

Some Limitations of the Peasant Concept as a Tool in Investigating European Rural Communities

by LAURA THOMPSON

RÉSUMÉ

Le concept de la société paysanne joue un rôle important dans la théorie de l'évolution linéaire de la société: tribale, paysanne, urbaine. A partir d'une étude d'un groupe rural en Saxe, l'auteur présente une autre théorie qui, selon lui, explique mieux les faits.

We anthropologists... must re-examine basic premises... ethnographic facts will be much easier to understand if we approach them free of *all... a priori* assumptions. Our concern is with what the significant social categories are; not with what they ought to be.

Edmund R. Leach (1961:27)

At the conference represented by this volume¹ and elsewhere I² have noticed a number of discrepancies between the "facts" of European history as reported by historians, geographers, social anthropologists, and biocultural anthropologists. For example, field observations and ethnohistorical research have led me to conclude that in the Osnabrueck Northland (West Germany), termination of the modified form of feudalism introduced after

¹ This paper, although taken in part from "'Peasant Aristocrats' of the Osnabrueck Northland" (L. Thompson, 1967c) prepared for the Wenner-Gren Conference on Central and North-Central European peasant cultures, was written as a result of the Conference. I take this opportunity to thank the members of the group, including its chairman and recorder, for their stimulating papers and discussion. I wish to express my appreciation also to Dr. Helmut Plath for his valuable assistance in assembling information regarding Lower Saxon culture and to Professor Alfred E. Emerson for helpful discussions and correspondence.

² Laura Thompson, a private consultant in applied anthropology and research design, lives at 3215 Avenue H. Brooklyn, New York.

Charlemagne's conquest was associated with a re-emergence of traditional Saxon institutions and values. On the other hand, some scholars attributed this event directly to the influence of the Hanseatic League. Freeing of the European "peasants" was ascribed also to the liberalizing effects of Roman law, whereas in the Osnabrueck Northland I found Roman and Roman Catholic influences responsible for the loss of freedom.

These discrepancies seem to fit into a pattern which is reflected in the thinking of many students of "peasant" societies and culture historians. Basic to this pattern are several premises which are often implied rather than stated. For example:

1. Civilizations originate in cities.
2. A peasant seeks to liberate himself from his society and to migrate to the city.
3. A peasant tends to be an uncultured, simple-minded fellow, poorly educated if not illiterate, incapable of solving complex problems, lacking originality, and easily oppressed.

Although these propositions may describe certain peasant societies, perhaps those of Central Europe, I find them by no means self-evident. Nor do they square with my observations among the Lower Saxons of West Germany, the rural Icelanders, and other cultivators whom I have studied at first hand.

In this paper, therefore, I propose to examine the peasant concept as it is generally employed in current anthropological literature and to test its usefulness as an analytical tool for the scientific study of human behavior. I shall reexamine some of my findings with these discrepancies in mind, especially regarding a rural community of the Osnabrueck Northland where I lived off and on for twelve months during the 1930's and also from a rural community in Iceland which I visited in 1952.

THE PEASANT CONCEPT

The term "peasant" has been bandied about in the anthropological literature for some time. It seems to be used with increasing frequency by anthropologists. On the other hand, attempts to define and limit the peasant concept with the precision

essential to its continuing usefulness in any scientific endeavor are much less conspicuous.

In a recent volume Eric R. Wolf (1966:10) defines a peasant as "a cultivator who has an enduring relationship with the city." But peasants are also assumed to represent "a phase in the evolution of human society" (Ibid, vii).

The Peasant Concept Within the Hypothesis of Social Evolution

The social evolutionary hypothesis, which incorporates the peasant concept as a working tool, was formulated by Herbert Spencer (1900:314), Emile Durkheim (1933:41) and others. As explained by Raoul Naroll (1956:687): "That society is the most evolved which has the highest degree of functional differentiation, whether in the form of occupational specialization or organizational complexity. At one end of the spectrum of social evolution are societies like those of the Bushman, the Fuegian, the Basin, and many of the Australian tribes. Organization patterns which define groups who work together in teams are few... Specialization patterns are also few... Near the other end of the spectrum, there are the traditional 'higher civilizations' of the Old World, with their intricately ramified political and religious organizations and their hundreds, perhaps thousands, of specialties."

The distinction between "civilized" and "uncivilized" societies within this social evolutionary hypothesis has been clarified by V. Gordon Childe (1951) and Grahame Clark (1962). These Old World archaeologists have identified "civilizations" as cultures which have cities. In the same ideological tradition Robert Redfield (1956) and others have emphasized the differences between urban and rural cultures by playing up the concept of the peasant.

A Concept by Postulation

Thus used, the term peasant represents a concept by postulation rather than a concept by inspection (see Northrop 1948:36, 60-63, ch. 5). Its meaning is designated not by inspection of immediately apprehended phenomena but by the postulates of the

deductive theory in which it occurs. The relevant hypothesis states that cultures evolve through a linear sequence of "levels of integration" (Steward 1955:ch. 3). These are generally described as three: the level of primitive tribal society; the level of peasant society; and the level of urban civilization. Stated or implied is the assumption that the city dwellers on whom peasants are dependent rule and exploit them (Wolf 1966:4). Hence it is frequently assumed that a peasant is not a peasant by choice. He would prefer to migrate away from his home base to a city if he could (see Halpern 1967:19-21).

Obviously the peasant concept so defined reflects the popular Marxian stereotype of a small farmer living in a rural community and exploited by urban interests. These interests may be represented by king, nobility, church, landlord, tax collector or, beginning with the industrial era, entrepreneur and middlemen.

TESTING THE UNIVERSALITY OF THE PEASANT CONCEPT BY MEANS OF A CASE STUDY³

To test the usefulness of the peasant concept as an analytical tool for investigating sociocultural change, let us note certain relevant facts about cultivator dairymen of the Osnabrueck Northland of West Germany.

For centuries the term peasant has been used by European scholars in the classical historical tradition to designate agricultural workers closely attached to the soil. It seems to have attained popularity as a handle for pinpointing vassals or serfs during the feudal era. As such it carried an implication regarding social status in the context of a superordinate-subordinate relationship expressed in the lord of the manor versus vassal dyad.

The meaning of the term has been colored especially by the status of agricultural workers in those parts of Europe where European feudalism attained its most developed and characteristic form. This occurred in central and eastern Europe, especially in

³ This account of the culture history and behavior patterns of the people of Osnabrueck Northland is based on several visits to the region in 1934-37 and one in 1960 (see Thompson 1969, ch. 10).

the Balkans, Poland and Russia. Here true serfdom developed. Farmers lost proprietorship of all their lands and their personal freedom as well. They were kept in bondage until they succeeded in overturning the feudal order by revolutionary means, as for example, in France in the 18th century and in Old Russia in the early 20th century.

Due to a combination of circumstances, however, in many parts of northern Europe the forms of feudalism were not only less intense but also less persistent. Indeed, in parts of Scandinavia, e. g. in Iceland (see e. g. Gjerset 1925:84), and in Scotland it did not take root except in a very peripheral form (see e. g., Darling 1955:1-2).

Among the Old Saxons of the north German lowlands before the Charlemagne conquest, for example, a very high value was placed on the status of freeman (see, e. g. Gullhiermoz 1902: 457; J. W. Thompson 1928:200ff). Indeed, the freeman concept carried a kind of sanctity or inviolability (Du Chaillu 1889 (1): 544).⁴ Any breach of freeman's sanctity had to be avenged either by blood or wergeld. The thirty-year struggle of the Saxons against unconditional surrender to the Franks, as well as their resistance to feudal status (Repp 1832:30-31; J. W. Thompson 1928:ch. 8), take on a deeper meaning in the context of the north European freeman concept.

In the Osnabrueck Northland after conquest and forced conversion to Roman Catholicism a Saxon freeman was demoted to vassal status (Kruesselmann 1937:44; J. W. Thompson 1928: 195ff). He also lost his freehold if the obligations imposed on him by the authorities exceeded his ability to meet them with the means at his disposal. Such obligations included tribute and tithes to bishops, cloisters and nobles, as well as other duties and obligations (Kruesselmann 1937:44; Prinz 1934, 1940).

⁴ According to the North European cultural tradition, a community was composed essentially of freemen organized into free extended family units. Every freeman was *fridheilag* (peaceholy or inviolate) unless he had forfeited his right to peace (Du Chaillu 1889 (1):544). Every freeman had his *rétf* on indemnity value which he could claim as redress for a breach of his inviolability in deed or word. Also every family had its indemnity value. The wergeld custom was related to these concepts. A man's wergeld consisted of the amount of money which must be paid him or his family as redress for a violation of his *rétf*.

Not all the Saxons lost their lands, however. While feudal practices prevailed concerning erstwhile Saxon properties claimed by the church and the nobles, blocks of Saxon lands remained in freehold under a slightly modified ancient system of tenure (J. W. Thompson 1928:177).

Re-emergence of the Saxon Freehold

Relevant in this connection is the climatic deterioration which began in Europe toward the end of the thirteenth century. It was more severe in the north than in the central and southern regions, except at high elevations. As the climate became extremely cold and damp the growing season contracted. Crops failed to mature and food became scarce (Abel 1935). Famines were frequent and epidemics, including the Black Death (1348-1350), took a heavy toll (Abel 1956:14).

Although relatively few farms and villages in northwest Germany were deserted compared to other regions of the country (Abel 1955:10), great social changes occurred in the Osnabrueck Northland. Since farmers were no longer able to pay their tithes and tribute (Prinz 1940:13), most of the larger manors failed. The noble families fell and their lands were sold back into freeholds (Provinz Hannover 1915:74). The Saxons' struggle against feudalism culminated in the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648) which occurred at about the climatic nadir.

Especially noteworthy is the fact that after a relatively short feudal period the institution of the Old Saxon freehold in the context of the north European freeman concept re-emerged in the lowlands in slightly altered form. According to Roman Catholic parish records and the statements of informants, a number of isolated farmsteads have been in the same family for a thousand years (Santoro 1939:292; J. W. Thompson 1928:176 after Meitzen and Blondel). The locations of many of these *altsächsische Siedlungen* are well known. Those in Ankun parish of *Kreis Bersenbrück* have been mapped by Wilhelm Kruesselmann (1937 map).

The evidence suggests that the original Saxon free family holding (*Besitz*) constituted a full-hide of land (Kruesselmann

1937:34; Plath 1966). As an isolated farmstead (*Einzelhof*), it encompassed about 30 hectares with rights to several classes of land. These usually included ownership of a house lot with garden plot and plowland. Access to common grazing land and forest were originally part of these rights. In other words, the *Besitz* was apparently designed to provide ownership or access to the types of natural resources which a freeman's household needed for independent viability. It became an establishment capable of virtually complete self-sufficiency.

Customarily a *Besitz* was handed down intact as a *Stamhof*. There were many traditional devices for coping with the population surplus problem which was intensified by this tradition. These included abortion, infanticide, human sacrifice, euthanasia, war, migration, monogamy, etc. Many of these devices to control births, plan families, and to eliminate non-productive family members were proscribed by the church on penalty of death. Thus, forced conversion to Christianity affected the population balance adversely in relation to the meager resources of the areas.

Beginning in the ninth century land hunger in Lower Saxony was intensified by the pressures of feudal estates circumstances. Although the use of manure had probably been known since the late Bronze Age, signs of soil exhaustion began to appear (J.W. Thompson 1928:471 after Lamprecht). Artificial fertilizer was not much used until the last third of the nineteenth century (Reining 1931:38).

Saxon conquest of the Wends and other Slavic tribes located east of the Elbe, and Saxon settlement of Slavic lands provided one outlet for surplus population (Abel 1956:10-11; J. W. Thompson 1928:ch.8). Nevertheless, beginning in the tenth century and especially during the second half of the eleventh, many full-hide estates were split into two parcels. These were known for tax purposes as *Halberben* or *Halberbigen Höfe* (Kruesselmann 1937: 34-37). As the climate deteriorated during the first half of the thirteenth century, three-part splits, called *Drittelerben*, were created.

Another device used to ease population pressure on the land was the development of *Erbkotten* or hereditary cotters. An outgoing farmer's son might receive a parcel of land from the

Stammhof as a *Mitgift* and work a small farming enterprize (Ibid. 37). He might use one of the houses belonging to the estate as a dwelling. Such a *Heuerhaus* was considered a constituent part of the stemfarm. A cotter strove to free himself legally from the estate. Such separation was generally achieved in the late Middle Ages. If the enterprise did not succeed, the cot was returned to the stemfarm (Ibid., 38).

During the Thirty Year's War many farm workers were killed. Others migrated to the Netherlands and elsewhere (Reining 1931:85). Vital resources were destroyed including large areas of forest. After the war there was a marked shortage of manpower in the rural communities. Laborers were needed especially to help with the grain crops and to cope with the swine fodder problem created by loss of woodlands. The hiring system, whose roots extend to the disappearance of moor and heath wasteland in the early sixteenth century, was developed to meet this need (Ibid., Wrasmann 1919). Hereditary cotters who were unable to make the grade independently became hereditary hirelings on the stemfarm. Under the hiring arrangement stemfarm and hirelings formed a complementary relationship, hirelings substituting for home servants and helping with seasonal work during the summer and autumn (Reining 1931:86). The stemfarm provided a house and cropland which the hireling worked in his free time. Thus the hireling and his wife gave a traditionally fixed number of days' labor to the owner annually in return for the use of a dwelling house and a parcel of land. This arrangement persists to the present.

Kindred Solidarity Replaced by Neighbor Reciprocities

Events of the Reformation period tended to break down the solidarity of kindreds (Phillpotts 1913:101, 169). In the Osnabrueck district the wergild continued to be paid into the sixteenth century but payments, usually made by the slayer to the heirs, were so small that fines paid to the public authority usually exceeded sums paid as wergeld (Ibid.).

Kindred solidarity, represented by the wergeld custom, was replaced by new developments, notably formal neighbor recipro-

cities. Each *Stammhof* was related by tradition to one or more farms by a system of formal neighbor rights and obligations which became hereditary. Owning families inherited fixed reciprocal duties to each other, especially during times of illness and family crises such as funerals and weddings. A farmer might have a "first neighbor," a "second neighbor", and even a "third neighbor", the role of each being fixed by custom rather than geographic proximity. The responsibilities of the "first neighbor" were heaviest. When the owner died the "first neighbor" and his family took charge of the deceased's menage until termination of the mourning rites, about ten days. The families of traditional neighbors cultivated friendly relations and visited with one another. These customs are still observed in the Osnabrueck Northland (L. Thompson 1965:106).

Thus as the importance of kindred waned and that of the neighborhood increased, the focus of the local social structure shifted. Whereas the strength of the traditional North European system, from which the Saxon culture apparently stemmed (see L. Thompson 1969: ch. 10), depended mainly on the maintenance of a balance between the paternal and the maternal relatives within the kindred (Phillipotts 1931:261), that of the Lower Saxons depended on give-and-take between groups and individuals within the farmstead, and between families of a neighborhood.

The Stemfamily

The northern kindred was superseded in the region under consideration by the stemfamily. According to C. Zimmerman and M. E. Frampton (1935:144, 133 from Frederic Le Play): "Typologically, the stemfamilies of the north offer three principal traits. The father chooses as heir one of his children judged the best fitted; he bequeaths the home and the work-shop by testament to the heir; and he imposes upon the heir the obligation to practice all duties of the house father... This family organization joins one married child to the ancestral household and establishes all others independently with doweries... it perpetuates habits of work, most of the property, and useful traditions at the paternal home. It forms a permanent center of protection to which all the members of the family may resort."

In farm-owning families of the Osnabrueck Northland the father may consult the mother and the siblings regarding the choice of the heir (preferably a son, but failing sons a daughter) best suited to inherit the place. On some old farms in the Osnabrueck region, however, the junior right prevails. Since families are usually large this allows the parents to take care of the needs of most of their children before it is time for the youngest son to bring home a wife and take over the place. The junior right custom also tends to reduce friction between father and heir and to promote the smooth functioning of a patriarchal order. It also facilitates the emergence of a sort of "Council of elders", older siblings who help the younger brother make major decisions.

The heir is required to provide for his parents after they relinquish proprietorship of the farm (usually upon the heir's marriage). The *Altenteil* custom takes care of them (Spiegel 1939). It may involve turning over one or more rooms in the farmhouse and a small piece of land to the old couple as an annuity for life. Upon the death of the recipients the plot reverts to the *Stammhof*. The responsibility of the heir toward his siblings involves the provision of a dowry upon the marriage of a sister, and covering the cost of training in a trade or profession of a brother. Siblings may also remain on the farm and work as unmarried "uncles" and "aunts".⁵ These customs are still observed in the rural districts of the Northland.

Marriage

There is a strong tendency for owner families to intermarry, the heir designate seeking out a spouse from a neighboring farm of

⁵ In such cases inheritance of land tends to follow an impartible rule, while income from land may be divided between heirs. Sons are preferred heirs of the land while both sons and daughters are entitled to a share of income from it. The share of a son who is not the primary heir customarily is used to subsidize training for a profession or vocation, while that of a daughter constitutes her dowry. Thus the viable family homestead becomes a permanent self-perpetuating socio-ecological entity with a subculture of its own (e.g., the junior right). It is the fountainhead of a family line which may extend 1000 years into the past and is expected to continue indefinitely into the future. For other types of European inheritance patterns, see Wolf (1967).

comparable status and similar religious faith. He looks for a girl who will bring as large a dowry as possible to the home place. Virtually, no farmwives are imported from outside the *Kreis*. This custom helps to insure that outgoing siblings will receive their fair shares of the inheritance (partly out of the young bride's dowry). It also makes certain that the young bride will have the culture and social position, the physical stamina, and the exacting skills needed to fulfill the traditional role as a good, strong, hardworking, thrifty and pious farm owner's wife. Whereas formerly a farm owner's daughter aspired to "marry a good farm" preferably with horses rather than simply with cows, lately some have preferred to marry school teachers, veterinarians, physicians, bankers, and even shopkeepers because "a farmer's wife has a hard life."

Social Classes

Owner families carry on their social activities almost entirely within their own social group. In the family of the farmstead where I lived close ties were maintained equally between the father's and the mother's relatives, especially those who lived within a radius of ten to fifteen kilometers. Siblings, their children (i.e., first cousins), and their parents met frequently, especially on Sunday after mass for schnapps or coffee in one of the numerous inns of the village.

Except between relatives and neighbors, visiting was confined mainly to certain life crises such as funerals and weddings, and to seasonal affairs such as *Kirmes*, the anniversary of the founding of the village church (Terpenning 1931:183), and the annual Farmers' Ball held a couple a weeks before Lent. Until it was opened to the public by Nazi edict during the thirties, the Farmers' Ball was an exclusive social event patronized by local farm-owning families (L. Thompson 1965:106-107). While their elders gossiped and drank beer or wine, young men and girls danced together and sized each other up as life partners. Courtship was formal and dating virtually non-existent.

Besides the Farmers' Ball, owning families claimed other prerogatives which enhanced their social position. For example,

hunting, a ritualized prestige sport, was confined almost exclusively to male members of this class. A group of a dozen or so hunters organized a hunting club. By supplementing privately owned hunting grounds with a rental of parts of the state forest, they were able to obtain hunting rights to a sizable territory (e.g., 3000 acres). Deer, wild boars, foxes, hares, pheasants, quail, and rabbits constituted the prey.

Erbhof proprietors occupy the upper rung of the local status ladder. Their social position depends on the size and soil quality of their land and the length of time which the family has owned it, the oldest settlers having the highest prestige. Cotters and hirelings occupy the middle rung, farm laborers constituting the lowest class. In the neighboring church and market village of Ankum professionally trained workers, such as the veterinarian, the physician, the bankers and the school teachers outrank small business owners and shopkeepers, who outrank skilled technicians such as bakers, blacksmiths and mechanics. In the eyes of the farm owners, however, the village hierarchy ranks between themselves and the cotters and hirelings. The Catholic priesthood stands apart while owner families, hirelings, and farm laborers form a rural hierarchy of their own. Here the proud owners, jealous of their freedom and more interested in their father's land than the Fatherland, reign supreme.

Household and Farmhouse

Characteristically, the household group includes the *Hofbesitzer* and his wife and unmarried dependent children, the male and female hired help, and the domestic animals belonging to the farm. A farm household forms a closely organized, mutually interdependent group. The owner is its undisputed head. He makes major decisions and manages the farm enterprises while his wife has charge of the household. Informants said that in the past when a farm owner died each of his domestic animals was told: "The master is dead." Even the bees were notified. According to the native attitude toward duty, men, women and children of the household, and even domestic animals including the bees, work hard at their appointed tasks as components of the household for the good of the whole.

The household inhabits a large and imposing farmhouse of Lower Saxon type. These picturesque farmhouses are one of the distinctive features of the landscape. Although many local variations in type may be observed in the lowlands, all have certain common features (Pessler 1906:112-134; 1955). They are isolated, single-unit complexes surrounded by plowed fields, meadows and woodland. (Abel 1956: *Pl. Deutsche Dorfformen* # 2). A large, well-built structure houses human beings and domestic animals under a single long-gabled roof. Several small outbuildings are used for barns and storage.

The Farmstead as a Self-sustaining Unit

As has been noted, formerly each farmstead was organized as an independent and self-sustaining economic unit. Even today, although the dark rye bread may be baked in the village oven out of home-grown rye rather than at home, virtually all the food consumed by the household is produced and processed on the farm. This consists of a basically balanced diet of potatoes and large quantities of smoked ham and sausage (e.g. 2000 pounds per year, depending on the size of the household) rye and wheat bread, butter, cream and buttermilk, eggs, sauerkraut, kale, onions, beets, turnips, apples, pears and honey, supplemented by wild game. Relatively few articles of food are bought at the village store except a little salt, sugar, coffee, wine and beer. Tobacco is also purchased.

Formerly flax was an important crop which supported the medieval spinning industry of the area. Sheep were also raised in the Osnabrueck Northland whereas now sheepherding is mainly confined to parts of the Lueneberg heath. Within the last century most traditional crafts such as spinning, weaving, and basket-making have disappeared. Colorful homespun folk costumes (Jostes 1904:72, *Taf.* IX) are no longer worn. During the 1930's, tractors, automobiles and telephones began to appear on some Northland farms. Electric power and machine-made tools began to be substituted for hand tools. The local farmers used mechanized equipment only when they could afford it and when they believed, on the basis of trial and error, that machines could do the job better than traditional hand methods. Most rejected the

McCormick Harvester because it allowed too much grain to escape. Hay is still hand-mown with a scythe on lands where the contour renders more modern methods inefficient from the viewpoint of a thrifty Lower Saxon farmer.

Industrialization such as milling, machines, chemicals, textiles, paper, furniture and glassware, has greatly increased in Lower Saxony since World War 2. This is especially conspicuous in urban centers such as Hanover and Osnabrueck. But in the Osnabrueck Northland most of the country people are still farmers and dairymen. Besides butterfat and Westphalian hams, the main farm products sold at market are rye, oats, sugar beets, and potatoes.

CHERCHEZ LE PAYSAN

Now the question arises: In this rural community what groups should be classed as peasants according to the current popular definition? The hiring families? They have an enduring relationship not with the city but with the owner family whom they assist and part of whose land they use. The farmhands and hired girls? They are sleep-in members of the farmstead household who help with the farm work and share the owner's table, food, and facilities as apprentices or with a small additional salary. The farm owners? Shunning urban society, they maintain as independent an existence as possible.

We have noted that most of the food consumed by the farmstead group is raised and processed on the place. The farm group also produces its own hay, most other fodder and all of its natural fertilizer. True, tobacco, wine, soap, clothing, chemical fertilizers, and some tools are purchased in the neighboring village. Here the family goes to Mass and the children go to school. Although a dialect of Low German is spoken as the mother tongue, literacy in High German, learned in school is universal. Certain services are provided the countrymen by the villagers: for example, those of the miller and the baker who grind and bake the large dark loaves out of home grown rye, the veterinarian who cares for the domestic animals, the hospital staff and doctor, the banker, the mechanic, the electrician and the innkeeper. Formerly,

of course, many of these services were taken care of on the farm itself.

To maintain, therefore, that these farm owners have "an enduring relationship with the city" is correct only in a limited sense. They do market their surplus food in town and buy from it certain necessities. But they sell their most valued products — stallions, mares, bulls, cows and pigs — at rural regional markets held for that purpose. To maintain that this relationship reduces them to an inferior status would be difficult to substantiate except from the ethnocentric viewpoint of the city dweller. And to hold that these rural dwellers, each king of his own domain, remain on their fathers' lands only because they cannot find a way to leave and go to the city is simply a city-fabricated fiction. On the contrary, as revealed by their behavior, attitudes and conversation, they feel superior to and even pity, their urban compatriots and deeply attached to their land, the rural life they lead, and their traditional Lower Saxon culture.

One remains puzzled, therefore, as to how rural farm populations such as that of the Osnabrueck Northland fit into current definitions of peasantry. Many other groups, as for example, the Icelandic farmers, the Hopi and Papago Indians, and the Lau Islanders present similar problems. How should they be classified?

PEASANT SOCIETY AS A LEVEL OF SOCIAL INTEGRATION IN A LINEAR EVOLUTIONARY SCHEME

We turn now to the second part of the currently popular definition of peasantry. Peasant society is but a step in the evolutionary progression toward urban civilization.

The most serious limitation of the peasant concept under discussion, I submit, is its emphasis on social evolution of a linear type. The three-stage pattern of advancement, of course, plays into the hands of the Marxists. But also, having supposedly established the universal validity of the peasant stage and having postulated a linear "advancement" of all societies through such a stage, it affords a ready-made, spuriously scientific rationalization for "development" projects of the social engineering type (see

Gouldner 1956). We set up a three-stage theory of advancement and then, ignoring cases which do not fit the theory⁶, we proceed to manipulate group behavior in terms of the theory. Industrial society is built upon the ruins of peasant society (Wolf 1966:vii) we maintain. So we feel justified in trying to upgrade the peasants and to destroy their culture for the sake of "progress".

But this is not all. Our almost compulsive focus on a stereotyped linear cultural sequence blinds us to possible alternatives. The history of Iceland furnishes an example. When faced with practical problems arising from the dissolution of the Danish trade monopoly, which had controlled both their external and their internal trade for 185 years (1602-1787) (Thorsteinsson 1946: 37), the Icelanders in time figured out their own solution. The farmers of the Husavik trade district in the northeastern coastal area of the island organized themselves into a local producer-consumer cooperative (L. Thompson, 1952, 1960). This handles all the produce from each local farm — hides, meat, wool, milk, butterfat, and tallow. It arranges transportation to both local and foreign markets, all processing, marketing, and banking. It also supplies the farmer with all his consumer needs: with credit, commercial fertilizer, seeds, tools, household goods, clothing and food not produced on the home place. The local cooperative even builds the ships, the factories, and the hotels it uses. Thus it bypasses the need to build an urban center and keeps economic power in the hands of the local rural cultivators.⁷ Subsequently (1902) all the local Icelandic cooperatives formed a national organization (Samband Islenskra Samvinnufélaga 1952). The recent community-center movement in Iceland reinforces this trend (see Felagsheimili 1950).

Alternatives to the peasant-to-urban sequence in modern industrial society are beginning to appear (see Calder 1967). Are

⁶ One such case, namely the repopulation of the countryside of Germany and elsewhere in Europe after many of its villages and farms were deserted at the end of the Middle Ages (coincident with the climatic deterioration), is well documented by Wilhelm Abel (1955:32 ff).

⁷ For a history of the Icelandic cooperative movement, see the fiftieth anniversary volume of the Federation of Icelandic Cooperatives (Samband Islenskra Samvinnufélaga 1952). Additional information regarding Icelandic cooperatives and a documented account of Icelandic rural organization has been presented in L. Thompson 1969, ch. 9.

we justified then in assuming that the sequence is inevitable and universal?

AN ALTERNATIVE HYPOTHESIS

There are, of course, other ways of formulating the problem. Rural populations may be approached as objects of scientific scrutiny from quite a different frame of reference. One such working hypothesis is that of the biocultural anthropologist, an approach that has borrowed heavily from ecology. Since I have attempted to describe it elsewhere (L. Thompson 1961:chs. 5, 6, 10; 1969), here I shall merely summarize it.

Populations of the species *Homo sapiens* tend to seek out viable, culturally congenial niches and establish themselves thereon. Once established, the members of such a community seek out from the natural resources available to them those which they find useful and adaptive to their purposes. They organize themselves to solve their practical living problems as, for example, reproduction, obtaining a balanced nutrition pattern, and group protection and defense. They activate themselves for decision-making in the essential group tasks. And they tend to establish the minimum means of conserving their essential resources so as not to exhaust them. They also try to control their population size in accordance with their total living arrangements in situational context. For these purposes they build and manipulate a culture as a problem-solving device. As John J. Honigmann (1963:24-25) phrases it, they use their culture as a means of "coping with the world."

Thus a human population may be thought of as one unit in a number of transacting species each with its own biogram forming a local ecosystem. This natural biosystem tends in isolation through time to consolidate itself in the direction of optimum control in terms of future function (Pittendrigh 1958:394). For this purpose the other species of the ecosystem use natural mechanisms while the human population uses both natural mechanisms and cultural devices (Emerson 1965:58).

The appropriate unit of research in scientific problems involving limited prediction of changing group behavior under

certain circumstances is the human breeding population within its total effective ecosystem in situational context (Thieme 1952). This unit is conceived here as dynamic and oriented toward problem-solving. The human group is perceived as using and integrating its culture for this purpose. The major mechanism which it employs is a culture change process which has been called "cultural homeostasis".

By the term cultural homeostasis I refer to a universal process by which a human population adapts itself to its natural and social situation and attempts to resolve its basic existential problems as a human group by means of building and integrating its culture in the direction of optimum control of future function (L. Thompson 1967b). The effects of the cultural homeostasis process are highlighted in the cultures of populations which have been isolated through time, either geographically or socially or both (L. Thompson 1967c). Its investigation requires a research model with a directional dynamic, and with spatial as well as temporal dimensions. It specifies cultural integration in isolation and through time as an adaptive process at the human population level analogous to the process of consolidation at the ecological and genetic levels (see Emerson 1965:50 ff). Thus it affords a research tool designed to investigate feedback relationships between a human group's cultural behavior and its reproductive activities under favorable natural laboratory conditions. And it postulates a formulation of the cultural evolutionary process which dispenses with a limited, linear, sequential concept of "cause and effect" and a simple metric or additive scale for the measurement of cultural "advancement". Rather, it sets the stage for the measurement of human evolutionary maturation in terms of the increased homeostasis, both cultural and organic, of a biocultural population unit.

CONCLUSIONS

The discussion suggests that the peasant concept may be defined appropriately as a concept by inspection within the natural history phase of scientific endeavor, as, for example, a cultivator closely attached to the soil. Such an endeavor would yield a *general description*, useless for purposes of prediction (see White-

head 1933:159), rather than an *explanatory description* of the culture or society under scrutiny. For example, the currently popular concept of a peasant as a cultivator with an enduring relationship with the city, may be valid for purposes of simply describing, comparing, and classifying certain historical groups of rural agriculturalists as, for example, in Central Europe.

On the other hand, if the full meaning of the peasant concept is defined by a deductive theory — that is, if it may be classed as a concept by postulation the meaning of which is given by the deductive theory in which it occurs — its validity may be established only by appropriate testing procedures. For example, we have noted that the currently popular definition of a peasant usually forms an integral part of a social evolutionary theory. According to this theory, human societies are assumed to “progress” through three stages of social integration up the cultural evolutionary ladder, namely, tribal society, peasant society, and urban civilization. This hypothesis must be regarded as unverified and indeed, according to our findings, as highly questionable. The scientifically acceptable procedure in such a case would be to set up a research project designed to test the theory formulated in terms of a working hypothesis.

When an attempt is made to test this hypothesis by means of a case study of a rural community in the Osnabrueck Northland in Lower Saxony, the data reveal no simple linear progression from tribal to peasant to urban society. Indeed, it is difficult to find any social group in this rural population which conforms to the popular definition of peasant. Thus the peasant concept, as currently used, fails to illuminate the local culture in a clear-cut, heuristic manner. On the contrary, an inquiry into the culture history of the area reveals that tribal Saxon freemen resisted conquest and the imposition of feudal institutions upon them with every cultural device at their disposal. As soon as possible they rejected feudal type relationships and attempted to reestablish their traditional institutions and to implement Saxon values in slightly changed form, especially those of the freeman and the freehold. The independent *Hof Besitzer* on his privately-owned *Besitz* reestablish his economic self sufficiency on a farmstead. He was supported by family, hired help, and hirelings and by reciprocal mutual help arrangements that he entered into with neighboring farmsteads. Thus, bypassing

the city and the church, the well established farm owner in this area became the center of the postfeudal rural social order. Cases of resistance to urbanization could be cited from other parts of the world. The Papago Indians of Arizona "accept removal from their reservation villages only with the greatest reluctance," according to William H. Kelly (1963:126).

By means of a similar process of local innovation, the rural farmers of Iceland, after termination of the Danish trade monopoly, organized their own non-urban society institutionalized in the form of local producer-consumer cooperatives.

These findings suggest that the linear social evolutionary hypothesis, with its built-in prediction of a three-stage "advancement" of human society, not only tends to discourage the meticulous type of research needed for an *explanatory* description of a society's culture which effords the empirical basis for limited prediction of local group behavior. It also tends to overlook diverse local sociocultural relationships by which many rural communities find a way to solve their practical living problems while preserving their cultural independence and even, to a considerable extent, their economic self sufficiency.

Finally, an alternative theory of sociocultural change is suggested as a means to explain the detailed field findings presented above and also to afford a basis for achieving an *explanatory* description of a local population.

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