The Emergence of Serfdom in the Czech Lands

For some time now serfdom, and particularly the emergence of serfdom in Central and Eastern Europe, has been the subject of much discussion among historians. Arnošt Klima¹ has made a seminal contribution to this international debate, and in his study of serfdom in Bohemia he adopted a stand similar to that of the American historian Arcadius Kahan² and the Soviet historian A. I. Gurevich.³ Klima based his excellent article on a thorough knowledge of the literature and the sources, and showed that one cannot speak of a "second period of serfdom" in Bohemia. Klima's analysis naturally deals mainly with the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, ground with which he is unassailably familiar through his rewarding researches into the pre-industrial manufacturing era. In the present article I shall take up some of the points he made, and will deal principally with the status of the vassals in the Czech Lands during the fifteenth century and the evolution of that status.

It must be stressed at the outset that I take serfdom to mean an economic, social, and legal system which subjects the vassal to considerable curtailment of the freedoms he had enjoyed hitherto. Whereas the terms vassal, vassalage, refer to a system in which the peasant is merely the tenant of the land, which is the property of his feudal superior, and the latter demands his feudal dues from the hereditary tenant, the terms serf, serfdom, refer to that stage in the development of vassalage during which feudal dues in the form of labor (robova, corvée) predominate over other forms of service, and the serf together with the members of his family are completely dependent on the will of his overlord for permission to move away, to take up studies, to marry and so on. In this conception serfdom is an exacerbated, more radical phase of vassalage.

Why this emphasis on terminology? For one reason, both vassal (poddany) and vassalage, serf (nevolnik) and serfdom, are concepts developed by modern

historiography; they are not words or concepts known to the Czech language in the fifteenth century. I have suggested often enough elsewhere that the use of modern terms and concepts when dealing with facts and phenomena which have long ceased to exist perforce involves the historian, against his will, in viewing his historical theme in contemporary terms. This can be avoided if he tries to confront his own scientific usage with the terminology, for example, of the Middle Ages, and with the semantic changes in words which reflect changes in the mentality of the period. If we are not mindful of the fact that in the past the human mind had a way of dealing with experiences, a mental approach, that was very different from our current logical constructions, we run the risk of enslavement by modern scientific concepts and semantic fields which shut us off from full and exact understanding of the historical facts. I shall therefore begin this study by attempting to show that the Old Czech terms referring to the rural population in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were not the same as those we use today, and that this fact in itself is of significance for our discussion of the emergence of serfdom.

It must be emphasized that the Old Czech word poddaný (Latin: subjectus, subditus, deditus, obnixus, attributus) did not appear in narrative or legal and official texts before the beginning of the fifteenth century, and in letters and deeds the word had nothing to do with the peasants or the rural population. The word poddaný, vassal, refers to kings, nobles, and burghers; the king and the margrave are both vassals of the emperor, Christians are the vassals of God—this is the conclusion we reached after analyzing dozens of documents dating from the end of the thirteenth to the beginning of the fifteenth century, from the Alexandreis to such works as the Nová rada of Smil Štaňka. The vassal is frequently described as under the power of the ruler and conqueror, because his power is lesser; the vassal is ruled by the man with sufficient power, in particular, sufficient military strength. The word poddaný first appears in connection with the rural population in Moravian legal records, where in 1417 a complaint was registered against a nobleman who appropriated property belonging to "servants and vassals" (služebným i poddanným lidem) of another nobleman. From that time onward, the word poddanný gradually came into use for the rural population subjected to a feudal lord, in legal deeds and documents; literary works (e.g., those of Hynek of Poděbrady) and reli-

5. For my analyses of the Old Czech vocabulary I have drawn on the archives of the Institute for the Czech Language, ČSAV, and the material accumulated for the edition of the Old Czech Dictionary (Staročeský slovník [Praga: Academia, 1979—]). I am grateful to the Department of Linguistic History for the privilege of studying there, and for their valuable help.