

RURAL PROTEST: PEASANT MOVEMENTS
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RURAL PROTEST:
PEASANT MOVEMENTS
AND SOCIAL CHANGE

EDITED BY
HENRY A. LANDSBERGER

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PREFACE

UNTIL quite recently, most of the world's workers have been peasants. It was, however, possible during the first half of the twentieth century largely to ignore that fact. Attention tends to focus upon what is changing in societies, and what claimed attention then was the spread of industrialism, its consequences for industrial workers, and the progress and effects of trade unionism in ameliorating their conditions.

During the second half of our century, more attention is being given to peasant populations. The peasantry moves towards the centre of the stage of world history at the very time when the traditional rural way of life is in decline and the peasant economy is shrinking. Violence has often accompanied these changes. The great twentieth-century revolutions have been peasant-based. While the wars of the first half of the twentieth century were fought in highly industrialised countries, those of the second half of this century have been fought in areas of peasant population. The major social and political issues of Third World countries now arise from the continuing transformation of the peasantry, whether into a modern workforce or into a mass of un-integrated, poverty-ridden urban slum-dwellers. The way in which this transformation is carried out affects the prospects for peace.

The perspectives of social science, as developed in industrial countries, were initially ill-adapted to elucidating the issues in the transformation of the peasantry, and provided an inadequate basis for practical guidance to those seeking solutions. Preoccupation with the problems of development has, however, had a broadening effect upon social studies generally and in no area has this been more necessary than in the study of peasant populations. In the search for understanding of newly posed problems, the historical method has much to offer. The historian's task is to look at a complex problem in its fullness, not leaving any important facet out of account. Concerted attempts at comparative studies of specific aspects of different peasant movements may, by clarifying both differences and similarities, improve our understanding and ultimately help us to deal more effectively with the questions which now trouble us.

Foremost among these questions are: Under what circumstances have peasants become active in attempting to change their condition?

What are the origins of peasant movements? What have been their goals? What kinds of people have become their leaders? How have peasant movements related to other groups in society, such as urban workers and middle-class people? When have peasant movements been of lasting effect, and when merely ephemeral?

If the study of modern and even of some more remote peasant movements could give us any insight into these questions, it might be a step towards understanding how contemporary peasant communities may make the transition to full participation in national life.

Such considerations led the International Institute for Labour Studies to bring together a small international group of researchers on rural problems of development for a few days during the summer of 1967. This book grew out of contacts amongst scholars initiated through that meeting. The Institute's role in research is primarily one of stimulating studies of social problems of contemporary importance in its field. The opinions expressed by the authors and by Professor Henry Landsberger, the editor, are, of course, their own. The Institute does not, of itself, express views or advocate policies. I do hope, however, that the reader will agree that the contributors to this volume have demonstrated again that history written in a live concern for contemporary issues can help towards understanding and overcoming some of the gravest conflicts of the present.

ROBERT W. COX

*formerly Director, International Institute
for Labour Studies*

THE CONTRIBUTORS

- Yu. G. Alexandrov, Asian Peoples Institute, U.S.S.R. Academy of Sciences, Moscow
- D. Galaj, Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw
- R. H. Hilton, Professor, School of History, University of Birmingham
- E. J. Hobsbawm, Professor, Birkbeck College, University of London
- G. Huizer, Visiting Professor, Institute of Social Studies, The Hague
- G. D. Jackson, Jr, Professor, Department of History, Hofstra University, Long Island
- H. A. Landsberger, Professor, Department of Sociology, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill
- P. Longworth, Centre for Russian and East European Studies, University of Birmingham
- M. Molnár, Professor, Graduate Institute of International Studies, University of Geneva
- R. Stavenhagen, Professor, College of Mexico