

THE AGRARIAN REVOLUTION

American ethnologists are currently discovering a type of man and a "culture." Their attention had been focussed for a long while on the various Indian tribes as a favored field of investigation, and, more recently, on the inhabitants of large or middle-sized American cities. This scientific "isolationism" had, therefore, effectively hidden from them the condition of the two-thirds of humanity who are neither "primitives" nor city-dwellers but, rather, peasants.

Robert Redfield, whose first inquiries took him to Mexico, there encountered what he called "folk culture."¹ Dispersed about the globe, his students brought back studies which led him to think that "peasant society and culture have a generic quality. This species of human organization has a certain uniformity throughout the world." Studying the life of Polish, Chinese, European, Latin-American, and Hindu peasants, he noted what he calls "this imperturbable sameness."

It is interesting to note that Europeans, too, are currently rediscovering the peasant. Ever since Hesiod, of course, numerous authors, agronomists, and economists, as well as poets, wrote of country life; but so long as the foundations of civilization were rural, the man in the field was *Man par*

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1. Cf. H. Mendras, "Cities and Countryside," *Diogenes*, No. 8, Autumn, 1954, pp. 111-17.

excellence: Cincinnatus returned to his plow and Melibeus sang the happiness of Tityrus. Through the discovery of distant lands Western man became aware of "the savage," while the development of an urban technologist society has brought the city-dwelling population to the fore. These two human types of human beings fixed historical and geographical limits to the peasant, who thereafter was individualized and characterized in relation to them. The peasant can no longer pass for "eternal."

It is not surprising, then, that we do not yet have a satisfactory definition of the peasant. Larousse, following Littré, gives simply: *homme de la campagne*. Robert Redfield tries a definition, admits that it is vague and that others may well be proposed. For him, the peasant is the man who cultivates the soil in order to live rather than to make money, and who is submitted to the influence of an elite. Hunters, fishermen, and nomadic herdsmen are excluded, as well as those agricultural producers for whom farming is not a way of life but a business for profit. Besides this, the peasantry, unlike the "savages," is never an autonomous society, but is always integrated into a broader society which provides it moral and intellectual direction; this dependent relation vis-à-vis town or castle may take any sort of juridical, economic, or political form.

If this definition is accepted, we may ask whether true peasants exist in Uruguay. Daniel D. Vidart has analyzed in picturesque terms the "dialectics of culture" between city and country. But the human types of the Uruguayan countryside, *peon, estanciero, gaucho, rancharo, payador, domador, montaraz*, etc., described in warm colors by Vidart, do not seem to fit the definition of Robert Redfield.

In order to define the limits of a "comparative science of peasantry," it seems fitting to attempt a typology which, behind the apparent uniformity of certain characteristics, would bring out the striking diversity of cultural forms found among what are called peasant societies. It is in this spirit that Oscar Lewis made a fruitful comparison between a village in India and a Mexican village, which he himself studied successively, thus giving a special value to his judgments.²

Certain values are consistent with the peasant way of life. Robert Redfield cites three which are closely related to each other: an intimate and mystical attitude toward the land; the conviction that agricultural activity

2. The author has attempted a similar comparison between a French and an American village, and agrees with Oscar Lewis that since "the investigator brings with him his own frame of reference, working methods and sense of the problem . . . this type of research pays a double dividend." Cf. H. Mendras, *Etudes de Sociologie rurale, novis (Aveyron) et virginis (Utah)* (Paris, Armand Colin, 1953).

is psychologically healthful, and the belief that devoting oneself to productive work is in itself a virtue.

The working relationship established with the land in pursuit of economic aims merges into emotional and even mystico-religious relationships. The Mayan peasant engages in agricultural work as if in a religious activity. Certainly he sells half his corn harvest, but corn prepared for sale is for him not the same as that which he has grown in his field or which he offers to his gods: he even gives it a different name.

The peasant's attitude toward woman is somewhat similar to his feeling toward the earth and shows a similar confusion in motivations. In his choice of a wife he is as interested in economic qualities and eagerness to work, as in emotional or spiritual values, and the scale of moral values to which he refers reflects his preoccupation with the economic. In the English village of Gosforth, W. M. Williams notes that economic considerations are very important in the choice of a mate among peasant families; more so than among the townspeople.

The peasant lavishes on things feelings which he would consider out of place if expressed towards human beings, and the Mayan peasant declares that "as much care must be shown for the earth as for the woman and the family." This modesty of feeling and the emphasis placed upon physical effort considered as a virtue together form a practical realistic attitude and a pronounced taste for everything sure and solid; a corollary is the blame cast upon all violence and all open aggressiveness, the refusal of risk, and the slight consideration merited by individual achievement and prowess. Peasants, for example, are agreed in minimizing "sexual experience considered as good in itself, as a sport, or as virile achievement."

If these are some of the dominant traits of the peasant "character" throughout the world, the man of the Mediterranean countryside hardly appears to possess them. J. Pitt-Rivers went to live in a small Andalusian town, which he called Alcalà de la Sierra and which appears to him representative of traditional Mediterranean civilization. He analyzes the mentality of these farmers who live in town and go out each morning to cultivate their fields. They feel more attached to the social life of the town than to the soil they tend without love. They lack any mystical attitude toward the land and agricultural work, which they consider as an economic necessity and not as a religious or moral obligation. Pitt-Rivers recalls that J. Weulersse made the same observation: "Love and labor were both missing in the Syrian soil; the fellah does indeed cultivate, but regretfully and with no indication that this cultivation looks beyond immediate neces-

sity: he works for himself and not for his land; he does not feel that the land surpasses and prolongs his own existence."³

The system of moral values of the inhabitants of Alcalà is also very different from traditional peasant values. Here, man's foremost quality is virility—a readiness to defend his own and his family's pride; since this moral quality is closely associated with sexuality, the supreme insult is to cast doubt on the virility of an adversary. The bullfight is the ideal occasion for proving oneself a man and the sexual exploit the supreme personal triumph. The importance attributed to the engagement period and the meticulous ritual which governs it show the emphasis placed on this aspect of life. Feminine *verguenza* corresponds to male *soberbia*, for the woman must be above all beautiful, delicate, reserved, an ideal far removed from that of the peasant!

Pitt-Rivers gives, finally, a subtle analysis of the lines of friendship among individuals and families. *Compadrazgo*, a complex system of sponsorship, permits that these relationships be institutionalized. There is a different set of regulations by which friendship yields to a "clientele" system in which the favors of some insure the fidelity of others. The importance given to choice and *simpatia* in personal relations contrasts with the system of relations based on residence and family, which are the rule in peasant societies. Yet this portrait of the Mediterranean farmer is at variance with the one traced by Hesiod. Must we conclude that Greco-Roman civilization urbanized the Mediterranean countryside to the point of destroying all trace of "peasantry"? Or possibly Hesiod idealized the Hellenic peasant and wished, like Virgil, to convince city-dwellers of rustic felicity. Robert Redfield offers another hypothesis. According to him, the intermingling of economic, emotional, psychic, and religious motivations is a trait of "primitive" life which tends to disappear as the peasant plays an increasingly active part in a secularized civilization. Thus, peasants from different parts of the world might be ranked according to their level of economic and technical consciousness, the two extreme types being the "primitive" tiller of the soil to whom the Mayan peasant is closest, and the "modern" farmer fairly well represented by the Mediterranean type.

If the farmers of Alcalà de la Sierra lack the peasant mentality, they do live in a social universe bounded by the *termino* of their *pueblo*. Like peasants throughout the world, they are members of a self-sufficient "little community" which lives unto itself. Of Alcalà's inhabitants, fewer than 12 per cent were born outside the town; this percentage includes civil em-

3. J. Weulersse, *Paysans de Syrie et du Proche-Orient* (Paris, Gallimard, 1946), p. 173.

ployees, landowners, and their families, who are outsiders, or *horsains*, as the Normans say. On the other hand, a good number of young people leave their *pueblo* to seek their fortunes elsewhere; even as expatriates they still “belong” to Alcalà. The first question asked of a *horsain* is “Where are you from?”—put in an effort to classify him and eventually to find some common acquaintance who will serve as guarantor. For in the “little community” where everyone knows everyone else, a personal link, even though an indirect one, must be established before relations with the newcomer can begin.

In fact, everything which is not of the *pueblo* is automatically suspect and the inhabitants of neighboring *pueblos* are guilty of all the vices. “My father who was a wise man often told me: ‘never trust a man of Jacinas, only bad pennies have ever come from there.’ ” Similarly, a man from the province of Berry says “foolish as someone from Sologne,” to which the latter retorts “stupid as a Berri-chon.” Pitt-Rivers suggests that this attitude is a reaction allowing people to “project the tensions of the group’s internal structure upon the out-group which, as a menace from without, serves to reenforce the solidarity of the group within. People of the neighboring town are always the cause of all the trouble: they steal the harvest, their wives are unfaithful, they use the foulest language, are most often drunk, most given to vice and cheat in business.” But Pitt-Rivers also notes that this hostility between *pueblos* is much less strong today than in the past.

Life in the Mexican village of Tepoztlan is much like that of Alcalà. In both cases the wife is chosen in the village itself and this endogamy assures social autarchy and the rejection of the outside world. The situation is entirely different at Rani-Khera, in India; there, marriages must be contracted within a caste and thus most often outside the village. Each village is linked with hundreds of others, forming what Lewis calls a sort of “rural cosmopolitanism.” In Mexico commerce and pilgrimages are the chief occasions of contact between villages; family connections being very rare, relations are impersonal. At Rani-Khera, on the other hand, pilgrimages and commerce are of very little importance compared to family relationships. In both cases, however, we see the peasant society integrated into a dominant urban civilization; but the structure of the two peasant societies is not the same.

From certain points of view Tepoztlan is more like the model of a village community: ethnic homogeneity, unity of religion, single administration elected by the village, etc. The importance of the market-place, on

which both church and *municipio* open, reflects this unity. Consider on the other hand an evaluation of the cohesiveness of a community based on the frequency of various collective activities among the inhabitants of Rani-Khera: groups of smokers, economic cooperation, caste councils, family groups, etc. Lewis sees "in the verbal affirmation of an identification with the village and of a solidarity, at Tepoztlan, a psychological compensation for a real atomization of social relations. Likewise, the absence of such verbal affirmation at Rani-Khera seems to reflect a stronger cohesion in social relations"; this interpretation agrees with that of Pitt-Rivers.

In the villages of India we also find a system of patronage, comparable to that of Alcalà, summed up in a word constantly on the lips of the villagers, *daksinya*, which might be translated as "obligation." In the name of "obligation" one is often called upon to do things he has no desire to do. Every relationship between two men or two groups produces "obligations," and gives each a claim, vague as it may be, on the other. Every rich man tries to "invest in men" so as to be able, when the moment is ripe, to utilize his wards for economic or political ends.

By forming such a clientele one attains the status of *cacique* or *caudillo*, and acquires sufficient power to become the regular intermediary between the village and the national society. Backed by the strength of this clientele, one speaks in the name of the village and is listened to in proportion to the number of votes he can produce at election time.

In exchange for their fidelity, the "clients" expect their patron to defend them and uphold them in their dealings with the agents of authority. In India almost all quarrels used to be settled within the village by the elders, but today it is more and more frequently necessary to go to court to obtain one's due.

In Spain the *cacique* intervenes between his clients and the police or the services of economic control, and the whole village acts solidly in a movement of self-defense against external authority: the famous bandits of the Andalusian Sierra thus managed to survive until very recently, and even today several mills operate illegally at Alcalà, thanks to the complicity of the whole village. The civil guard itself, though it represents external authority, must compromise with the village in order to live there, and closes its eyes to the clandestine activity of the millers, who never fail to share their profits with the guard.

This marginal role of local elites and lower-echelon civil employees, once essential, declines in importance as the dominant urban civilization imposes upon peasant society its requirements, its new techniques, and its

code of behavior. The *señoritos* of Alcalà look increasingly to the city, trying to urbanize their way of life, and finally they leave the *pueblo*. In India, the city-country conflict is matched by a conflict between traditional and occidental civilizations: the higher castes tend to become Westernized and to escape the social system of the village, leaving the field open to lower castes who, in reaction, hope to impose their power on the village by identifying with the Brahman tradition and “Sanskritizing” their behavior. Thus at Madhopur the untouchables of the Camar caste adopt the practices of the landowning Thakur caste at the moment when the latter drop these practices.

At Gosforth, the social structure of a seven-class hierarchy is the foundation of the entire social life of the village. The various voluntary associations are almost entirely presided over by members of the gentry; the active members belong to the middle class. The *parvenus* who cannot aspire to the presidencies, and the lower class who would not feel comfortable in the associations, join in making fun of them. In contrast to what happens in India or Spain, the gentry remain faithful to the old standards, while the *parvenus* try to affirm their status by imitating modern city ways. The peasants measure prestige by professional qualities and by good upkeep of the farm; they are little interested in the house, principal index of prestige in the town: housewives, for example, take great pride in their curtains, the only part of the interior visible from the outside.

Exchanges of service are numerous: the loan of a bowl of milk or of a tractor, financial advice, etc. It goes without saying that the rich lend more than they receive in return, but these relations do not lead to the formation of “clienteles” as at Alcalà or at Rani-Khera.

It is astonishing to find a parish which fits so well the definition of the “little community” in a country as urbanized as England. A newcomer is a long time finding acceptance unless he is related to one of the old families. Every intrusion of the external world and of national society is carefully avoided. During the census people wondered why “those men in London wanted to know so many things about all the people of Gosforth.” The “college fellows” who want to teach old peasants their trade are a source of great amusement.

The policeman’s situation is comparable to that of his colleagues at Alcalà. Cockfights, forbidden by law but still held, are an open secret; stories are told about “the good jokes played on the policeman who wanted to meddle.” The courts are used only in exceptional cases or when an outsider is involved: “Our people settle their own differences, sir!”

But in the last fifty years, and especially since the Second World War, Gosforth has seen its way of life, once autonomous and strongly individualistic, transformed by the increasing acceptance of a uniform national "culture." This penetration is particularly visible in the life of the farmer, forced to keep accounts by the mechanization of agriculture and its accompanying fiscal obligations. The "Agricultural Revolution" and the influence of the city are completely transforming the traditional way of life in this once sheltered part of Cumberland.

From this point of view Gosforth represents all the villages of western Europe and perfectly illustrates the admirable history of European agriculture just published by M. Augé-Laribé. His whole book tends to prove that the "Agricultural Revolution," a very slow one, began in the sixteenth century, started in the cities, and was propagated by large landowners both noble and bourgeois: it thus agrees with Robert Redfield in underscoring the dependence of the peasantry on these elites. "These men—and these women—(peasants), so ingenious in perfecting details of execution, do not invent. All the great changes from which they have profited or to which they have submitted were imposed from outside, by the cities, industry, science, intellectual critics. Agricultural life changed so little during the Middle Ages because the society being formed outside the villages was itself entirely or almost entirely inactive." Or in the words of Cattaneo: "*L'agricoltura razionale nasce nelle città.*"

Books, voyages, and gardens were of great service to agricultural progress. From the moment of the invention of the printing press, books treated the *prouffitz champêtres et ruraux* (1478), and the *Théâtre d'agriculture* of Olivier de Serres went through nineteen editions between 1600 and 1675. From Rome, Rabelais in 1536 sent his protector lettuce, melon, carnation, and various other seeds with directions for their use, and Henri IV instituted a public garden at Montpellier in 1593.

Although the attitude of the "great" toward the country has not yet found its interpreter, it nevertheless reflects one whole aspect of a civilization and explains the place of agriculture in it. Garden art is an excellent index to this subject: witness the completely different attitudes revealed by the rational ordering of a Le Nôtre on the one hand, and the English garden which, after Rousseau and Ermenonville, becomes the romantic garden. The pastorals of Madame Desnoulières or Honoré d'Urfé do not have the same significance as Marie Antoinette's games at the Trianon hamlet. The study of these problems is just as useful for a "theory" of peasant society as are the minute notations of ethnologists.

Beginning with the sixteenth century, but especially since the eighteenth, the clash of traditional peasant society with the new principles of a capitalist and technical civilization meant the birth of a "methodical agriculture" which, with world-wide competition, was soon to become "international agriculture," an evolution logically incompatible with the maintenance of the autarchy of the "little community" or the autonomy of a "rural cosmopolitanism."

From the eighteenth century on, the attempt was made to "spread light" among the peasants. First, brochures were printed, to be read by priests from the pulpit on Sunday. A farmer asks the intendant: "Why doesn't the government name inspectors to go and observe . . . the state of the fields, teach farmers to improve their methods, tell them what to do with livestock, how to breed, fatten, and sell them, where to take them to market? . . . The farmer who shows the best growing methods should be honored." Such an agricultural service was not installed in France until the end of the nineteenth century. Meanwhile, agricultural meetings and societies multiplied.

Since the beginning of this century, agricultural information services have been developed, their methods perfected, and their agents sent into the most backward regions. Following the pamphlet, the model farm, and the film, television has come forward to aid in this work and in France UNESCO has undertaken a study of the subject.

The French television system broadcast a series of programs devoted to the modernization of country life, and a team of sociologists and psychologists studied the reactions the series produced among farmer members of television clubs. (In certain villages clubs have been formed to buy a TV set and meet for group viewing). There the research team found a milieu particularly favorable to their inquiry. The often animated discussions following the broadcasts prove the interest they aroused. Three out of thirteen programs were devoted to the value of cooperation; while these broadcasts were among the most widely appreciated, the discussions which followed reduce to two complementary remarks: "We've got to be less individualistic and have confidence," answered by "That just wouldn't go here."

A study of the public's attitude concerning modernization before and after the series of broadcasts showed, however, that they had had some effect. Some decided to build an incubator for chicks, to send their daughters to cooking and domestic science school, or to buy a washing machine, and one municipal council voted funds for an increased water supply "de-

manded by all for so many years." Generally, the most notable progress was made in household equipment. But some reacted unfavorably: "They're not going to put curtains and rugs in the stables, are they? . . . All that is very fine, something to dream about," and one young farm woman summed it up: "More than ever before I'd like to go live in the city!"

The anxiety and tendency toward reaction felt by most peasants facing the necessary "revolution" becomes a nightmare to certain Hindu peasants who expect to see their village razed and their land cultivated completely by machine: ". . . there'll be no more family: everybody will live in a hotel, eat in a canteen, etc. . . ." Meanwhile, all agents of the irrigation service "are considered criminals or their accomplices, for they not only abuse their rights and demand booty in the form of wine, but they even move out by truck, sometimes at night, and they have dealings with city men, with landowners who know how to read and write."⁴

This moral blame and these apocalyptic views disclose the profound and justifiable feeling of men who are clearly aware of the contradiction between their society and mentality on the one hand, and the imperatives of modern civilization on the other. They feel incapable of coping with this conflict by themselves, and they are frightened at the prospect of trusting technicians whom they cannot supervise or an external authority which the past has taught them to fear.

With the discovery and the study of the "peasant" well established and with the analysis of the agricultural revolution now taking place in the most modern countries, it would be fitting for someone to draw conclusions likely to facilitate the revolution of less advanced peasants. This is a new and a delicate task, which certain specialists in the social sciences have not been afraid to undertake.⁵

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4. Cf. McKim Marriott, "La modernisation de l'agriculture dans les régions sur-développées," *Chronique sociale de France*, 1954, No. 2, pp. 123-34.

5. Cf. "Les techniques d'évaluation," *Bulletin internationale des Sciences Sociales* (Paris, UNESCO, 1955), Vol. VII, No. 3.

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