REVIEW ARTICLE

"A Homage to My Own": Remembering the Peasant Past

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Joyce, P. (2024), *Remembering Peasants: A Personal History of a Vanished World*, Scribner, New York, pp. 400.

The first words of this beautifully written, absorbing book, by a fine social historian whose own roots are in the peasant society of western Ireland,[1] may strike some of the readers of this journal as surprising, even questionable: "We do not easily remember peasants. The realities of their lives are a dim presence in the historical record. We catch only glimpses" (p. ix). This is, perhaps, a Eurocentric view, and one that the text itself arguably belies, drawing as it does on the rich historical literature about the peasantry of Poland and on work about the Italian South and the Irish West. It is certainly a view that may seem out of place in India, where such a large proportion of the population remains rural and engaged at least for some of the time in agriculture and where there is a considerable body of research and writing on peasant lives. Whether the term "peasant" remains an appropriate descriptor can be debated. Joyce's point – and it applies to the rural people of India as well as to Europe and much of the rest of the world – is that for almost all of human history, most people have lived their lives as peasants. As such, they have constituted the foundation of society, though they have usually been forgotten, disregarded, looked down upon as backward and in need of "improvement" – even if sometimes celebrated as the true, authentic "people" – and frequently oppressed. The word "peasant" itself is used in a derogatory way in European languages.

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[1] Patrick Joyce is Professor Emeritus of Social History, University of Manchester, and the author of a number of books, including *Visions of the People: Industrial England and the Question of Class, 1848-1914* (1991); *The Rule of Freedom: Liberalism and the Modern City* (2003); and *The State of Freedom: A Social History of the British State Since 1800* (2013).

Joyce quotes another author, Andro Linklater, who wrote "What the skeleton is to the anatomy, the peasant is to history, its essential, hidden support" (p. xii). Now, however, the peasantry is vanishing, to a greater extent in Europe than elsewhere, but everywhere in the world very substantially. Joyce writes, as "the London-born child of Irish rural immigrant parents . . . a sort of relict of what we have lost," and, having had "some immediate experience of the old world . . . this is the reason I write this book as I do. It is a homage to my own" (p. xv).

Though Joyce says of India that it is "the greatest peasant nation still remaining on Earth, with 43 per cent of its population in agriculture" (p. 14), the peasant world is vanishing even in South Asia. Large masses of rural workers are proletarianised, and it is now usual to refer as well to "farmers" rather than to "peasants." In Europe, the peasant world has vanished with remarkable speed over the last century. At the time of Joyce's birth, in 1945, Ireland was still very much a rural economy, but by 2010

> almost two-thirds of the population were urbanised and today rural Ireland has receded from people's daily awareness. Large tracts of the countryside are mainly concerned no longer with agricultural production, but with consumption of lifestyle, with leisure and tourism. (p. 17).

Much the same is true of most of Europe. In France, "once the greatest peasant country in Europe" (p. 12), agricultural workers make up three per cent of the labour force; in Britain and Germany, the figure is just one per cent; in Spain, five per cent. In central and eastern Europe, the figures are only a little higher. Even then, for many of these "agricultural workers" – just as in India – agriculture is only part of their employment. "(T)he 'five o'clock farmer' [is] numerous everywhere, not least Poland, Ireland and Italy" (p. 15). The "five o'clock farmer" idea may not be appropriate in India, but clearly, many rural people in India are only part-time farmers. Joyce refers to the "falling silent of the countryside" (p. 11) – and I was reminded of how quiet the village of Iruvelpattu, in the (old) South Arcot District of Tamil Nadu seemed to me in 2008 (Harris *et al.* 2010). Many more people worked outside the village, on a daily basis, or for longer periods, than was the case when I first lived in a Tamil Nadu village 35 years earlier.

Joyce's book is in part, as the title says, a personal history, and he writes, often movingly, about his own family and the country he comes from, "on the Galway-Mayo border in Ireland's far West" (p. 3) – although he was born the child of a migrant labourer, in London. The term "peasant" was not commonly used in Ireland, and in the Irish language, there is only a word meaning "a country person." But the country persons of the Joyce country in County Mayo, like those of India more recently, had come to depend upon migration to find their livelihoods over many generations before Patrick Joyce's birth. A stone's throw from where I am writing in southern Ontario, there is a simple monument to the many Irish

labourers who died in the construction of a canal in the 1830s. How widely, across the world, Irish countrymen lived, and worked, and died.

Many of the men who remained on their small farms in western Ireland, like Joyce's cousin, Sean, lived their lives alone, even though cared for by their kin. "The bachelor life he led," Joyce says, "was itself a sort of emblem of what happened far beyond Irish shores" (p. 18), where many peasants found that marriage eluded them. Joyce cites the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, who was himself the son of a village postmaster and who, in his writing about the society of the region of south-western France that he came from, in the 1960s–1980s, argued that failure to marry removed the central axis of peasant culture (Bourdieu 2008, p. 19). This, too, resonates with what is happening in India, where men from dominant farming castes, including men of the Jat caste in parts of north India, or of the Gounder caste in western Tamil Nadu – men proud of their land and their farms – have experienced increasing difficulty in finding brides. The gauche self-consciousness that Bourdieu observed among men at country dances, and Joyce perhaps in the cousin to whose memory he dedicates the book, is no doubt found as well, these days, among men from the proud "farmer castes" of India, where most young people seek ways of leaving the village and the land.

After his opening discussion of "The Vanishing," Patrick Joyce reflects, in Chapter 2 of the book, on the question "What is a peasant?". He sees the sense in Chayanov's definition of a peasant mode of production, "in which a peasant is seen as primarily oriented to securing the subsistence needs of the family unit," although, as he says, the problem with that definition is "that if strictly applied it would leave Europe in recent centuries pretty much bereft of peasants, contrary to common sense and common usage" (pp. 22–3). The same might be said of India now. Still, the definition is useful because "what it highlights is the family and the family economy," and Joyce goes on to make his central point, which is that

> the family economy denotes a way of life, and if we talk of subsistence what subsists most of all is the means of life itself, which is the family, the habitation and the land *together*: a family economy and not a business. (pp. 23–4, Joyce's emphasis)

Thus, as he says earlier in the book, "Peasants come from a world that in essence is not capitalist, although they have coexisted with capitalism for centuries" (p. xii). Joyce continues with reflection on the relations of peasants with others, powerful people who hold the peasants in subjection and who frequently treat them with contempt. Peasants have been, over long stretches of time, seen by themselves as well as by others as people who are "cursed" – an idea that Joyce takes up with reference to the work of the 19th century painter, Jean-Francois Millet, who came from a peasant family in northern France. Joyce's reflections will encourage some readers to think again about the concept of "the peasant" – I was myself reminded of some of Robert Redfield's (1965) arguments – and whether it can sensibly be equated with the idea

of the "petty commodity producer." What is missing, however, is any reference at all – surprisingly – to arguments and ideas about the peasantry in the works of Marx (his arguments, for example, about the peasantry in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*), of Lenin (is his analysis of the differentiation of the peasantry after the abolition of serfdom in Russia of no relevance to the Polish case?), or Kautsky.

Part II of the book is entitled "Worlds That Have Gone." It includes chapters – illustrated with some powerful photographs – on the significance of "the house" as "the symbolic as well as the material centre of the peasant family economy" (p. 67), on the life cycle in peasant societies and on gender relations (in Poland certainly, male dominance was much more fragile than is commonly thought), and on peasant beliefs and religious practices – where there are commonalities as well as differences between peasant societies adhering to different religious traditions. These chapters are all rich in historical detail – especially so when Joyce writes either from his own experience in Ireland or from the extraordinarily rich literature on the Polish peasantry – and in shrewd as well as sensitive commentary. South Asian readers will find, I am sure, many observations that have parallels or resonances for them. In my further comments, however, I will concentrate on the chapters in which Joyce writes about agrarian relations, about poverty and suffering, and peasant responses to them.

Joyce (Chapter 3) discusses the diversity among peasant societies, such as in Italy, which, in 1945, before three decades of economic growth when there was massive migration from South to North (and outside), was still substantially a peasant country. In 1945, there remained considerable differences across the country that had to do (just as in India) with variations in the relations of landlords and peasants and in patterns of land tenure. The same factors made for broad, long-running differences across Europe, when the line between "good" and "bad" forms of land tenure could be regarded, Joyce argues, as being defined by sharecropping (p. 50). He recognises, though he does not dwell upon, the significance of class differentiation within peasant societies. He clearly sides, for example, with the critics of Edward Banfield's influential book about the Italian South – *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society* – for its neglect of the way in which the "amoral familism" that he distinguished was itself conditioned by the structures of agrarian relations and exploitation (Banfield 1958).[2]

Joyce writes about the extent of unfreedom in the peasant societies of Eastern Europe, where the "nobility and their officials beat peasants just like draught animals were beaten, convinced that only this would work" (p. 57). It was not so different in the Italian South, as Carlo Levi (1945) showed in *Christ Stopped At Eboli*. The book was based on the writer's experience during his exile – because of his anti-fascist activism – in the South, in the 1940s. Levi saw many people reduced to being little

[2] Banfield was a Harvard professor, regarded as having contributed significantly to American conservatism. He worked as an advisor for three Republican presidents including Ronald Reagan.

more than beasts of burden, and he wrote that "no message, human or divine, has reached this stubborn poverty . . . Christ did not come. Christ stopped at Eboli" (p. 46). The kind of slavery that many rural workers in India – often Dalits – have endured, and continue to endure, bound as they often are in relations of unfreedom, are not very different.[3]

Suffering (the subject matter of the powerful Chapter 7 of Joyce's book) has been the everyday experience of peasants throughout history, even when they have not been subjected to extraordinary suffering, as in the devastating famines that peasant societies have regularly experienced. Joyce refers to a memoir of life in a village in north-western France (Brittany), written by a peasant, published in 1975 – and thought of at the time as a kind of an obituary of French peasant life – which refers to the evocative idea of "the devil in our purses": "poverty, misfortune and the despair they brought was [seen as] the Devil. To feel this despair was to have the Devil in your purse and in your pocket" (p. 187). Peasants suffered at the hands of bailiffs and other agents of landlords, and at the hands too of local big men, such as the man who was known as the King of the Joyces in mid-19th century western Ireland.[4] Suffering was inflicted by peasant on peasant – at once expressed and managed by the peasant feud – such as happened in what became known as the Maamtrasna Murders in the 1880s, when five members of the Joyce family were slaughtered (pp. 201–3, with photographs of the falsely imprisoned Patrick Joyce of that time). Through all of this, the Church in Ireland played an important role in ensuring the submission of rural people to the violence and suffering that were inflicted upon them – just as the institution of caste has made for the submission of Indian rural workers.

There is, however, also a strong sense of justice in peasant societies – expressed in the code of the "moral economy" and other "weapons of the weak" that were explored by the late James C. Scott in a succession of important books (Scott 1976, 1985, 1990).[5] The idea of moral economy is that there is a strong sense of fairness among peasants, as in the idea of there being a right to subsistence, reflected in the kinds of demands made by poor rural people on landlords and big farmers such as I have observed myself in villages. "Weapons of the weak" such as foot-dragging or wilful acts of minor sabotage, similarly, reflect a strong sense of justice. But these sentiments can also sometimes explode into acts of frenzied violence, such as in the brutal torture and murder of a nobleman in rural south-western France in 1870, when "Vengeance for suffering expressed itself ritually . . . (the) man was made to suffer just like those he had made to suffer" (p. 206).

[3] The extensive writings of Jan Breman bear eloquent testimony to this point.

[4] Such suffering is evoked very powerfully, in the setting of the Highlands of Scotland in the later 19th century by Graeme Macrae Burnet in his novel *His Bloody Project* (2015), which will be the subject of a future essay for *RAS*.

[5] Scott's work may have been less influential in India than elsewhere in the world. A remarkable scholar, he died at the age of 87 in July 2024.

There is also more organised violence, such as in the series of attacks in western Ireland in the later 19th century that culminated in the murder of a particularly notorious and very powerful landlord, Lord Leitrim in 1878. The immediate context was fury among the people at the eviction of tenants in order that land be turned over to woodland, fishing, and wildlife shooting. There have also been more extensive peasant rebellions, threatening the state. This happened in Galicia, a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire that is now in south-eastern Poland and western Ukraine, in the 1840s – an event that Joyce describes in detail.

Patrick Joyce speaks to the way in which the great historian Eric Hobsbawm opened up the study of peasant resistance and rebellion in his work on those he called "primitive Rebels" (Scott 1959) referring to acts such as those of the Irish countrymen who finally murdered Lord Leitrim. Such actions were felt by Hobsbawm, in Joyce's view, "to be 'blind and groping forwards' towards modern forms of political mobilisation, the destination of the groping looking suspiciously like the Communist Party, of which Hobsbawm was a member." But on this, Joyce comments, "Once again, the primitive peasant is to be corrected and set firmly down the right political path, namely the one that will terminate in modernity" (p. 208). One may sympathise with these sentiments, "taking the part of peasants," or with James Scott's critique of the modern state and his "two cheers for anarchism" – but still think, as I do, that without effective organisation that brings together and "scales up" local peasant resistance, such as has sometimes been accomplished by communist parties, the weapons of the weak do not of themselves bring about progressive social transformation (Scott 1998, 2012). There are still rural-urban disparities in China, no doubt, but the lives of rural people are nothing like they were before the revolution (Harriss 2013).[6]

The final section of *Remembering Peasants* is headed, simply, "Remembering," and it is about memory. The first chapter of the section is about the memories of peasants themselves, with accounts of studies of peasant memory, in different contexts. The second is a set of reflections on how the past is regarded, and on the way in which peasant life is now remembered, especially through museums. And the final chapter, which makes for a moving conclusion to the book as a whole, is about journeys and the experience of change in Poland, Italy, and finally in Ireland. Joyce concludes with "his own."

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[6] The suffering of Chinese peasants before the revolution are well described by Isabel and David Crook in their account of *Ten Mile Inn* in the 1940s, discussed in an earlier article in *RAS*.

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