

PEASANTS AND PEASANT SOCIETIES

EDITOR: TEODOR SHANIN

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**Peasants and Peasant
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Edited by Teodor Shanin

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Peasants and Peasant Societies

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Edited by Teodor Shanin

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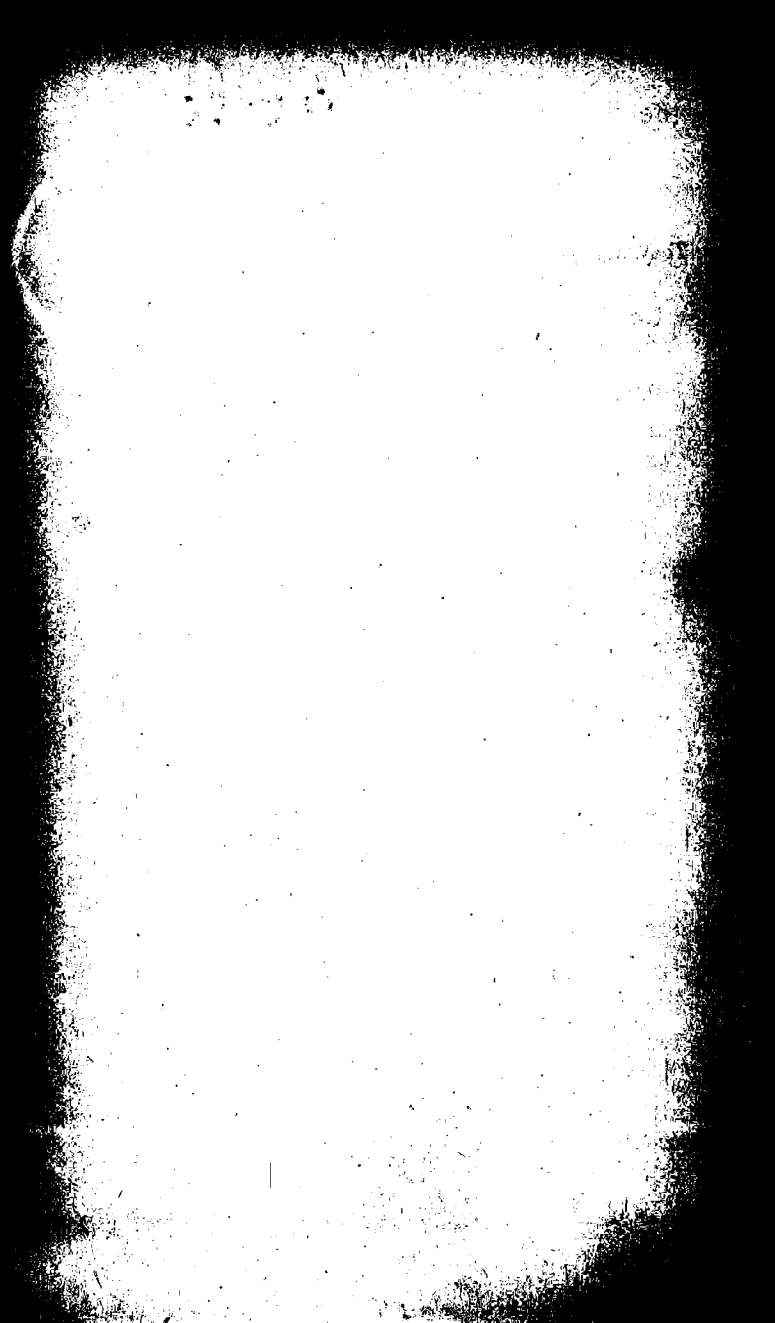
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To Nancy, quarrelsomely . . .



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Introduction

One can barely speak of discoveries in the social sciences, yet time and again social issues strike the scholar's eye with all the dramatic force of the apple which fell at Newton's feet. The last few years have seen a somewhat paradoxical rediscovery of peasants. In our rapidly expanding world, the character, livelihood and fate of massive majorities in the world's poorest and potentially most explosive areas have come to be seen as one of the most crucial issues of our time. Suddenly, behind the news-men's headings about glib politicians, corrupt administrators, vicious landlords and fiery revolutionaries, the great unknown of the peasant majority was 'detected' as one of the major structural determinants which make the so-called developing societies into what they are. After a quarter of a century in obscurity the 'peasant problem' came back with a bang - as the dominant issue of war and peace, Vietnam's battlefields and India's hunger, and reflected in the 'super state' policies, campus revolts and ghetto riots of the other 'civilized' world.

Rural sociology as a discipline in its own right emerged in the United States at the turn of the century, preceding its introduction into Europe. It was, however, focused on the sociology of farming as an occupation rather than on peasants as a social entity (Galeski, 1972). The systematic study of peasantry originated in Central and Eastern Europe; not surprisingly, because in those societies a rapidly 'Westernizing' intelligentsia was faced by a large peasantry - the poorest, most backward and numerically the largest section of their nations. The issue of the peasantry became closely entangled with, and impelled forward by, the ideologies of modernization and by the rediscovery of the national self by people suppressed by the Russian, Austrian, German and Turkish Empires. Subsequently, political leaders, social scientists and scores of amateur ethnographers turned their attention to the peasant.

Since the 1920s European research into peasantry has encountered adverse conditions. Nationalist ideologies, military

dictatorships and Russian collectivizers did not favour specific studies of peasantry. The few studies of peasantry published in English remained individual ventures. Furthermore, Western social scientists found themselves conceptually handicapped by the prevailing typology – pre-industrial versus industrial (or modern) societies. Such analyses were, on the whole, related to an ethnocentric preoccupation with industrialization and parliamentary democracy as self-evident ways of progress. Peasants 'disappeared', lumped together with neolithic tribesmen, Chinese gentry, and so on, in the common category of pre-industrial or primitive societies.

The growth of interest in peasant societies has coincided with new developments in anthropology. Western anthropologists clearly, have been running short of small tribes and closed 'folk communities'. Kroeber's re-conceptualization (see below, p. 14) has drawn attention to the peasantry. Considerable resources and numerous topic-hungry students, especially in the US, were launched into the study of peasant societies, generating a wave of monographs, a number of analytical contributions as well as some rediscoveries of truths long known outside the autarky of the English-speaking world.

In view of the rapidly increasing number of peasant studies there is something amusing, if not grotesque, in the failure of scholars as yet to reach even a general agreement on the very existence of peasantry as a valid concept. To many scholars the unlimited diversity of peasants in different villages, regions, countries and continents makes any generalization 'spurious and misleading'. Moreover, to a large number of scholars, peasant societies, which appear to disintegrate under the impact of the modernizing forces of industrialization and urbanization, do not seem worthy of forward-looking scholarly attention.

The existence of peasantry as a realistic (and not purely semantic) concept can be claimed for both empirical and conceptual reasons. Firstly, it is sufficient to read concurrently a sequence of peasant studies originating in countries as far removed in their physical and social conditions as Russia, Hungary, Turkey, China, Japan, India, Tanzania, Colombia, and so on, to note numerous similarities. There are, of course, in

important differences which are only to be expected in view of the varied historical experience, etc., but what is striking is, to quote Erasmus, 'The persistence of certain peasant attributes' in societies so far removed (Erasmus, 1967, p. 350). Or in Redfield's words: there is 'something generic about it' (Redfield, 1956, p. 25).

Conceptually, a tendency to treat peasantry as a bodiless notion can be countered on grounds related to the essence of sociology – to the trivial but often forgotten truth that *a sociological generalization does not imply a claim of homogeneity, or an attempt at uniformity*. Quite the contrary, a comparative study implies the existence of both similarities and differences, without which a generalization would, of course, be pointless. In pursuing 'a generalizing science' a sociologist always lays himself open to the outrage of the adherents of those disciplines in which the study of uniqueness is central, and easily develops into a canon of faith. Much of it is based on misunderstanding. Some if it simply illustrates the limitations of the sociologist's trade, and of any conceptualization of an unlimitedly unique reality. In Max Weber's words, 'sociological analysis both abstracts from reality and at the same time helps us to understand it', and, consequently... 'the abstract character of sociology is responsible for the fact that compared with actual historical reality they [i.e. sociological concepts] are relatively lacking in fullness of concrete content' (Weber, 1925, p. 109–12).

In a framework of thought which accepts both the brief of sociology as 'a generalizing science' and the existence of peasantry as a specific, world-wide type of social structure, we can discern four major conceptual traditions which have influenced contemporary scholarship: the Marxist class theory, the 'specific economy' typology, the ethnographic cultural tradition, and the Durkheimian tradition as developed by Kroeber and allied in its theory of social change to functionalist sociology.

The Marxist tradition of class analysis has approached peasantry in terms of power relationships, i.e. as the suppressed and exploited producers of pre-capitalist society (Marx and Engels, 1950). Contemporary peasantry appears as a leftover of an earlier social formation, its characteristics reinforced by remaining at the bottom of the social power structure. The second tradition

has viewed peasant social structure as being determined by a specific type of economy, the crux of which lies in the way the family farm operates. This approach, too, can be traced to Marx, but was first made explicit by Vasil'chakov (1881) and fully developed by Chayanov (1925). The third tradition, which stems from European ethnography and from traditional Western anthropology, tends to approach peasants as the representatives of an earlier national tradition, preserved as a 'cultural lag' by the inertia typical of peasant societies. The fourth tradition, originating from Durkheim, has followed a rather complex path. The basic dualism accepted by Durkheim and his generation (Tönnies, Maine, etc.) divides societies into the 'traditional' (divided into social segments – uniform, closed and cohesive) and the modern or 'organic', based upon a division of labour and necessary interaction of the units (Durkheim, 1960). Kroeber later placed peasant societies in an intermediate position as 'part societies with part cultures' – partly open segments in a town-centred society (Kroeber, 1948, p. 284). The peasant 'part segments' were turned by Redfield into the cornerstone of a conceptualization accepted by the majority of American anthropologists, with the consequent tendency to become reified into self-evident truths by the sheer volume of monotonous repetition.

Sociological definitions and models resemble two-dimensional sketches of a multi-dimensional reality. Each carries partial truth, each reflects necessarily only part of the characterized phenomenon. The reality is richer than any generalization, and that holds particularly true for peasant societies, highly complex social structures with little formal organization. Yet, without conceptual delineation of peasants and peasant societies as a type of social structure, this Reader would turn into a ghost story.

We shall delimit peasant societies by establishing a general type with four basic facets. A definition of peasantry by one, single determining factor would, no doubt, be neater, but too limiting for our purpose. The general type so defined would include the following:

1. *The peasant family farm as the basic unit of multi-dimensional social organization.* The family, and nearly only the family,

provides the labour on the farm. The farm, and nearly only the farm, provides for the consumption needs of the family and the payment of its duties to the holder of political and economic power. The economic action is closely interwoven with family relations, and the motive of profit maximization in money terms seldom appears in its explicit form. The self-perpetuating family farm operates as the major unit of peasant property, socialization, sociability and welfare, with the individual tending to submit to a formalized family-role behaviour.

2. *Land husbandry as the main means of livelihood directly providing the major part of the consumption needs.* Traditional farming includes a specific combination of tasks on a relatively low level of specialization and family-based vocational training. Food production renders the family farm comparatively autonomous. The impact of nature is particularly important for the livelihood of such small production units with limited resources.

3. *Specific traditional culture related to the way of life of small communities.* Specific cultural features (in the sense of socially determined norms and cognitions) of peasants have been noted by a variety of scholars. The pre-eminence of traditional and conformist attitudes, i.e. the justification of individual action in terms of past experience and the will of the community, may be here used as an example. At least part of these cultural patterns may be related to characteristics of a small village community, life in which may be accepted as an additional defining facet of peasantry.

4. *The underdog position – the domination of peasantry by outsiders.* Peasants, as a rule, have been kept at arms' length from the social sources of power. Their political subjection interlinks with cultural subordination and with their economic exploitation through tax, *corvée*, rent, interest and terms of trade unfavourable to the peasant. Yet in some conditions, they may turn into the revolutionary proletariat of our times.

The definition of a 'general type' leads to a further delineation of *analytically marginal groups* which share with the 'hard core' of peasants most, but not all, of their characteristics. In general, such differences can be presented on quantitative scales of more/

less. Analytical marginality does not here in any sense imply numerical insignificance or some particular lack of stability. The major marginal groups can be classified by the basic characteristics which they do not share with the proposed general type: e.g. an agricultural labourer lacking a fully fledged farm, a rural craftsman holding little or no land, the frontier squatter or the armed peasant who at times escaped centuries of political submission along frontiers or in the mountains (e.g. the *Kozaks* or the Swiss cantons). Analytically marginal groups may also be either a product of different stages of economic development or, alternatively, of different contemporary State policies towards agriculture. (For example, pastoralists, peasant-workers in modern industrial communities, or the members of a Russian *kolkhoz*.)

Like every social entity, peasantry exists only as a process, and in its change. Regional differences among peasants reflect to a large extent their diverse histories. The typology suggested can be used as a yardstick for historical analysis, types of peasants can be approached as basic stages of development. One should beware, however, of the pitfalls of forcing multi-directional changes into neat and over-simplified schemes which presuppose one-track development for peasantries of every period, area and nation.

Some of the dynamism evident in peasant societies does not lead to structural changes and may be cyclical in nature. On the whole, however, the attention of scholars has been drawn to structural changes and especially to those leading to the increasing integration of peasants into national and world society. The social mechanisms involved in such changes are closely linked and can once more be related to the general type suggested. The diffusion of market relations, the increasing significance of exchange and the advent of a money economy, gradually transform the peasant family farm into an enterprise of a capitalist nature, entailing the disappearance of its peculiar characteristics. Professionalization reflects an increasing division of labour which gradually transforms the agricultural and occupational functions of the peasant. Urbanization, acculturation, and the spread of mass culture through the countryside destroy the specific characteristics of peasant culture and the relative closeness and homogeneity of the villages. The impact of State