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PEASANTS AGAINST CAPITALISM AND THE STATE

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Review-Essay of Frank E. Huggett, The Land Question and European Society, R.E.F. Smith, Peasant Farming in Muscovy, John D. Bell, Peasants in Power, Benedict J. Kerkvliet, The Huk Rebellion and Merilee S. Grindle, Bureaucrats, Politicians, and Peasants in Mexico. To appear in Agricultural History.

The Land Question and European Society, by Frank E. Huggett. London: Thames and Hudson, 1975. 179 pp. £ 3.50.

Peasant Farming in Muscovy, by R.E.F. Smith. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977. xii, 289 pp. No price indicated.

Peasants in Power. Alexander Stamboliski and the Bulgarian Agrarian National Union, 1899-1923, by John D. Bell. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977. xiv, 271 pp. No price indicated.

The Huk Rebellion. A Study of Peasant Revolt in the Philippines, by Benedict J. Kerkvliet. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977. xviii, 305 pp. No price indicated.

Bureaucrats, Politicians, and Peasants in Mexico. A Case Study in Public Policy, by Merilee S. Grindle. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977. xix, 220 pp. No price indicated.

Like the great wave pushed up by a passing freighter, the rise and fall of peasants has for centuries registered the advance of capitalism and of national states. Let us understand peasants in the narrow, Eric-Wolfian sense of the word: agricultural producers organized in households which control the land necessary to their survival, supply the bulk of their labor and commodity requirements from their own efforts, and yield a significant portion of their production to outsiders. The appearance of peasants, in that narrow sense, is a relatively rare historical phenomenon, a phenomenon closely linked to the growth of large markets and major concentrations of political power. India, China, Greece and Rome all created peasantries of one sort or another. But the most recent and most extensive wave of creation -- that of the last five centuries or so --

transmitted the impact of capitalism and of the national state.

In what sense did capitalism and statemaking create peasants? After all, we frequently think of them as the twin nemeses of the peasantry. Certainly small-scale subsistence farming long antedated national states and modern capitalism. Certainly small-scale subsistence farming eventually succumbed under their influence. Nevertheless, the peasant version of subsistence farming -- in which land-controlling households devote a portion of their production to the market -- expanded under the early phases of capitalism and statemaking, before declining under the later phases of the same processes. Capitalism reinforced private appropriation of the factors of production and gave priority in production decisions to the holders of capital. Thus capitalism challenged the collective use of the land, resisted the fragmentation of rights to the same land, labor or commodities, and worked against the autarky of the household or village. By the same tokens, capitalism provided farming households with the means and incentives to dispose of a portion of their products for cash outside the locality. These features of capitalism promoted the conversion of a large number of peasants into agricultural wage-workers, pushed another large portion of the peasantry out of agriculture toward manufacturing and services, and gave a relatively small number of peasants the opportunity to become prosperous cash-crop farmers.

In this regard, the state was a powerful complement. The pressure to pay taxes for the support of a national military and administrative apparatus translated almost inevitably into a pressure to market products; peasants needed cash to pay taxes. More directly, as Gabriel Ardant has emphasized, states developed an interest in the marketing of all the factors of production because a market in land, labor or commodities assigned a visible, regular and therefore easily taxable value to them. Likewise

a concern with having well-defined, responsible units from which to collect cash, labor and commodities led statemakers to reinforce the legal identities of households and villages. Despite many hesitations, under the influence of an exigent, indispensable bourgeoisie, states became guarantors of private property; in the short run, that guarantee increased the prominence of land-controlling households in agricultural production, even though in the long run it became the means by which bourgeois landowners squeezed out the small peasantry. Finally, the western states which grew up with capitalism generally promoted the marketing of agricultural products as a way of maintaining their armies, staffs and capital cities.

The peasantry of capitalism and statemaking differed from its counterparts under other systems in several important regards. Their village communities as such tended to have extensive obligations, privileges and corporate existence. Corporate kinship groups played a rather unimportant part in their lives. A small but significant flow of peasants fed the worlds of crafts and commerce. In absolute terms, the number of peasants grew for several centuries; both the natural increase of the peasantry and the conversion of other kinds of agriculturalists (for example, the slash-and-burn Tatar farmers R.E.F. Smith shows us coming under Russian control in sixteenth-century Kazan') into peasants contributed to the growth. That was true despite an important and accelerating counter-movement of peasants into the worlds of agricultural and industrial wage-labor. As a result, there were probably more peasants in the world -- in absolute terms and in the strict sense of the word "peasant" -- early in the twentieth century than there ever had been before. The absolute numerical decline in the world's peasantry most likely began no more than a few decades ago.

The momentous creation and elimination of peasants is one of the grand themes of agricultural history. In dealing with a particular seg-

ment of the agricultural history of the last few centuries, we can usually ask with profit what relationship existed between the particular rural experience in question and the great transformations of the peasant world. That is one of the few questions a hapless reviewer can reasonably ask of the five disparate books under discussion here.

Four of the books, it is true, include the word "peasant" in their titles, and the fifth avowedly concerns "the farmer, the peasant, and the agricultural worker." Despite the elasticity of words, however, it is a long stretch from sixteenth-century Muscovy to Mexico of the 1970s. To include Bulgaria of the early twentieth century and the Philippines of the period after World War II with Muscovy and Mexico, and then to bring in a general survey of the post-Medieval European experience, we need a rubbery container indeed. About the only sense in which all five books tell part of the same story is that all of them relate some aspects of the world's last great cycle of creation and destruction of peasants.

Frank Huggett's The Land Question and European Society is by far the broadest of the five. It is also the briefest, slickest and best-illustrated. In about 115 pages of text, 45 pages of pictures and 13 pages of notes and bibliography, Huggett attempts no less than a general history of European agrarian experience since the late Middle Ages. What is more, he seeks to sketch the differences among five large regions: the Northwest, the Center, the North, the South and the East. Small wonder that the basic arguments are sketchy and unconvincing. The wonder is that Huggett nevertheless manages to make the account interesting and informative.

The book's organizing themes run something like this: subsistence farming dominated European agriculture until quite recently. Peasants lacked the means, and landlords the incentives, to break out of a poor, inefficient and conflict-ridden system. The markets created by the eigh-

teenth-century growth of towns finally commanded changes in agricultural techniques and organization which broke up the old system; that transformation continued into the twentieth century. In the period since World War II, government intervention and the industrialization of farming have reversed an age-old relationship, making the countryside dependent on the town as never before. It takes some agility to fit the larger, commercial agricultural enterprises of early modern Europe (for example, the great estates of East Prussia and the Spanish woolgrowers of the Mesta) into such a scheme; Huggett bustles through the difficulty by stressing the inefficiency and exploitative character of those enterprises; he does not try to explain why the market conditions which made them possible did not also make a more productive small-scale peasant agriculture possible.

Huggett's argument leaves little place for some of the basic processes which affected the quality of rural life before the nineteenth century; the proletarianization of a substantial part of the agricultural population, the great rise of manufacturing in the countryside, and the ceaseless flow of migrants within, to and from rural areas. The analysis almost completely misses the pervasive, growing impact of national states as taxers, drafters and expropriators of rural resources, as promoters of marketing, as allies of capitalist landlords. It is not simply that Huggett's foreshortened survey omits important details and qualifications. In relying on a conventional before/after, subsistence/market, traditional/modern model of agrarian change, it falsifies the European experience.

Falsification is the last charge that could be laid against R.E.F. Smith's Peasant Farming in Muscovy. The analysis is so prudent, tentative and responsive to gaps and uncertainties in the evidence as almost to disappear into pure description. If Huggett's book puts us in a stream which flows so fast that it constantly threatens to carry us away, in Smith's we

find ourselves hiking a dry, rock-filled streambed, stumbling here and clambering there, attracted by the odd objects the stream has left behind, but wishing frequently that the water would return to refresh our feet. The texts are rare and difficult, and Smith sticks close to his texts. They lead him from the Mongol invasions to about the middle of the seventeenth century. The book begins with a discussion of the characteristic organization of the peasant production unit. Its emblems are the plough, the scythe and the axe: tillage, stock-feeding, hunting and gathering. Smith's discussion picks its way from texts to an extremely tentative localization of different implements and practices in time and space: is there any evidence for peasant use of the plough in the Novgorod territory at the middle of the fifteenth century? (Probably not: see p. 25.) How much did the peasants of Muscovy rely on the forest? (A lot: see pp. 47-49.) Given four hypothetical farms (all of 9-15 hectares, but having respectively two thirds, one third, one fifth and none of the holding in hayfields), what was likely to have been the net harvest of rye on each? (The equivalent in puds of a) 262-524 kilograms, b) 524-786 kilograms, c) 524-1048 kilograms, d) 786 kilograms: see p. 87.)

This last is about the highest level of speculation and generalization that Smith permits himself; it belongs to a "production and consumption model" presented "in order to try to see as clearly as possible what the basic unit of Russian peasant life was like as regards getting a livelihood and what the rough technical limits were within which it could operate" (p. 94).

Hesitant and apologetic whenever he reaches that degree of abstraction, Smith prefers the close, critical, philological examination of particular texts. Later in the book, nevertheless, he provides roughly parallel descriptions of three farming regions: Moscow uezd (as revealed by

various deeds, charters and registers), Toropets (from a sixteenth-century inquisition register) and Kazan' (from a survey of 1565-1568). No comparisons or generalizations emerge from the three descriptions; instead they give way abruptly to a brief discussion of peasant farming and the state. The book closes, almost as abruptly, with two unexpected -- and uncharacteristically undocumented -- conclusions of great importance: first, that so long as land was available on the eastern frontier, the peasant tenement and the peasant community were essentially self-sustaining, and provided little opportunity for outsiders (including the state) to exert control or extract a surplus; second, that it took the end of colonization, "the development of estates, a three-field organization and serfdom" to break up the self-sustaining system and open the way to economic growth based on agriculture (p. 240).

John D. Bell's Peasants in Power translates us to the southeastern edge of the Slavic world and into the twentieth century. At the start of Bell's chosen period of 1899-1923, Bulgaria was a small, poor country-in-the-making caught between the declining Ottoman Empire and the still-mighty force of Austria-Hungary. This region of peasant smallholders not only produced a vigorous peasant party, the Bulgarian Agrarian National Union, but actually brought the party leader to the premiership for nearly four years, only to see him murdered and the party shattered in the military coup of June 1923. In the meantime, the agrarians had installed programs of land distribution to the landless and of compulsory labor service, in addition to attempting educational and administrative reforms.

The most important leader of this extraordinary peasant movement was Alexander Stamboliski, a journalist-teacher of peasant stock, and the principal subject of Bell's attention. Roughly half the book deals with the experiences of Bulgaria, of BANU and of Stamboliski from the late nine-

teenth century into World War I. The second half of the book takes us from Bulgaria's military disintegration of 1918, through the near-coup which brought together rebellious troops and Agrarian leaders in September 1918, past the elections of August 1919 which made BANU the leading political party, into Stamboliski's formation of a coalition government in October 1919, across the period of political maneuvering, international diplomacy and domestic reform, up to the right-wing coup (inspired particularly by Stamboliski's hostility to a Macedonian guerrilla movement much favored by Bulgarian nationalists) which ended that rare experiment in agrarian leadership.

Bell avoids all the embellishments with which biographies so often arrive these days: no deep readings of texts, no psychiatric explanations, no attempt to inflate Stamboliski's experience into a Type or a Universal. He makes no particular effort to portray Stamboliski or his interlocutors as flesh-and-blood characters. (The only notable exception is Bell's speculation that Stamboliski's experience as a womanizer may have "helped him to establish rapport with Lloyd-George" during Stamboliski's 1920 tour of European capitals in search of a better peace settlement for Bulgaria.) Bell delivers unadorned political biography: the central character consists primarily of a set of doctrines, a set of programs and a set of actions; the biographer's job is to narrate and reconcile doctrine, program and action. The reader who is concerned with those matters -- and who already knows enough about the Balkan context to avoid tripping in the dense underbrush of names, places and events -- will learn plenty from Peasants in Power. Those who seek generalizations about peasant politics or about the Balkans will, however, have to generalize for themselves.

In that regard, Benedict Kerkvliet's The Huk Rebellion tries much harder. Kerkvliet is self-consciously concerned to explain a major rural

rebellion, to do so from the perspective of the participants, and in so doing to gauge the adequacy of standard explanations of agrarian revolt. An introductory chapter sketches the historical background, structure and personnel of the rebellion in a single barrio of central Luzon. From that point on, the order is essentially chronological: the agrarian and political histories of central Luzon before World War II, the resistance to the Japanese occupation during the war, the American turning against the reputedly leftist Hukbalahap guerrillas at the end of the war, the formation of a peasant military force and its movement toward open rebellion from 1946 to 1948, the struggles within and around the rebel movement during its growth from 1948 to 1951. Throughout the narrative and analysis, the experience of the barrio San Ricardo intervenes with the experience of central Luzon. Kerkvliet's interviews in San Ricardo and elsewhere (which included a dozen prison meetings with still-jailed Huk rebels) gave him the means of building personal histories and recollections into the narrative. Almost all the chapters, in fact, begin with effective personal vignettes before proceeding to the general analysis. In addition to the interviews, Kerkvliet drew on some 1,200 captured Huk documents and a wide survey of the Philippine press of the time. The resulting account moves easily among narrative, quotation of texts and testimonies, personal anecdote and shrewd analysis. It remains concrete, with a minimum of conceptual apparatus. Throughout the account Kerkvliet calmly communicates his sympathy with his subject, without becoming vague, sentimental or sloganeering.

Fortunately for the reader who has become lost in the Philippine hinterland, Kerkvliet closes his book with a clear, careful statement of his principal conclusions. In their general form, they run: 1. A combination of declining economic position of the peasantry and, especially, deteriorating ties between peasants and landlords, produced the fundamental

grievances of the rebels. 2. The ". . . protesting and rebellious villagers believed their actions were justified" (p. 252). 3. "Peasant demands were moderate, not radical" (p. 254). 4. The rebellion was a last resort after many other attempts to cope and to demand reform had failed. 5. Repression by the government and by agrarian elites pushed the peasant movement from protest to open rebellion. 6. Leaders helped shape the rebellion, but they were far from creating or inciting it. 7. Colonial regimes (read: the U.S.A.) and local elites worked "hand-in-hand against the peasants' protests and rebellion" and thereby contributed to agrarian unrest (p. 266). 8. Ultimately, the movement's "efforts to restore a fading traditional agrarian society brought some limited reprieves, while at the same time increasing the social distance between peasants and their former patrons" (p. 267). The conclusions are very much in the spirit of Eric Wolf's analysis of twentieth-century peasant wars, as well as James Scott's discussions of the peasant "moral economy." They differ rather more from Jeffery Paige's correlation of the specific forms of conflict with the organizational structure of agriculture, and most emphatically from the sort of strategic analysis of rural rebellion which grew up with the "counter-insurgency" studies of the 1960s. Kerkvliet's effort to reconstruct what the rebels were about from their own perspective works out rather well, and invites generalization.

Bureaucrats, Politicians, and Peasants in Mexico, by Merilee Grindle, contrasts sharply with Kerkvliet's treatment of the Huks. The subject is the implementation of contemporary rural-development policy, the object of study a set of interlocking organizations, the perspective from the top down, the argument heavy with concepts, models, formal comparisons and statistical tables. In short, it smacks of contemporary American political science.

As Grindle lays out her topic, it has four general components: how the policy process works in the Mexico of the 1970s, the character of bureaucracy in a Third World country, the context in which administrative elites make their decisions, and the peculiarities of the Mexican political system. To get at these large problems, she follows a single important agency, the *Compañía Nacional de Subsistencias Populares* (CONASUPO) as it engaged in the formulation and application of rural development policy from the arrival of a new national administration in 1970 up to the middle of 1975. Her chief source of evidence is a set of open-ended interviews with 78 CONASUPO officials and 19 "members of the Mexican academic community and administrators in other government agencies who had frequent contact with CONASUPO" (p. 185). She quotes extensively from the interviews to illustrate major points in the argument, but does not attempt a formal analysis of their content. The statistical tables are likewise illustrative: they deal mainly with Mexican economic activity, and secondarily with the organization and performance of CONASUPO.

The political science background of the study shows up in several other ways. There is the literature cited, which deals with patronage, politics and public administration in India, China, Italy, the Philippines and every other part of the world. There is the painstaking diagrammatic presentation of alternative recruitment patterns into the bureaucracy. There are the observations on the constraining effect of the six-year presidential term, at the end of which most incumbent administrators lose their jobs, new people take office, and a new set of programs comes into being. There is, most of all, the repeated emphasis on informal exchange networks among organizations as the mechanisms by which bureaucrats get their work done: "The officials in CONASUPO who sought to formulate and operationalize the rural development policy freely embraced such mechanisms as kinship re-

relationships, political influence, personal loyalty, and career dependence to achieve their goals. In the Mexican system, these instruments are recognized as highly efficacious and legitimate means to obtain program and policy results . . . " (p. 176). As Grindle says, the efficacy of these means and the corporate, authoritarian character of the regime as a whole give us little reason to expect either a formal rationalization of the government or an extension of effective popular participation in Mexico. Indeed, the one rural-development effort studied by Grindle which did involve a serious attempt to encourage grass-roots participation -- the Field Coordination program, calling for local peasant committees to help define the local development path -- died helpless in its cradle, starved by the political system and then strangled by the regional power brokers whose prerogatives it threatened.

These particular cases and her general analysis leave Grindle with no confidence that "modernization" will automatically rectify Mexican injustices, and no more than wan hopes that some unnamed change will promote democracy: "That it is an authoritarian and ultimately exploitative system does not seem to make it incompatible with the requirements of economic development, industrialization, or modern mass society. Perhaps the most that can be hoped is that pressures from within the regime will continue to encourage greater economic and social equity, if not increased political equality" (p. 183). Once again it appears that capitalism and the state do not love peasants. Once again we learn that it matters little to others whether or not the peasants love capitalism or the state.

The reader who comes from recent work in European social history to the sections on peasant life in all these books has the feeling of having done Rip Van Winkle in reverse: his snooze has erased decades of scholarship. It is disconcerting to find no serious attention to fertility, mortality,

migration and household composition; odd to encounter no analyses of the interplay of kinship, inheritance, property-holding and production; curious not to be bludgeoned with price series, estimates of caloric intake and observations of climatic fluctuations; puzzling to find so little of that sort of analysis of the household economy identified with the name of Chayanov; preposterous to find Smith declaring:

It may be objected that there is no reason for the historian to concern himself with the dimension of peasant everyday life on which this work has focussed. After all, it may be alleged, it makes little impact on the historical record; it is social anthropology or ethnography rather than history. In terms of these objections in a sense there can be no peasant history, and perhaps this book should not have been attempted as history. On the other hand, Russian history in the period dealt with here would be so distorted were its peasant dimension unrepresented that it would be nonsense. To restrict peasant appearances on the historical scene to those significant but exceptional occasions when mass disturbances erupt on the political stage is to compound the distortion of the documents. It is at least as historically important to depict the usual life of the mass of society as to focus on such cataclysmic events as the nominally peasant risings (pp. 238-239).

Agreed, yet it is amazing to find that an historian feels such a declaration is necessary thirty years after the appearance of Braudel's Mediterranean.

Nor is any of our five studies directly oriented to the issues with which we began: the advance of capitalism and of national states.



"Capitalism" and "state" are missing from Huggett's index. Impersonal "markets" provide his closest brush with capitalism. Before the twentieth century state-makers hardly figure in his analyses, except as occasional promoters of particular agricultural practices. Smith does break away from his texts at the end to speculate about the changing conditions which made the Russian peasant community more vulnerable to state control as the seventeenth century moved on; in reflecting on the seventeenth-century Time of Troubles in Moscow uezd he likewise mentions the likely importance of the great urban market and shows us the impact of increasing taxation; otherwise he offers us no sustained reflection on statemaking and the emergence of the capitalist world-economy. Politics and the state are naturally omnipresent in Bell's treatment of Bulgaria, but not in such a way as to lend much insight into the relations among capitalism, statemaking and the changing fate of the peasantry. Kerkvliet's otherwise admirable analysis is disappointing in this regard; after enumerating the sources of the declining position of Central Luzon's peasantry as "rapid population growth, capitalism, and the expansion of the central government" (p. 17), Kerkvliet settles for summing up the central political problem as the decay of traditional patterns of local patronage (see, e.g., p. 25). Grindle, finally, undertakes so deliberately to look in other directions that her reader rapidly abandons any hope of learning from her about the lives of Mexican peasants.

If competent authors choose other subjects than those which interest me, do I have any right to complain? I think I do. For if these five studies are any sign, an important part of contemporary work on the peasant experience is ignoring the rich returns of recent European historiography. More important, it is failing to advance our understanding of that momentous process over the last half-millennium which produced first a great expansion and then a brutal contraction of the peasant way of life.