The Rise and Fall of Illegitimacy in a Rural Society
The Case of Rendalen, Norway 1750-1900

Introduction
In the second half of the 18th century there was a rise in the number of illegitimate births in Europe. The number fell a century later. While the question of increased levels of illegitimacy has received a great deal of attention connected to a possible romantic revolution, there has been little study of why these levels again fell.

Previous findings and further questions
Premarital sexuality was not an uncommon feature in Rendalen in the 18th century, and many brides were pregnant or had their first child before marriage. Still, around 1790 there was a great surge in premarital sexual activity, involving girls from both the landowning and the (semi-)landless group. This surge had two faces. One was the fact that a premarital pregnancy and especially a premarital birth became the normal way to start a marriage. The other is that simultaneously there was a surge in looser premarital sexual relations.

The article which constitutes the basis for this poster addresses two questions concerning this. When the normal way to start a marriage was to have a sexual relationship that ended in a pregnancy, it is also obvious that not all relationships based on mutual attraction would culminate in marriage. Was it a situation whereby the young men and women of Rendalen began to pursue a vision of romantic love in a society already in possession of a relaxed view on premarital sexuality? Or is it more a result of a process of proletarianisation where parents had little to offer a large flock of siblings, who then of necessity had to provide and find a partner for themselves?

Results and Conclusion
During the whole period it was only the farmer who had the clear ability to affect the outcome of whether an extramarital pregnancy would result in marriage for their children. In the early period (1750-1800), it may be seen that the farmer’s wife had a positive effect on securing a marriage for her daughter, irrespective of the social status of the girl’s suitor.

Method
A logistic regression of remaining a farmer as an adult for sons and daughters of farmers. The regression shows the effect of marriages initiated by an extramarital pregnancy on social mobility - controlled for social origin of the spouses and their age of marriage.

Data
The basis for the analysis is the Rendalen database. The foundation of the database is parish registers from 1734-1900 that are linked together by a couples establishment procedure. In addition there are linkages to several other sources such as censuses, probate registers and court journals.

Table: Proportion of pregnant brides or having the first child before marriage among all married mothers. Decades. Marriage in Rendalen 1750-1900.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time period</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Farmers</th>
<th>Farmworkers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1750-1775</td>
<td>28.9 (60)</td>
<td>28.2 (24)</td>
<td>26.7 (53)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1775-1800</td>
<td>30.4 (96)</td>
<td>30.5 (86)</td>
<td>26.9 (82)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1800-1825</td>
<td>28.7 (119)</td>
<td>28.8 (98)</td>
<td>26.3 (110)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1825-1850</td>
<td>29.4 (152)</td>
<td>29.6 (198)</td>
<td>27.1 (215)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1850-1875</td>
<td>29.2 (157)</td>
<td>28.4 (286)</td>
<td>26.2 (141)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1875-1900</td>
<td>27.3 (150)</td>
<td>27.1 (320)</td>
<td>25.4 (132)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: A bride is considered pregnant when the child is born within four months after the wedding. Betrothal is used as date of marriage before 1799. Data only for first marriages for men and women.

Reference
Hans Henrik Bull (2006), 'The Rise and Fall of Illegitimacy in a Rural Society. The Case of Rendalen, Norway 1750-1900', article no 3, Marriage decisions in a peasant society [...], Doctoral thesis, Faculty of Humanities, University of Oslo.

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Data digitized by Norwegian Historical Data Center at Tromsø and Bardufoss