DEBATES

« *Peasants, Procreation and Pensions* » *by Philip A. Neher: A Comment*

Gerhard Benecke
University of Kent at Canterbury

The study of peasant society is an obvious field of overlap between the academic disciplines. Where the social scientist builds models, analyses, systematizes and makes generalisations, the historian buries himself in piecemeal evidence from archives and libraries. Soon the one fails to perceive the trees for the wood, soon the other can not see the wood for the trees. It is thus particularly useful when a study in one discipline rouses significant interest in the other. This seems to be the case for historians who read Professor Neher's article.[1]

Neher examines the proposition that peasants have children in order to ensure that they have support in old age. A pension scheme becomes the reason for procreation. Neher makes purely hypothetical assumptions and then deduces a system of economics from them. To test his model he applies it to a hypothetical, underdeveloped agrarian economy. In that system the peasant will continue to have as many children as by tradition he thinks he will need to support his old age, notwithstanding advances in birth-control and medicine. His government will thus have to encourage or coerce him to look for security in old age elsewhere than from his hypothetical large number of children, by changing his economic system. This will mean changes in the ownership of land (from families to individuals or firms), changes in the structure of the peasant family, and imposition of an appropriate tax system upon peasants to fund a state pension scheme. Then the peasant will produce less children.

---

1 *Discussion paper 23*, Department of Economics, University of British Columbia, Canada, July 1969, published in « The American Economic Review », 61, 1971, pp. 380-9 (quotations refer to the original discussion paper).

With great conciseness Neher has built his model and effectively used it to provide advice to authorities involved in limiting the population explosion in underdeveloped countries. This advice seems to be highly practical and impressively policy-orientated. And yet it is based on pure theory and hypothesis and not on case study. Only at one point in Neher's introduction does he cite historical evidence, and then, very interestingly, it is pre-industrial, Early Modern European historical evidence that he uses.[2] It is this fact that has led to the following comment.

Firstly, can Neher's model be tested against the recorded evidence about peasant societies that historians are discovering and still be found to work?

Secondly, can the actual historical sources that remain of pre-industrial Early Modern European peasant societies (to take concrete examples), when they are analysed by historians, help the third-world development economist of today in his decision making?

Neher's basic assumption is « that family size will be larger if parents anticipate that their children will support them during their retirement years ».[3]

This seems to hold true only for the richer peasant families in seventeenth and eighteenth century German and Austrian peasant economies that have for example recently been specifically studied from historical sources.[4] Here, the richer peasants were above all those serfs who cultivated the best soil, and the largest amount of it, in the areas of traditional, medieval settlement, in the *Esch* of the *villicatio*, village or settlement.[5] These rich serfs were only a substantial minority of the total peasant population. Their legal duty as serfs (an unfree men, women and children owned by a lord) was inversely proportional to their economic privilege as the most affluent producers among all the peasant groups. In other words, the more that peasants were serfs, the larger and better were their farms: and the more that peasants were freemen, so the worse were their farms. This, after all, made economic sense to the landlords; the richer the offered tenancy, so the more the owner would seek to control the peasant's use of it, to make sure the farm was not so mismanaged as to become unprofitable — hence serfdom, or landlord's control.

Yet the majority of peasants were small farmers, cottars, and new settlers on less extensive farms with less fertile soils. They were producers

---

2 Neher, p. 2, citing E. A. Wrigley, *Family limitation in Pre-Industrial England*, in « Economic History Review », April, 1966.

3 Neher, p. 1.

4 Lutz K. Berkner, *The Stem Family and the Development Cycle of the Peasant Household: An Eighteenth-Century Austrian Example*, in « The American Historical Review », 77, April, 1972, pp. 398-418. G. Benecke, *Labour relations and peasant society in regional Germany around 1600*, seminar paper, University of Kent, January 1973.

5 G. Benecke, *Society and Politics in Germany 1500-1750*, Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., London, forthcoming 1973/4, Chapters 2 and 8.

with less duties; that is, landlords were less interested in tying them to the land as serfs. The poorer peasants were often still freemen, but all the less enviable compared with the richer serf-peasants, because no landlord, be he clerical, burgher or noble, found it worthwhile to enserf them. These poorer peasants had less duties than the richer serf-peasant precisely because they could not produce enough surplus for the landlord to worry about. This mass of small peasants lived at subsistence level producing little or no profit for their landlords, quite unlike the serf-tenant peasants on the richer soils. In order to sort out the one from the other, early seventeenth century German territorial officials for example produced very detailed records of each individual peasant's economy and potential to pay taxes at regular intervals.[6]

Thus the majority of peasants were so poor that they were not worth bothering about in the eyes of government officials and landlords. This was even more evident in the case of those without land, the labourers and servants of the peasants. Compared with the lot of his ploughman, the peasant who employed him was a grand manager, and businessman. And the ploughman might aspire to the peasant's status by casting around for a peasant's widow to marry.[7]

In early modern German-Austrian peasant societies, the richer peasants had more children per marriage than the poorer peasants, and both had more children per marriage than the labourers or living-in servants.[8] This is because the richer peasants could feed more mouths than could the other groups. If the rich peasant did not have more children, then he would have to employ more servants and labourers. The rich peasant could get more efficiency and loyalty more cheaply out of running his farm with his own flesh and blood than with the work of employed strangers.

So here seems to be a real difficulty with Neher's model. When it is adapted to the German-Austrian case study, it will only apply to the minority of rich peasants there.[9] In this study we also know that poorer peasants and labourers tended to have fewer children than richer peasants. This is clear from early modern census returns.[10] But if Neher is right that a

---

[6] H. Stöwer and F. Verdenhalven (eds.), *Salbücher der Grafschaft Lippe von 1614 bis etwa 1620*, Münster, 1969, reprints the status, rents, taxes, services, tithes and debts of nearly 3000 heads of peasant households from one small German state alone. Prices, wages, taxes, and amounts of permissible consumption are regulated at the same time in H. Stöwer (ed.), *Die lippischen Landschatzregister von 1590 bis 1618*, Münster, 1964, including in Appendix IV, « Die lippische Taxordnung (1620) »: and by *Die Lippische Policeyordnung (1620)*, in « Lippische Landesverordnungen », 1, Rinteln, 1646.

[7] As portrayed vividly in imaginative literature, August Strindberg, *Hemsöborna*, 1887, Carlsson's wooing of Widow Flod.

[8] Berkner, Tables 1, 3, 4, 5, 6 and Footnote 48.

[9] Modifying Neher p. 4 - « all members of society share and share alike ».

[10] Berkner, p. 400 for Heidenreichstein/Waldviertel, Austria in 1763: Benecke, *Society and Politics*, Chapter 4, for County Lippe/Westphalia, Germany in 1776 and 1788.

peasant's reason for having children was that they would look after him in old age, what has in fact gone wrong with the poorer peasants who did not have more children in our example? The answer lies in the economic resources of the poorer peasants and labourers. To them more children meant less food and less work available to all those people already alive. Even when more children were produced within the rich peasant families, this in itself could become a threat to the poorer peasant and labourer families who looked to these richer families for employment, and whose only other serious alternative was starvation.

What balanced this economy was the force of nature. The early modern European peasant, rich or poor, serf or free, the labourer and living-in servant, all had a life cycle which integrated them into nature.[11] Their technology was traditional: their view of the world fatalistic. The peasant who was unwise enough to marry too early and to have too many children almost deserved to see them die, because he had been so foolish in tempting fate.[12] The way of the early modern European world was the way of immutable tradition and nature.[13]

Thus the development economist can learn from an early modern European peasant society because he can study the records of how that society regulated itself, however cruelly, without his existence, without his interference, without his advice and humanity. He will learn much about tradition, balance of nature and anti-growth which he can apply to present-day, underdeveloped peasant agrarian societies. The model he will construct from this historical evidence will be one that is pre-social and pre-modern as it is pre-industrial growth, and subject to no humanitarian external influences. With such a model, he will learn to value and then to be extremely cautious in his necessary task of manipulating traditions so alien to him.[14]

---

[11] Essays of GOUBERT, MANDROU and MARC BLOCH, in ISSER WOLOCH (ed.), *The Peasantry in the Old Regime*, New York, 1970, pp. 9-41.

[12] As portrayed vividly in imaginative literature, ANNETTE VON DROSTE-HÜLSHOFF, *Die Judenbuche, Bilder aus Westfalen*, in F. DROOP (ed.), *Ausgewählte Werke*, Berlin, 1925, pp. 130, 192, 199, 202, 213.

[13] As in EDMUND BURKE, *Reflections on the Revolution in France (1790)*, Everyman edition, London, 1910, p. 23, « The dislike I feel to revolutions, the signals for which have so often been given from pulpits; the spirit of change that is gone abroad; the total contempt which prevails with you and may come to prevail with us, of all ancient institutions, when set in opposition to a present sense of convenience, or to the bent of a present inclination: all these considerations make it not unadvisable, in my opinion, to call back our attention to the true principles of our domestic laws... ».

[14] I am grateful to Dr. Peter Victor for discussion and advice on a draft of this comment.