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 prima, as 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 rationalist 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, Michael Gare, and Clifford Geertz. The "moral economists" assume that peasants are amoral, that they prefer common property to private.... [and] that peasant welfare depends on the closed corporate villages.... The fabric of the moral economy 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 Teotitlan to Vilyatpur and from the 1280s to the 1970s, among other evidence of selfish and clear-headed maximizing, did not help each other to pay taxes (p. 41), demanded strict reciprocity in charity (p. 47), had 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 who knows and loves us 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 abstractions, 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 "its 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. 190) 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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References


