



Introduction: Rural Societies and Agrarian Change: The Novelist's Gaze

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In his book *Sociology through Literature* (1972), the sociologist Lewis Coser wrote that the “creative imagination of the literary artist often has achieved insights into social processes which have remained unexplored in social science.” From time to time, social scientists and other scholars have sought to follow Coser’s lead and draw on literature to illuminate social processes. In 1974, David Craig (a professor of English Literature rather than a social scientist) wrote an article on “Novels of Peasant Crisis” in *The Journal of Peasant Studies*. In it, he shows how creative writing contributes to an understanding of that experience.¹ He says of Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* that the novel “describes, dramatises, and *explains* a large-scale historical process almost entirely from the point of view and in the words of those who live the process” (Craig 1974, p. 64).

Some years later, the historian of Europe Jerome Blum reviewed realist novels of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century (including work by Emile Zola as well as by five, now largely forgotten, winners of the Nobel Prize for Literature) as sources for the study of the European peasantry. He argued that

[t]he novels of the realists afford us another way of looking [at the phenomenon of agrarian change]. They go beneath the external manifestations, the macro-dimensions as it were, to tell us what was happening inside the village and inside the huts of the villagers, what was changing and what was unchanged. In doing this they give content and meaning to what Gerschenkron called “the lifeless shell of the scholar’s monographs.” The realists’ intimate first-hand knowledge of the rural world and their artistic genius enabled them to provide us with an awareness of the realities of peasant life that the accounts of scholars cannot hope to achieve. (Blum 1982, p. 139)

The aim of this In Focus section of the *Review of Agrarian Studies* is to help restore the position of literature as a source of knowledge about rural societies and agrarian

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¹ Craig (1974), pp. 47–68.

change. The four essays that appear here – one on a classic of Hindi literature about the zamindari regime in eastern Uttar Pradesh, another on French rural society in the late nineteenth century, a third on the Mexican agrarian reforms of the 1930s, and the last on Haitian rural society in the early twentieth century – are the first, we hope, in a continuing series of reviews of novels that are about rural societies, in different contexts and at different times. What do we learn from them about processes of agrarian change? What do we learn that we might not from the work of a historian or a social scientist?

REFERENCES

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