

*The Rational Peasant: The Political Economy of Rural Society in Vietnam.* By SAMUEL L. POPKIN. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979. Pp. 306+xxi. \$14.95 (cloth); \$4.95 (paper).

*The Origins of English Individualism: The Family, Property and Social Transition.* By ALAN MACFARLANE. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979. Pp. 216+xv. \$19.95 (cloth); \$6.95 (paper).

Perhaps there is yet an economist who thinks peasants are irrational and collectivist. It is difficult to believe that such a benighted view of the countryside could persist, but this is the age of wonders. In truth, it remains a commonplace of development planning and scientific analysis. The two books under review here are signs of a counterattack.

Clear and important arguments can be described by their rhetorical dual as well as by their primal, by what they attack as well as by what they affirm. So here. As his title suggests, Samuel Popkin, a young political scientist at the University of California at San Diego, is attacking the World Bank view that peasants are idiots and the more sophisticated view, articulated recently by James C. Scott in *The Moral Economy of the Peasant* (1976), that peasants are rational but rationally communitarian. Popkin believes they are not communitarian in general and were not in particular over the past century in his country of study, Vietnam. He believes that the economic rationality of Vietnamese villagers in choosing crops was at one with their political rationality in choosing allies, both in the service of individual well-being.

The evidence for his beliefs is persuasive. The first third of the book is a long essay on "The Peasant," not necessarily Vietnamese, marshaling the latest work by medievalists and anthropologists (except Macfarlane's, published too late) against the views of Karl Polanyi, George Dalton, Eric Hobsbawm, Eric Wolf, James Scott, Joel Migdal, and Clifford Geertz. The "moral economists" "assume that peasants are antimarket, [that they] prefer common property to private, . . . [and] that peasant welfare depends on the closed corporate villages . . . The fabric of the moral community is rent . . . by the intrusion of the 'cash nexus'" (pp. 5-6). The "political economy" view, as Popkin calls it, notes that the evidence for the moral economy view is weak. Peasants from Tepotzlan to Vilyatpur and from the 1280s to the 1970s, among other evidences of selfish and clearheaded maximizing, did not help each other to pay taxes (p. 41), demanded strict reciprocity in charity (p. 47), used gleaning rules to prevent misallocation of labor (not to help the poor [p. 52]), expected to grow rich out of village offices (p. 60), resisted innovation when it was rational to do so (p. 66), and engaged in exchanges of land or crops without social disaster (p. 68). The opening chapters constitute a brilliant survey of the context within which economists measure the supply response of African farmers and the transformation of traditional agriculture. A central planner who can read Popkin without some twinge of doubt that his bureaucracies, communes, and other substitutes for voluntary exchange are good for the poor (p. 29) is a hard man to persuade.

The rest of the book may do the trick. It is a narrative of Vietnamese political history down to 1946 emphasizing the impact of colonialism on the politics of villages. The narrative, like the analytical essay, is skillfully done, although of course it is difficult in any case for an American over 25 to yawn

at the names Hue, Tonkin, Cho Lon, and the like. The writing is modest, clear, and warm. So far as can be judged from his surefootedness in the literature on the European peasantry, Popkin's opinions in fields outside my competence are to be taken seriously. The index testifies to his heavy reliance on Blum and Hilton for Europe, and on Gourou, Gram, Ory, Osborne, Rambo, and Woodside for Vietnam. The book is generous to its enemies and almost embarrassing in its praise for allies. The footnotes are filled with references to studies that are "wonderful," "excellent," "must reading." The burden of bringing a chaotic history to bear on wider issues is sometimes too great, leading to excessive repetition and summarization. And the narrative portion can be faulted as rather too broadly focused to make the case about the details of village politics the argument requires. But the book is loaded with good observing and good thinking.

The major thought inspired by Popkin's history of Vietnam under the French is that the village was no passive victim of colonization and commercialization. On the contrary, village notables themselves called the new world into existence to redress the balance in the old. The new colonial taxes, for instance, were occasions for the notables to consolidate their power over the rest of the villagers (p. 149). Before the French came, "villages were not egalitarian, leveling, welfare oriented, or necessarily harmonious" (p. 132). In consequence, the many antifeudal movements of the twentieth century, whether religious or communist, did not look back to a Confucian golden age: the Vietnamese themselves knew well the rapacity of rural life. It is the analysts of the peasant wars of the twentieth century, not the warriors themselves, who idealize the communities the peasants came from.

Popkin criticizes too the other half of the idealized portrait of the death of community, namely, the vile and domineering colonialists who murdered it. The flaw, Popkin argues, is to attribute effectiveness in evil to the French administration. The French supported 10 times as many bureaucrats per head of local population as did the British in India yet failed repeatedly in their schemes to manipulate the villagers. The story of colonialism is not one of effective and evil government, which needs only to be replaced by effective and good government to reestablish the communitarian values of the golden age. It is a story of ineffective government lost in a sea of selfish peasants. The story should have a certain familiarity to Americans lately embroiled in Southeast Asia.

Popkin recognizes that the source of the mythology of the unselfish peasant is history, especially English history. So does Macfarlane, whose book is a more direct challenge to the mythology: "a great deal of modern India, Africa, or South America cannot be understood without some comprehension of what happened on a small island with only a few million inhabitants between the thirteenth and eighteenth centuries" (p. 7). The dual of Macfarlane's interpretation of English history is the one traditional since Marx, that England was like other economies long ago in having many "peasants." The peasant is here not merely a countryman but the denizen, of a society with production in the home, no markets in products, no markets in factors of production, no geographical mobility, great emphasis on kinship, inheritance by the family instead of the individual, ownership by the family instead of the individual, an all-pervasive family life in which women marry young and are subordinate to their husbands, and sharp lines between this peasantry so described and the nobility and its state. In brief, the peasant is the man we all know and love from the works of Marx, Weber, Tawney, and their recent (collective) heirs—the same list that Popkin called the "moral economists."

The history that all educated people carry about in their heads is "a progression from small, isolated communities inhabited by 'peasants' . . . towards the market, monetized, 'open' social structure of the eighteenth century" (p. 54). The history, says Macfarlane, is wrong. England was in fact a nonpeasant society from earliest times for which we have records: there was no revolution of the sixteenth century. Like Popkin, he buttresses his own primary evidence (from two English villages that he himself is studying intensively) with a brilliant survey of work by others bearing on the point. No medievalist will find the facts reviewed novel, though he may be irritated by the single-mindedness with which they are deployed. Indeed, anyone who finds Macfarlane's (or Popkin's) theme entirely surprising has been relying for his view of English medieval society either on the works of Maitland or Vinogradoff, brilliant in their day (ca. 1900) but still in the grip of nineteenth-century German scholarship and its romantic view of the brotherhood of times past, or on textbooks by political historians who rely in turn on Maitland and Vinogradoff.

As you and I would turn to markets, and the political scientist Popkin turns to politics and power, it is natural that Macfarlane as an anthropologist turns to family relations to test the antiquity of English individualism. He argues that the English family was at an early stage nuclear, formed rather late in life, oriented toward the individual, respectful of women's rights, and unconfining. In particular, the individual, even women, inherited the family's land and could dispose of it at will. The central evidence is simply the records showing individuals disposing of land, in large amounts and with great freedom—as they did labor and produce. The notion that the early medieval (not to speak of late medieval) economy was a "natural economy," as the Germans used to put it, is flatly mistaken. *Sic transit* all manner of hypothetical histories, from Marx's notion of precapitalist economic formations, necessarily unsubstantiated in an age before the professionalization of history, down to such newer abominations, which may not be so easily pardoned, as Polanyi's *The Great Transformation* (1944), Hicks's *A Theory of Economic History* (1969), and Wallerstein's *The Modern World System* (1974).

Like Popkin, again, Macfarlane does not prove his case beyond all doubt. He is as uncomfortable with quantitative arguments as were the medieval men he studies and tries repeatedly to force the evidence to say yes or no when it can only say more or less. The most troublesome feature of the book is its insistence throughout that individualism was a peculiarity of England. What might be interpreted as a device of rhetoric to silence the cries of "it's-different-in-Dijon-and-Dacca" becomes in the end a disfigurement. Always it is "in England" or "at least in relation to England" that one after another myth of peasant life debunked, until finally (p. 199) we are told that by Adam Smith's time "England had probably long been different from almost every other major agrarian civilization." The evidence for this key assertion has the same weakness that Macfarlane detects throughout in others, as in the work of George Homans: "There appears to be a strong, self-confirming, and circular hypothesis. It is thought to be self-evident that the rural inhabitants of England [for present purposes read 'of any particular community'] were basically like 'peasants' elsewhere. . . . It is [then] justifiable to fill in the vast gaps . . . by drawing information from peasants elsewhere. The picture of [the society] which emerges then seems to show that there were really peasants" (p. 191).

For all his iconoclasm in the English case, then, Macfarlane retains a respectful attitude toward the notion that peasants elsewhere are a very odd

sort. The antidote is of course Popkin—Vietnam is most assuredly "elsewhere." From the union of these two books little remains of the myth of the peasant, historical or modern. Popkin's brief survey of the medieval evidence should be strengthened by Macfarlane; and Macfarlane's reluctance to extend his evidence outside England should be overcome by Popkin.

The books are not economics, though they talk much of economic matters. The question arises whether an economist should break off the scrutiny of his out-garbage from the comp center long enough to peruse a book on historical political science and a book on historical anthropology. Yes, he should. Historical mythologies live on in the premises of the economist who believes himself, whether proudly or humbly, to be a mere technician. To learn that "neither decline nor decay of peasant institutions is necessary for peasants to enter markets" (Popkin, p. 267) or that "'homo economicus' and market society [were] present in England for centuries" gives the economist new fields to conquer, and the conquered fields may in turn civilize his economics.

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