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Introduction: Sharecropping in history

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The following four articles arise from a one-day conference on 'Sharecropping in History', organized by Benedita Câmara and held at the University of Madeira on 8 October 2004. The papers gathered here, though revised, reflect the variety of approach evident in their first presentations at the meeting. A fifth paper, by Kyle Kauffman, on 'Monopsony land tenure and sharecropping in Dutch South Africa, 1652–1795' (which was not presented for publication here) also suggested that same variety, not only in terms of the inevitable spatial and temporal range but also in terms of approach. That said, a number of discrete themes emerged from the meeting, with 'sharecropping' a central concept, tantalizingly clear and yet fiercely resistant to close categorization, offering a number of avenues for exploration. The majority of these approaches were conditioned by, and set out to test, some of the more prevalant assumptions of economic history and economic theory with regard to sharecropping.

Though it is not always directly addressed, the first and most obvious 'problem' for the authors of these articles resides in identifying the particulars of sharecropping itself. As Giovanni Federico notes in his article, the broad identification of sharecropping as a contract whose distinctive feature is the division of the product by pre-determined share leaves the door open to a range of contractual sub-types. In the three other articles, we see examples of these which serve to illustrate elements of that range. Thus, for instance, in Câmara's paper on *colonia* contracts in Madeira, the share of the product is conditioned by particular rules on improvement of the holding, while in Rui Santos' paper on sharecropping on the Portuguese mainland the sharecropping arrangement is chiefly determined in the form of rent.

Working on the general assumption that sharecropping, though variously described, is capable of general definition, the authors here are also keen to test a number of wider observations regarding the role and efficiency of sharecropping arrangements. Federico's discussion of global sharecropping offers the most general assessment here and his suggestion is that sharecropping – broadly defined – is a declining feature of the agrarian contractual mix. Federico's new 'puzzle', which he posits here, is to propose that if economists have been correct in identifying sharecropping as an inefficient form of contract, why have they not tested the prevalence of sharecropping more carefully? By attempting a survey in this instance Federico argues that, in fact, sharecropping was never as widely distributed as has always been supposed and that its significance continues to decline.

The three other contributors approach the problem of inefficiency, essentially a tenet of the theoretical literature, from other directions. For Câmara the relative strength or weakness of *colonia* and sharecropping resides in the contractual mix. She argues that the changing frequency of usage of sharecropping contracts on Madeira was a consequence of the imposition of the Civil Code and its treatment of the *colonia* contract as a sharecropping contract, and of the changing agro-system which imposed an increased need for both investment and supervision by landlords and the direct regulation of such arrangements through government. In that sense, sharecropping was a partial response to a changing structure and its relative significance varied accordingly. Santos also identifies the 'functional complementarity' of sharecropping and fixed-rent tenancies on the estates of Evora's Santa Casa da Miséricordia in southern Portugal. As in Câmara's discussion of change in the Madeiran contractual mix, Santos recognizes a similar movement between forms of agrarian contract but contextualizes his narrative of long-term change in terms of risk and the calculations of the respective players. In perhaps the most direct engagement with the theory of inefficiency, Juan Carmona argues that, in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century France, sharecropping offered opportunities in areas of mixed husbandry. Once again, management of risk, especially in a context where other possible safety nets (including developed credit mechanisms) did not exist or were limited, encouraged agrarian contracts of a kind that, for instance, allowed careful management of resources by landlords.

While Federico is most probably correct to be pessimistic about the ultimate possibility of quantifying and correctly identifying the history of sharecropping across a broad period – and here we are chiefly talking about the period after *c.*1600, with little or no reference to earlier histories of sharecropping – the analysis of a changing contractual mix in these studies sheds more light on the ways in which a number of possible key variables, including regulation and institutional initiatives, landlord-tenant relations, and changing environment and market conditions, encouraged the development of particular arrangements organised to an agreed advantage of the parties. The context of such agreements and the relativities of the ensuing advantages encourage further study of the significance of local contractual arrangements relative to our wider and theoretical understanding of the role and importance of sharecropping in past society.[1]

ENDNOTE

1 Similar arguments and testing of Marshallian theory continue to be applied for other contexts, including most obviously the *post-bellum* south of the United States. See, for instance, M. Garrett and Z. Xu, 'The efficiency of sharecropping: evidence from the postbellum south', *Southern Economic Journal* **69** (2003), 578–95.