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E. J. Hobsbawm^a

^a Professor of Economic and Social History,
Birkbeck College, University of London,
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Peasants and Politics

by

E. J. Hobsbawm*

This paper discusses the political relations of 'traditional' peasants to groups and institutions outside their local community, with special reference to situations in which they encounter the political movements and problems of the twentieth century. It stresses the separation of peasants from non-peasants, the general subalternity of the peasant world, but also the explicit confrontation of power which is the framework of their politics. The relative isolation of local communities, and their consequent ignorance, does not confine peasant politics only to parish pump or undefined millennial universality. However, it makes certain forms of nation-wide peasant action without outside leadership and organisation difficult and some, like a general 'peasant revolution', probably impossible. The political problems of a 'modern' peasantry are briefly touched upon in conclusion.

The subject of this paper is vast, and moreover implies some definition both of peasants and politics. A good deal of the effort of definition is, of course, significant for theoretical rather than practical purposes. It may well be a very complex matter for a zoologist to define a horse, but this does not normally mean that there is any real difficulty about recognizing one. I shall therefore assume that most of us most of the time know what the words 'peasants' and 'politics' refer to.

Nevertheless, a few initial clarifications are useful. The *politics* with which we are concerned in this paper are those in which peasants are involved with the larger societies of which they form part. That is to say the relations of peasants with other social *groups*, both those which are their economic, social and political 'superiors' or exploiters and those which are not, workers, for instance, or for that matter other sections of the peasantry, and with more comprehensive institutions or social units—the government, the national state. I shall not be concerned with the kind of micro-politics which fill so much of the horizon of villagers, as they do of students, professors and other inhabitants of closed or partly closed little worlds. The distinction between micro-politics and macro-politics in peasant communities is not easy to draw in practice, for the two overlap very considerably, but may nevertheless be properly made.

As for *peasants*, I merely wish to suggest—or rather to recall—two points: *first*, that there are profound differences between various forms of family-based agrarian production which any generalisation risks underestimating—for example between pastoral and tillage economies—and *second*, that beyond a certain point in the socio-economic differentiation of the agrarian population the

* Professor of Economic and Social History, Birkbeck College, University of London.

term 'peasantry' is no longer applicable. That point itself is often difficult to establish, but it is evident that, for instance, neither the commercial farmers of 19th century England nor the rural proletarians of some large-scale plantation economies in the tropics belong to the 'peasant' problem, though they do constitute part of the 'agrarian problem'.

I would, however, like to insist on one distinction which applies in different ways both to peasants and to politics and which divides life before and after the 'Great Transformation' which, in Europe, occurs with the triumph of bourgeois society and industrial capitalism. I wish to make it clear that this does not imply accepting the crude and non-historical dichotomy between 'traditional' and 'modern' society. History does not consist of a single step. 'Traditional' societies are not static and unchanging, exempt from historic change and evolution, nor is there a single model of 'modernisation' which determines their transformation. But to reject the crudities of some social sciences should not lead us to underestimate the profundity, and the qualitative difference from earlier developments, of the transformation which, for most countries, resulted from the triumph of industrial capitalism. The mere fact that the peasantry has ceased to constitute the actual majority of the population in many parts of the world, that it has for practical purposes disappeared in some, starting with capitalist England, and that its disappearance as a class is today quite conceivable in many developed countries, separates the period since the 18th century from all previous history since the development of agriculture.

We may place peasants somewhere on a continuum between two extreme ideal types, the first represented by something like the mid-19th century communal peasantry of Central Russia, leading the sort of life well described by Dobrowolski for Poland [*Dobrowolski, 1958*], the second represented by something like the mid-19th century model of the French peasantry of Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire* [*Marx, 1852*], who operate in a framework of bourgeois institutions and law, especially property law, most likely as individual commodity producers, possibly shading over into commercial farmers, thus forming an aggregate of small individual enterprises without any strong interrelationships—Marx's 'sack of potatoes'. By and large the characteristic of traditional peasants is a much higher degree of formal or informal (mostly localised) collectivity, which both tends to inhibit permanent social differentiation within the peasantry and to facilitate, or even impose, communal action.¹ We need not here consider whether this collectivity is due to economic factors—perhaps the need for cooperation in the process of labour or the management of resources for common use—or to other factors. It does not imply egalitarianism, though probably (perhaps in conjunction with such institutions as those of feudal lordship) it implies some mechanism inhibiting

the unrestricted accumulation of resources by individual peasant families. The strength of the 'community' may vary enormously. Nevertheless it is difficult to conceive of a 'traditional' peasantry, outside certain very special situations, without this collective element. Insofar as there may be regions where it is absent, the following discussion evidently does not apply to them. It will deal primarily with 'traditional' peasants or those in the process of transformation, i.e. of social and economic class differentiation.

Broadly speaking the 'Great Transformation' also transforms politics, including the politics of the popular masses, inasmuch as the sovereign territorial 'national-state', with specific institutions including, with growing frequency, nation-wide elections, becomes the standard framework for political action, insofar as new forms of political organization and movement with specific, and increasingly secular, ideologies develop, etc. It should be stressed that the difference is not one between 'traditional' societies 'without politics' and 'modern' ones with politics. There is politics in both. Nor is it a difference between an era when politics is the preserve of the superior classes and one in which the common people, including the peasantry, become permanently active factors in politics. Nevertheless in Europe the politics of the period before and after the French Revolution are distinct in their procedures and their setting. Most of history is that of traditional peasants in traditional politics, but what this paper is chiefly concerned with is what happens when traditional peasants get involved in modern politics: a transitional situation, but one which for many parts of the world is of practical and not merely of historical interest.

Let us next turn to the question which is basic to the problem of peasants in politics: how far can we speak of the peasantry as a class? Of course objectively it can be defined as a class 'in itself' in the classical sense, namely a body of people who have the same kind of relation to the means of production as well as other common economic and social characteristics. But as Shanin has rightly observed, among such classes the peasantry is 'a class of low classness' [*Shanin, 1966*] compared, say, to the industrial working class, a class of very high 'classness', in the sense that a great deal of its politics can be directly derived from its specific relations to the means of production.

But how far is it a 'class for itself'—a class conscious of itself as such? In traditional societies, hence for the greater part of history, peasants regarded themselves, and indeed were, the basic type of humanity; being of course the great majority of all the people living in the world they knew, or for that matter anywhere in the world. In a sense people or human beings were then typically peasants, the rest being untypical minorities. Secondly, peasants were enormously aware of their distinction from, and almost always their subalternity to, their oppression by, the minorities of non-peasants, whom they did not like or trust. This applies not only

to the gentry or lords (where there is lordship), but to traders and townsmen, except perhaps to the peasants' kinsmen who briefly visit towns without actually becoming townsmen themselves. Of course in the twentieth century this situation has changed, and the sharp distinction between town and country can no longer be maintained, given the mass 'Landflucht' of the peasantry. Still, traditionally peasants tended to distrust and dislike all who were not peasants, because most other people appeared to belong to a conspiracy to rob and oppress them, and stood above them in whatever social hierarchy was established.

Leonardo Sciascia, the Sicilian writer, recently published a harvest song discovered in some obscure local journal of 1876, in which the peasants, while harvesting, go through a litany of hate against anyone who is not a peasant holding a sickle, a song of hate — but also of self-hate and hopelessness, because the peasant is chained to the social order of which his exploiters are part [*Sciascia*, 1970: 80-83]². It is the voice of those of whom La Bruyère wrote in the France of Louis XIV:

Scattered across the countryside one may observe certain wild animals, male and female, dark, livid and burnt by the sun, attached to the earth which they dig and turn over with invincible stubbornness. However, they have something like an articulated voice and when they stand up they reveal a human face. Indeed, they are human beings. . . . Thanks to them the other human beings need not sow, labour and harvest in order to live. That is why they ought not to lack the bread which they have sown [*La Bruyère*, 1688: 292-3].

Such explosions of hatred may be rare—though they are not surprising in 19th-century Sicily—but the underlying sense of separation and rancour of those who feed the others but are regarded by them as sub-human, is not unique. Countrymen, indeed, are often physically different from townsmen, even when there is no difference of race, colour, language or religion. Their behaviour, their costume are different. In Sicily the 'caps' (the wearers of the old stocking cap or Phrygian bonnet of the French Revolution) are the class enemies of the 'hats'. In Bolivia, on the rare occasions when the peasants asserted themselves collectively against the townsmen, as in the rising of 1899 [*Condarco Morales*, 1965: 290], they attacked all those 'wearing trousers' and imposed the costume of the peasants (i.e. Indian dress) on the townsmen.

The sense of a common separation from non-peasants may have produced a vague 'peasant consciousness' enabling even peasants from different regions, with different dialects, costumes and customs, to recognize each other as 'peasants' at least in personal relations. Just as among the 'labouring poor' in general, a sense of 'they are poor bastards like us', or 'it's the poor who help the poor' is found, so among traditional peasants. The Communist Party guerrillas of Marquetalia (Colombia), a pure peasant move-

ment, roving after their expulsion from their bases in 1964-5, enjoyed this sort of spontaneous recognition and support among other countrymen in a way in which student guerrilleros would not automatically do. 'Their leaders had great prestige among the peasants, even in Conservative areas. . . . The peasants believed that they had magic powers which made them invulnerable, but in no case did they seem to see them as a means of taking power, not even to occupy the land. They appeared rather as other poor peasants, persecuted unjustly by the powerful, by the urban interests, and to whom it was necessary to give the solidarity of the helpless' [*Gilhodès, 1970: 445*].

This vague consciousness of 'peasantness' as a special sub-variety of subalternity, poverty, exploitation and oppression, has no specific geographical limits, since it rests on the mutual recognition by peasants of the similarity of their relation to nature, to production, and to non-peasants. Ideally humanity is the limit of this consciousness, and the political action which corresponds to it is the brief but vast millennial sweep or surge which, in theory at least, embraces the whole world. But such sweeps are necessarily as brief as they are ecumenical in scope, precisely because they are based on a recognition of similarity or identity, rather than on the firmer base of a concrete system of economic or social interrelations. The unit of such interrelations among traditional peasants is much smaller and more restricted—the 'community' or more generally the 'little world' within which transactions between people are systematic. Where millennial surges are genuinely spontaneous, they therefore spread characteristically by 'contagion' from one community to the next, and the curve of their spread is similar to that of epidemics.

The 'little world' may indeed vary considerably in size, population and complexity. The basic unit of traditional peasant life, the community, forms only one part of it. Within this area—large or small, more or less complex—people know of one another and the social division of labour, the system of exploitation and stratification are visible. A full peasant 'class consciousness' is conceivable here, insofar as differentiation within the peasantry is secondary to the common characteristics of all peasants, and their common interests against other groups, and insofar as the distinction between them and other groups is sufficiently clear. And this may indeed happen: the solidarity of all peasants against third parties may outweigh the internal conflicts among them [*Shanin, 1972: 161*]. In the valleys of La Convención and Lares (Peru) during the early 1960s a unified peasant movement against the neo-feudal lords developed, though its participants included peasant groups which exploited one another [*Craig, 1969; Hobsbawm, 1965, 1970*]. On the other hand both the lateral divisions within such an area—e.g. between peasant communities—and the personalisation of social relations — e.g. through clientelism and artificial

kinship (*compadrazgo*)—inhibit a permanent class consciousness. The trader or labour recruiter is not merely a type but a person, kin or *compadre* of those with whom he deals, and whom he exploits. The community may be in dispute not only with the estate which has taken its common land, but with other communities over its boundaries, and it may at times be politically expedient to ally with the estate against its neighbours.

Nevertheless, whatever the size and complexity of the 'little world' it is always known not only to abut on or overlap with other analogous 'little worlds', but to form part of a much wider world. A crucial problem for the politics of traditional peasants is the relation between the microcosm and the macrocosm. By themselves they cannot solve this problem, since their unit of political action is either (in practice) the region or (conceptually) the human race: the parish pump or the universe. But in fact the area of major developments and decisions lies somewhere inbetween, and neither its boundaries nor its structures are determined by the economy or society of the peasant microcosm.

Nor, indeed, are they actually known except, as it were, by hearsay. This is obvious for the ecumene. Journalists who asked Peruvian peasants organised under Castroite slogans where Cuba was, were told 'in another department of Peru'. A peasant recently arrived in Cuautla (Mexico) from a village in his native Oaxaca, who interrogated me about my country, found it impossible to situate 'Britain' in any geographical sense. It was in Europe—but what and where was Europe? It was across the ocean. But what was the ocean and what did the distance mean? He could only conceive of it as being 'near Russia'—a country of which he *had* heard. It is less evident, but equally true, that the peasant's knowledge of the nation or state under which he lives is likely to be almost equally uncertain and patchy: a matter of personal enquiries and acquaintances.

Knowledge of the country itself:

Here on this course I've learned to talk to the fellows from the coast and those from the hills. Well, up to now those from the coast haven't told me anything. On the other hand those from Cañar have talked to me and told me what their problems are, and that's a comradely thing to do, and those from Chimborazo, they've also talked. But the fellows from the coast, they've told me nothing about their country. . . . You come out of the church in Quito, and those from the coast stick with each other, and so do those from Cañar with others from Cañar . . . none of them said to me 'let's go somewhere together'. So I had to ask them to explain things to me. I asked a fellow from Cañar to tell me what was going on in their country, and he did. But now the technicians have explained things, and I'm content, because that way I can follow what this course is about better [*Hammock and Ashe, 1970: 19-20*].

Knowledge of the country institutions:

Me and another comrade, we decided to find out and went to the provice of Chimborazo to ask the communities belonging to the Parish

of San Juan, El Guabo and Chogol, because I believe they have problems also. . . . So then we went to Riobamba to the CEDOC and we told them what the people had told us in Guabo, and asked them whether they could deal with our problem. They said, well, they were also talking to Senator Chamara. They called him by telephone and the young lady secretary answered and said he wasn't there, he'd gone to Guayaquil. He'd be back very late tomorrow, maybe tomorrow he'd answer. So I stayed there in Riobamba in an inn. . . . [*ibid*: 13].

The above quotations come from a smallish country of perhaps 5 million inhabitants and from the present (1969). *A fortiori*, the element of sheer ignorance and helplessness of peasants outside the confines of their region is even more important to an understanding of their politics in earlier periods of history and larger states.

II

Bearing this in mind, let us consider whether there can be such a thing as a national peasant movement or a national peasant revolt or uprising. I very much doubt it. Local and regional action, which is the norm, turns into wider action only by external force—natural, economic, political or ideological — and only when a very large number of communities or villages are simultaneously moved in much the same direction. But even when such widespread general action occurs, it rarely coincides with the area of the state (as seen from above), even in quite small states, and it will be less a single general movement than a conglomerate of local and regional movements whose unity is momentary and fragile. The men from the coast and the men from the mountain may be too different from each other to meet more than briefly on the same ground.

The greatest peasant movements all appear to be regional, or coalitions of regional movements. Alternatively, if peasant movements develop all over a state's territory, unless sponsored or organized by the state authorities, they are unlikely to be simultaneous or to have the same political characteristics or demands. In the worst case this composition of large peasant movements from a mosaic of small ones may create merely a series of scattered enclaves which do not affect the rest of the country. Thus in Colombia quite powerful agrarian movements, mostly organised by the Communist Party, developed in the 1920s and 1930s in certain types of zones—in the coffee-growing tracts, in Indian areas, which had their specific problems, in frontier or new settlement areas among squatters and colonists, and so on. Even the national coordination of the Communist Party produced not a single peasant movement, but a scattering of 'red' peasant areas often far distant from each other; nor has a nation-wide movement developed from these scattered areas, though some have proved capable of spreading their influence regionally. Of course national political or guerrilla cadres may emerge from these isolated and

often enduring little nuclei, but that is another matter.

In the best case, such peasant movements may occur in one or two strategically placed regions where their effect on national politics is crucial, or in areas capable of producing powerful mobile military forces. This was very much the case in the Mexican revolution. The bulk of the peasantry in that country was not much involved in the revolution of 1910-20, though as a result of the revolution's victory several areas became organized. Still, the largest mobilisation of the Mexican peasantry connected with the revolution was almost certainly, as it were, the wrong way round—the movement of the 'Cristeros' in the 1920s which rose for Christ the King *against* the secular *Agraristas*. Subjectively, theirs was undoubtedly a peasant revolution, though both its timing and its ideology made it objectively counter-revolutionary [Meyer]. Nevertheless between 1910 and 1920 two regions happened to exercise enormous political effect. One was the frontier region of the North, with its footloose armed men—cowboys, prospectors, bandits, etc.—which produced Pancho Villa's army with its mobility and capacity to range widely — a Mexican equivalent to the Cossacks. The other was the much more solidly based communal revolution of Emiliano Zapata in Morelos, which had purely local horizons but the enormous advantage of being situated next door to the capital city of Mexico. The political influence of Zapata's agrarian programme derives from the fact that his peasant levies were close enough to occupy the capital. Governments in large and loosely-administered states such as early 20th-century Latin American republics are resigned to losing control of outlying provinces from time to time to local dissidents or insurrectionaries. What really worries them is insurrection in or in the backyard of the capital.

Where peasant revolutions do not have this advantage, their limitations are much more obvious. The great peasant movement in Peru in the early 1960s is a good example, being probably the biggest spontaneous mobilisation of this kind in Latin America during that decade. There was at this period nation-wide unrest, including unrest among the workers and the students. The agrarian movement was active both in the coastal plantations — which cannot be classified as belonging to the peasant economy but are better called by the local name of 'agro-industrial complexes'—and in the peasant highlands. Within the highlands, again, there were very extensive movements both in the Southern and the Central highlands and patchier outbreaks of land occupation, strikes, the organisation of peasant unions and so on elsewhere. No adequate account of this movement has yet been written. However, two characteristics may be noted. First, though more or less simultaneous—the movement was at its height in 1962-4 and reached its peak in late 1963 in the centre and a little later in the south—the regional movements were not really linked with each other,

or effectively with the non-peasant movements. Second, there were curious gaps. Thus the traditional area of 'native risings' in the South, the Department of Puno, was notably inactive. The traditional type of movement was no longer central or relevant, though as recently as 1910-21 it had been very active indeed. In Puno the peasant movement took the form of the establishment of a political machine by local kulaks and traders, which soon after showed remarkable political strength [Dew, 1969]. Meanwhile, immediately to the north, in the Department of Cuzco the direct action of peasants organising unions and occupying the land, inspired by the success of the frontier peasantry in La Convención, was proceeding on a massive scale, though the men of La Convención themselves, having already achieved their main objectives, were militant chiefly in defence of their conquests. The widespread Peruvian peasant movement in 1962-4 produced unrest rather than revolution.

I am therefore inclined to think that the idea of a *general* peasant movement, unless inspired from outside or even better, from above, is quite unrealistic [Alavi, 1965; Wolf, 1971]. It is a myth, both revolutionary and counter-revolutionary. For conservatives also have this myth, as witness the fear of a new 'Pugachevshchina'—a general peasant insurrection on the model of the Pugachev rising of the 1770s—which played so large a part in the thinking of governments and reactionaries in Russia before the emancipation of the serfs. Perhaps there was more basis for such fears in Russia, for certainly in 1905-7 the Russian peasant movement was extremely widespread, affecting between 80 and 100% of all districts in six Russian regions. Even so the inter-regional variations were substantial in the remaining six regions (omitting the Baltic provinces and Transcaucasia); disturbances ranged between 38% (Urals) and 74% (Lithuania) [Perrie, 1972]. Incidentally, the original Pugachev movement itself was regionally based rather than national, its power consisting more in the potential threat to Moscow than in its geographical extent.

This is not to underestimate the force of such conglomerate movements. If unified by some outside force—a national crisis and breakdown, a sympathetic reformist or revolutionary government, or a single nationally organised and effective party or organisation, they may make the difference between success and failure for major revolutions. Even by themselves they may make an agrarian system or the structure of rule in the countryside unviable, as the 'Great Fear' of 1789 did in France [Lefebvre, 1973] and the Peruvian wave of land-occupations did in 1962-4. There is good evidence that sometime between June 1963 and February or March 1964 the bulk of the estate owners and lords in the central and southern highlands decided to cut their losses, faced with a general peasant mobilisation, and began to liquidate their assets and think in terms of compensation for expropriation under some sort of

agrarian reform. This did not make agrarian reform automatic. It took another five years and a military coup to impose it; but it merely buried the corpse of a highland landlord economy which had already been effectively killed by the peasant movement.

III

The potential power of a traditional peasantry is enormous, but its actual power and influence are much more limited. The first major reason for this is its constant, and in general quite realistic, sense of its weakness and inferiority. The inferiority is social and cultural, for instance as illiterates against the 'educated': hence the importance to peasant movements of locally resident and friendly intellectuals, especially the most formidable of village intellectuals, the primary schoolteacher. Their weakness is based not only on social inferiority, on the lack of effective armed force, but on the nature of the peasant economy. For instance, peasant agitations must stop for the harvest. However militant peasants are, the cycle of their labours shackles them to their fate. It is worth speculating about the role of the potato-economy of Ireland—a crop which requires little regular labour—in making possible the notorious frequency of 'agrarian outrage' in that country of the 19th century. But at bottom, peasants are and feel themselves to be subaltern. With rare exceptions they envisage an adjustment in the social pyramid and not its destruction, though its destruction is easy to conceive. Anarchism, that is, the dismantling of the superstructure of rule and exploitation, leaves the traditional village as a viable economy and society. But the times when this utopia can be conceived, let alone realised, are few.

In practice, of course, it may not make a great deal of difference whether the peasants are fighting for an entirely different and new society or for adjustment of the old, which normally means either the defence of the traditional society against some threat or the restoration of the old ways which, if sufficiently far in the past, may merely amount to a traditionalist formulation of revolutionary aspirations. Revolutions may be made *de facto* by peasants who do not deny the legitimacy of the existing power structure, law, the state and even the landlords. We have examples of peasantries which appear to deny totally the legitimacy of landlord property, in Tsarist Russia for example, though hardly ever the legitimacy of the supreme ruler's rights over all property. We do not, of course, know what precisely this denial implies in theory or meant in practice. What difference is there between the Russian serfs who held that they belonged to the lords but the land was theirs and not the gentry's, and the Andean Indians who believed labour service to Inca rulers and Spaniards to be legitimate but resented payment of rent in money or kind [*Wachtel, 1971: 159*] and whose descendants appear not to have challenged the existence of large landed estates as such? We can only speculate. A movement which

only claims to 'recuperate' communal lands illegally alienated may be as revolutionary in practice as it may be legalist in theory. Nor is the line between legalist and revolutionary an easy one to draw. The Zapatista movement in Morelos began by opposing not *all* haciendas, but merely the new ones which had been introduced in Porfirio Díaz' time, since the bench-mark years used to define the good and legitimate old days, which included the fact that gentry were superior to peasants. It did not remain within these limits.

The major difference lies not in the theoretical aspirations of the peasantry, but in the practical political conjuncture in which they operate. It is the difference between suspicion and hope. For the normal strategy of the traditional peasantry is passivity. It is not an ineffective strategy, for it exploits the major assets of the peasantry, its numbers and the impossibility of making it do some things by force for any length of time, and it also utilises a favourable tactical situation, which rests on the fact that no change is what suits a traditional peasantry best. A communally organised traditional peasantry, reinforced by a functionally useful slowness, imperviousness and stupidity—apparent or real—is a formidable force. The refusal to understand is a form of class struggle, and both 19th-century Russian and 20th-century Peruvian observers have described it in similar ways [*Field, 1967; Martinez Alier, 1974*]. To be subaltern is not to be powerless. The most submissive peasantry is not only capable of 'working the system' to its advantage—or rather to its minimum disadvantage—but also of resisting and where appropriate, of counterattack. The stereotype of the Russian *mujik* in the minds of educated Russians, which is very similar to the stereotype of 'the Indian' in the minds of Andean whites, is largely a reformulation of something which the upper classes cannot understand because they cannot control it: 'credulous, devoted to the tsar and prone (though naturally submissive) to unreasoning violence' [*Field, 1967: 49*]³. In fact there is a system in such behaviour.

Passivity is not, of course, universal. In areas where there are no lords or laws, or in frontier zones where all men go armed, the attitude of the peasantry may well be very different. So indeed it may be on the fringe of the unsubmissive. However, for most of the soil-bound peasants the problem is not whether to be normally passive or active, but when to pass from one state to the other. This depends on an assessment of the political situation. Broadly speaking, passivity is advisable when the structure of power—local or national—is firm, stable and 'closed', activity when it appears to be in some sense changing, shifting or 'open'.

Peasants are perfectly well able to judge the local political situation, but their real difficulty lies in discerning the wider movements of politics which may determine it. What do they know of these? They are normally aware of belonging to some wider

polity — a kingdom, an empire, a republic. Indeed the familiar peasant myth of the remote king or emperor who, if only he knew, would put matters right and establish or re-establish justice both reflects and to some extent creates a wider framework of political action. At the same time it reflects the normal remoteness of the national government from the local political structure which, whatever it may be in theory, in practice consists of state power and law exercised by and identified with the local men of power, their kin, clients or those whom they can bribe and overawe. What else they may know varies widely with the actual political system. Thus if national courts exist, which is by no means always the case, litigation may well bring even remote communities into some relation to the national centre, doubtless via a chain of intermediary urban lawyers. The Peruvian community of Huasicancha, some 4000 metres up in the mountains, could hardly be physically more remote—but since it obtained its first judgment in the viceregal court at Lima against a usurping Spaniard in 1607, it has never ceased to be aware of at least some dimensions of the wider polity of which it is a distant part.

As we approach the present, the details of national politics become increasingly important and known — for instance when elections and parties enter the scene, or when the direct intervention of the state in the affairs of localities and individuals requires some knowledge of its institutions and their operation. Moreover, with mass emigration the village is likely to possess direct links with the centre in the form of colonies of its own people settled in the capital or elsewhere, who know city ways. But long before this happens peasants are aware of changes within the system, even if unable to describe or understand them precisely. War, civil war, defeat and conquest may involve the peasants directly and open new possibilities when they put the the national rulers at risk and change the local ones. Even lesser events in the politics of the ruling class such as elections and *coups d'état*, which hardly affect them directly, may be rightly read as encouraging or discouraging. They may not know exactly what is happening in the capital, but if family A ceases to provide the local senator while its rival family B appears to be riding high, there will be considerable local reappraisals, doubtless first among the townsmen, but also eventually in the villages. The Mexican revolution—even in Zapata's Morelos—did not begin so much as a revolution but as a breakdown of the long-established local political balance which in turn depended on the smooth operation and permanence of Don Porfirio's system of national government.

If any major national change may open new local possibilities or close old ones, then a *fortiori* news of reform or otherwise favourable change mobilises peasants. Thus when a reformist government supported by the APRA party came into office in Lima in 1945, communities which had operated on the assumption of stability

promptly changed their tactics. Santa Rosa, which had been negotiating boundary treaties with the neighbouring estates, announced that 'now with the new government we can do what we want and we denounce the existing treaties with Ganadera' (Sociedad Ganadera del Centro) [*Hobsbawm, forthcoming*]. Marc Ferro points out that the resolutions sent by the peasantry immediately after the February Revolution in Russia, doubtless drafted by the village intelligentsia, unlike those of the workers, 'demand' very much more frequently than they 'complain' or 'petition', and also that they 'express more frequently than the workers the desire to punish the masters of the old regime' [*Ferro, 1967: 186*]. It is as though the villages, always conscious of potential strength even within their subalternity, required only the assurance of goodwill or even mere toleration from the highest authorities to straighten their backs. Conversely, of course, any hint that power will once again stamp on them encourages them to retreat into their shells. As the 1945 reformist government led to a wave of agrarian unrest and organisation, so the imposition of the military government in 1948 brought land invasions and peasant unions to a brusque stop—until under a new government after 1956 the peasants gradually become aware that the situation is once again rather more open.

This sense of constant potential or actual confrontation of force may perhaps derive from the very exclusion of the traditional peasantry from the official mechanism of politics or even law. Relations of force—either real trials of strength or ritualised ones—replace institutionalised relations. Señor Fernandini's reluctance to expel an encroaching Indian community adjoining his *hacienda* is interpreted by the peasants as fear: 'There is no Indian around this region who does not say that they can take any advantage they wish from *taita* Eulogio, because *taita* Eulogio is afraid of them' [*Martinez Alier, 1974*]. On the other hand, as Daniel Field rightly recognizes [*Field, 1967: 54*] if the peasants wanted to attract the notice of the authorities they had no effective way of doing so except by challenging authority through direct action, since there was no political machinery for making themselves heard. This was risky, since punishment was normally sure—but certainly peasants, and probably even lords and government, would calculate the dose of violence offered. In the invasions of 1947 it was the inexperienced communities who stayed and were massacred when the soldiers came. Huasicancha, with centuries of experience of alternating litigation and direct action, evacuated the occupied ground quietly when the troops came, and temporarily made the best of what law could achieve.

Confrontation could thus be quite non-revolutionary: it is an error to think of every incident of peasant challenge by force as a 'rising' or an 'insurrection'. But it could also, because of the very nakedness of the typical relation of force which it implied, lend itself to revolution. For what if it looked as though the definitive

end of the rule of the gentry was at hand? At this point we are on the border between the territories of hard political assessment and apocalyptic hope. Few peasants would hope that their own region or village alone could achieve permanent liberation. They knew too much about it. But if the entire kingdom, indeed the entire world, was changing? The vast movement of the 'trienio bolchevista' in Spain (1918-20) was due to the double impact of the news of the successive collapse of empires—the Russian, followed by the central European ones—and of an actual *peasant* revolution. 'But how,' asked Diaz del Moral 'can you possibly believe that you will triumph? What about the Spanish government and army?' and was answered: 'But señorito, when Germany has collapsed, what can the bourgeois hope for from this Spanish government, which is not worth much anyway?' [*Diaz del Moral, 1967: 468*]. And yet, the further the centres of decision were from the known and understood local power structure, the hazier the line between actual judgment, hope and myth (in both the colloquial and the Sorelian sense). The signs by means of which men foretold the coming of the millennium were, in one sense, empirical—like those by which they foretold the weather; but in another, expressions of their feeling. Who could tell whether there was really 'a new law' or a rider carrying the Tsar's manifesto in letters of gold giving the land to the tillers, or whether there simply ought to be?

One might push hypothesis a stage further and suppose that, conversely, the disappointment of hope within a concretely assessable situation would be less lasting than that of global or apocalyptic hopes. When the troops came and expelled the community from the lands it occupied, it would not be demoralised, but wait for the next suitable moment for action. But when the expected revolution failed, it would take much more to restore the peasants' morale. Thus Malefakis [1970] has suggested that part of the tragedy of the second Spanish Republic of 1931-9 lies in the fact that the grassroots peasant movement did not become aware that a new era of possibilities was opening until 1933—by which time the best moments for pushing the republican government into agrarian reform had been missed. After the failure of the *trienio bolchevista* it took more than the fall of a king to revive their confidence.

IV

We have so far considered the wider political structure simply as something which affects peasant action favourably or unfavourably. And yet, especially during the transition to modern politics, the peasants' own effects upon it must also be briefly observed. In pre-18th century Europe—perhaps in most of the world—they are normally negligible, except at periods of general revolution, when they may become decisive, either for the triumph of revolution or for its defeat. Peasants appear to belong in economic or

social history, but rarely in political history, since rulers rarely have to bother for more than a moment about what happens in the villages. China may be the great exception, for in the traditional politics of that country peasant risings play an accepted and expected part in the end of one dynasty and the substitution of another. But in the transition to modern politics in Europe the countryside becomes significant, if only because of the frequency of revolutions or revolutionary threats, and with the development of systems of mass politics, electoral or otherwise, their attitude forms parts of the permanent calculations of politicians.

The traditional peasants are integrated into the prevailing political system by means of three major ideological devices: the 'king', the 'church' (or other religious structures) and what must, with hesitation and consciousness of the danger of anachronism, be called 'proto-nationalism'. All three are politically ambiguous. The 'king' is both the keystone of the stable social structure which rests on the backs of a loyal and uncomplaining peasantry and the remote fount of justice who may be called upon against the real rulers, the gentry. The 'church' has a similar duality, though perhaps a more sharply distinct one: in Christian regions the bishop may belong to 'them', but the saints always to 'us'. Proto-nationalism, often indistinct from religion (as may still be verified in the Irish national movement, where catholicism is at least as crucial a criterion of nationality as ethnicity), is less regularly identified with political integration, but where it coincides with king or church or both, the combination is powerful, as Napoleon discovered in both Russia and Spain. On the other hand, where it does not, it rarely has political implications on a national scale, at least in Europe before the 19th century.

During the transition to modern European politics initially (with the partial exception of proto-nationalism) this ideology mobilises the peasantry on the political right, or fails to mobilise them on the political left, even when their aspirations are by our standards revolutionary. Modern politics (e.g. liberalism) belonged to the cities and the rich, and were either irrelevant or hostile to the peasants, and the defence of the old ways against the new implied the sort of revolutionary traditionalism which the Bourbons utilised to good effect in Southern Italy, though not in Sicily where they themselves were 'foreigners'. The interesting question is: when, how and under what circumstances do peasant movements come under the leadership of the left, or more generally, come to be expressed in a new political language? Thus it is evident that in the 1870s the Russian peasants, to the grief of the Narodniks, were still quite inaccessible both to them as non-peasants and to their idiom, but by the early 20th century they were far more receptive to new ideas and methods. Economic changes, urbanisation, migration and so on are obviously very largely responsible for such changes. As a 1908 survey in Russian put it:

The 'ferment' or 'brain' in the movement . . . were the peasants on side-earnings in the factories, in the mines and in the towns. As more developed persons they naturally became the leaders of the movement; in some cases they brought into the countryside—along with the newspapers—news about the agrarian and the workers' movement in other places and unconsciously propagandized the idea of the agrarian movement [*Perrie, 1972: 136*].

Still, we evidently have examples of traditional peasants who accept the leadership of the political left (in Sicily and Southern Italy of Garibaldi, for instance) long before industrialisation and urbanisation had seriously affected them. About this question we remain very much in the dark, and further research is needed. It must not, of course, be confused with the ready appeal which heterodoxy, including that of secular political revolutionaries, may have from an early stage to discontented minority groups, such as the Albanian settlers in Southern Italy or the tribals in modern India.

One thing may however be suggested. Contrary to what might be supposed, straightforward modern nationalist agitation is likely to capture the peasants rather later than social agitation, unless in the form of simple xenophobia which may be just as easily turned against outgroups belonging to the same 'nation'. Thus the men of Tipperary in the first part of the 19th century exercised their notorious 'agrarian terrorism' not only against the protestant English landowners, but against the Connaughtmen and Kerry men who competed with them for land and work. And the clearest example of a popularly-based national movement in the 19th century, the Irish Fenians, did not acquire a really solid peasant base, overcoming the powerful hostility of the church, until the agrarian depression and the Land League had given them a social as well as a national programme.

This paper has overwhelmingly dealt with the politics of traditional peasants in traditional or transitional situations. It may be concluded with three brief propositions about peasants in modern political situations. I omit the role of peasants in socialist countries, for in these (with the possible exception of China) peasants once again become a recessive and relatively passive force, though the effectiveness of their refusal to do certain things demonstrates that modern states and economies may be, if anything, more sensitive to the traditional kind of feet-dragging in which peasants are so experienced.

The first proposition is that at some point of economic differentiation 'the peasantry' as a political concept disappears, because conflicts within the rural sector now outweigh what all peasants have in common against outsiders. This development has sometimes been hoped for by revolutionaries (e.g. the Russian Bolsheviks), but when it happens, at least before revolutions, is normally to their disadvantage. The difficulty encountered by Indian communists in their peasant work today is that they can effectively appeal to some but not all rural strata, and in appealing to one

group, automatically tend to antagonise others. However, the political disintegration of the peasantry is postponed or concealed by the persistence of the traditional differences between town and countryside, of specific political interests which a very large range of people occupied in agriculture may have in common, for instance a state policy of high and guaranteed prices for farm products, and of traditional institutions and practices. Thus the 'peasant community' of the 1970s may in fact represent the interests of a group of kulaks or rural middle class within it rather than those of all its members, who in turn may now form only a small percentage of the local inhabitants. But it will nevertheless function as a community and be to some extent represented by its members as such. The village poor or the landless may continue to defer to their richer brethren, though modern politics and organisation may make them more effective as a group than they once were. Insofar as this is true, it suggests that 'peasant' politics is more likely than not rich farmers' politics.

The second proposition is that democratic electoral politics do not work for peasants as a class. Unlike 'the working class party', 'the peasant party' is not the regular projection of class consciousness into politics, but a historical freak phenomenon, for practical purposes confined to parts of eastern, south-eastern and central Europe between the world wars. And even these 'peasant parties' were not necessarily very different from other parties with a largely peasant clientele, but which did not base their appeal officially on class. Of the 2836 radical rural mayors in France no less than 2600 were peasant cultivators in the early 1950s [*Duverger, 1955: 225*]. There are countries which never developed specific peasant parties, and indeed countries in which there is 'no global correlation between the percentage of the active population engaged in agriculture and the political behaviour of the area' [*Ibid: 157*]. Thus the five most rural departments of France in 1951 gave their largest blocks of votes respectively to the Communists, to an alliance of Christian Democrats and Radicals, to an alliance of Socialists and Radicals, to the Gaullists and to the Christian Democrats. Moreover, even when particular parties gain majority support among peasants, their cadres are hardly of peasant origin. The Italian Demochristian legislators of 1963, though elected by 44% of the peasantry, were overwhelmingly non-peasant in origin. Only 4.5% of their fathers had been peasant proprietors—curiously enough almost twice this percentage had been workers [*Tarrow, 1967: 134, 144*]. (For comparison, almost one third of Italian Communist deputies had working-class parents in 1963, whereas 40% of the French Communist deputies in the early 1950s had actually begun life as manual workers themselves). In terms of the national politics of bourgeois-democratic states, peasants tend to be election fodder, except when they demand or inhibit certain specialised political measures. In terms of local politics they are,

of course, much more significant. However, the sheer numbers of peasant electors, or the persistent over-representation of the rural electorate, are not to be neglected.

The third proposition is the one that Marx put forward in the *Eighteenth Brumaire* [Marx, 1852]. He argues that because of their peculiarities as a class peasants are 'incapable of enforcing their class interest in their own name. . . . They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented. The representative must at the same time appear as their master, or as an authority over them, as an unlimited governmental power that protects them against other classes and sends them rain and sunshine from above. The political influence of the smallholding peasant, therefore, finds its final expression in the executive powers subordinating society to itself'. Whether this argument applies only to peasants, or also to other classes and strata incapable of organising themselves as a class (e.g. the lower middle classes in the European sense of the word) need not be discussed here. It may also be argued that in many cases the apparently passive attitude of peasants to the central government conceals complex hierarchies of clientelist relationships, based on tacit or overt bargaining, which stretch from the localities to the apex of state power [Powell, 1970]. It may also be held that the enormous *de facto* 'veto power' of peasant refusal to act make this relationship less passive than it seems at first sight. Nevertheless, Marx's argument probably explains more than the nature of mid-19th century Bonapartism. It need not lead to a right-wing dictatorship, though in a sense the rise of the Nazi party in Germany between 1928 and 1933 was the last genuine mass movement of peasants at least in the Protestant parts of Germany. Nevertheless, the importance of the political father- or mother-figure, or the patron-state in the politics of peasant countries today, is worth investigating with Marx's observation in mind.

However, the fundamental fact of peasant politics today is the decline of the traditional peasantry, and indeed increasingly the relative numerical decline of any kind of peasantry. Much of what has been discussed in this paper is already of historical rather than current interest. Nevertheless, since the mass of migrants into the cities in many parts of the world consists of men and women from traditional peasant backgrounds, who bring into their new world the modes of action and thought of their old world, history remains a current political force. It would be unwise to neglect it.

NOTES

1. Cf. a contemporary comment on a conflict between different rural strata in sixteenth-century Germany: 'It is curious that the subjects of the Lordship of Messkirch should have rebelled against their lord, Gottfried Werner, because they could give no valid or urgent reason for their action. They simply claimed that, in the villages, they were overrun by the cottagers and day labourers who wanted to use the pasture-land, and that they

could not live on their farms in the old ways. But in fact, the majority of the labourers consisted of the sons, sons-in-law or close kin of the farmers' [Sabeau, 1972: 904].

2. The editors hope to publish a full translation of the Sicilian harvest song, with a commentary, in a future issue of the Journal.
3. Field [1967: 49-50] suggests that even the Russian peasants' monarchism was largely a defensive trick: they had enough problems without saddling themselves with a reputation for disloyalty to the state. This is probably pushing peasant pragmatism too far, but there is a grain of truth in such a view.

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