

Peasant Society.

Séamas Ó Síocháin

Peasants have been defined as “persons who, owning or controlling land and resources, produce primarily agricultural crops for their own subsistence, but who also produce a surplus product, a portion of which is appropriated, directly or indirectly, by representatives of a larger economic system.” While scholars have applied the term to agricultural population in various parts of the world over several thousand years, its application to Ireland has been largely confined to the period from the seventeenth to the twentieth century. Though there is a substantial literature on the history of the Irish land system, and though the term “peasant” has been sporadically used, systematic application of the comparative literature on peasants has been limited.

The term has been applied to the hierarchically organised rural society of 1700-1845, with its great estate (or BIG HOUSE) at the top and beneath it, in descending order, agents or middlemen, wealthy tenant farmers, small farmers, cottiers and casual day-labourers, and defines peasants as “a class...of small producers on land who, with the help of simple equipment and the labour of their own families, produce mainly for their own consumption, and for the fulfilment of their duties to the holders of political and economic power.” Literary sources provide an insight into landlordism, the lives of the peasantry, and agrarian secret societies and sees the end of the cottier system in the “thrust towards modernity.”

Ireland can be seen as very much a part of the enormous transformation resulting from the rise of world capitalism and the impact of modernisation generally on peasant societies, the nature of peasant collective action, including obstacles to and facilitators of such action, and the variation in type of peasant systems, including class differences. The impressive succession of regional movements punctuating every decade between 1760 and 1840 indicates the capacity of Irish peasants for effective political action without external assistance and the evolution from family-size tenancies to family farms and a variant of ranch-style units and, regarding the potential for conflict between poorer and middle peasants, suggests that there is a significant difference between the pre-famine and post-famine situations.

A debate on the applicability of a “peasant model” sprang up around reappraisals of the anthropological work of Arensberg and Kimball in Co. Clare, hinging on interpretations of the degree of local autonomy that small farmers retained and the degree to which and point at which their economy and culture were drawn into the expanding world of market relations. The “peasant model” has been characterised as involving a subsistence family economy, stem family arrangements and a highly localised cultural and co-operative system, an Hannan has argued that only a “peasant model” could “adequately represent or help to explain the complexities of small farm community life” in the west of Ireland in the 1920s and 30s. Hannan underemphasised the degree to which Irish farmers were sensitive to the market: the farmer of the west of Ireland was “to a considerable degree influenced by external market forces,” while nevertheless retaining important local survival strategies. A steady process of social differentiation (class formation) was taking place with the disappearance of the smallest land-holdings, and, he believed, family-labour farms showed considerable resilience and persistence.