy of the commons the increased use of common-pool resources led to the development of new institutions and organizations. These changes became not only a way to overcome crises, but led to long lasting changes of the economy for many user groups. They lay the foundation for a new way of using resources that lasted for many centuries. These results from the seventeenth century are an illustration of how important common-pool resources and collective action have been to overcome obstacles in crises. The crises were a time for changing production that had long lasting effects and collective action was a way to overcome hurdles

¹⁵ Larsson 1983, p. 105.

¹⁶ Blomkvist and Larsson 2013, Larsson 2009; Larsson (forthcoming).

in periods with crises. These changes required self-governance over the local resources.

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