

V I N T A G E

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# Pig Earth

JOHN BERGER

## *Pig Earth*

John Berger was born in London in 1926. He is well known for his novels and stories as well as for his works of nonfiction, including several volumes of art criticism. His first novel, *Painter of Our Time*, was published in 1958, and since then his books have included the novel *K. G.*, which won the Booker Prize in 1972.

With *Lilac and Flag* (1990), Berger completed his peasant trilogy *Into Their Labours*, which also includes *Pig Earth* (1979) and *Once in Europa* (1987). His volumes of essays include *Keeping a Rendezvous* (1991), *The Sense of Sight* (1985), *Ways of Seeing* (1972), and *Selected Essays* (2001).

In 1962 Berger left Britain permanently, and he now lives in a small village in the French Alps.



INTERNATIONAL

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*The works of John Berg*

*PIG EARTH* (first book of the *INTO THEIR LABOURS* trilogy)  
*ONCE IN EUROPA* (second book of the trilogy)  
*LILAC AND FLAG* (third book of the trilogy)  
*A PAINTER OF OUR TIME*  
*PERMANENT RESIDENCE*  
*THE FOOT OF CLIVEDON*  
*CORKER'S FREEDOM*  
*A FORTUNATE MAN*  
*ART AND REVOLUTION*  
*THE MOMENT OF CUBISM AND OTHER ESSAYS*  
*THE LOOK OF THINGS: SELECTED ESSAYS AND ARTICLES*  
*WAYS OF SEEING*  
*ANOTHER WAY OF TELLING*  
*A SEVENTH MAN*  
*ABOUT LOOKING*  
*AND OUR FACES, MY HEART, BRIEF AS PHOTOGRAPHS*  
*THE SENSE OF SIGHT*  
*THE SUCCESS AND FAILURE OF PICASSO*  
*KEEPING A RENDEZVOUS*  
*TO THE WEDDING*  
*KINDNESS*  
*PHOTOCOPIES*  
*THE SHAPE OF A POCKET*  
*SELECTED ESSAYS*

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J O H N B E R G E R

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PIG

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EARTH

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*“Others have laboured and ye are entered  
into their labours*

ST JOHN 4-3

This book is dedicated to five friends who have taught us:

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*Théophile Jorat*

*Angeline Coudurier*

*André Coudurier*

*Théophile Gay*

*Marie Raymond*

to the friends who have helped us learn:

Raymond Berthier, Luc and Marie-Thérese Bertrand, Gervais and Mélina Besson, Jean-Paul Besson, Denis Besson, Michel Besson, Gérard Besson, Christian Besson, Marius Chavanne, Roger and Noelle Coudurier, Michel Coudurier, La Doxie, Régis Duret, Gaston Forrestier, Marguerite Gay, Noel and Hélène Gay, Marcelle Gay, Jeanne Jorat, Armand Jorat, Daniel and Yvette Jorat, Norbert Jorat, Maurice and Claire Jorat, François and Germaine Malgrand, Francis and Joelle Malgrand. Marcel Nicoud, André Perret, Yves and Babette Peter, Jean-Marie and Josephine Pittet, Roger and Rolande Pittet, Bernadette Pittet, François Ramel, Francois and Léonie Raymond, Basil Raymond, Guy and Anne-Marie Roux, Le Violon, Walter

and to Beverly with whom I learn.

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*Acknowledgements*



“The earth shows up those of value and those who are good for nothing.” A peasant judgement quoted by Jean Pierre Vernant in *Mythe et Pensée Chez les Grecs*. (Vol. 2. Paris 1971)

“The peasantry consists of small agricultural producers who with the help of simple equipment and the labour of their families produce mainly for their own consumption and for the fulfillment of obligations to the holders of political and economic power.” Theodor Shanin. *Peasants and Peasant Societies*. (London 1976)

PEASANT LIFE is a life committed completely to survival. Perhaps this is the only characteristic fully shared by peasants everywhere. Their implements, their crops, their earth, their masters may be different, but whether they labour within a capitalist society, a feudal one or other which cannot be so easily defined, whether they grow rice in Java, wheat in Scandinavia or maize in South America, whatever the differences of climate, religion and social history, the peasantry everywhere can be defined as a class of survivors. For a century and a half now the tenacious ability of peasants to survive has confounded administrators and theorists. Today it can still be said that the majority in the world are peasants. Yet this fact masks a more significant one. For the first time ever it is possible that the class of survivors may not survive. Within a century there may be no more peasants. In Western Europe, if the plans work out as the economic planners have foreseen, there will be no more peasants within twenty-five years.

Until recently, the peasant economy was always an economy within an economy. This is what has enabled it to survive global transformations of the larger economy—feudal, capitalist, even socialist. With these transformations the peasant's mode of struggle for survival often altered but the decisive changes were wrought in the methods used for extracting a surplus from him: compulsory labour services, tithes, rents, taxes, sharecropping, interests on loans, production norms, etc.

Unlike any other working and exploited class, the peasantry has always supported itself and this made it, to some degree, a class apart. In so far as it produced the necessary surplus it was integrated into the historical economic-cultural system. In so far as it supported itself it was on the frontier of that system. And I think one can say this, even where and where peasants make up the majority of the population.

If one thinks of the hierarchical structure of feudal or Asian societies as being roughly pyramidal, the peasantry were on the base frontier of the triangle. This meant, as with all frontier populations, that the political and social system offered them the minimum of protection. For this they had to look to themselves—within the village community and the

extended family. They maintained or developed their own unwritten laws and codes of behaviour, their own rituals and beliefs, their own orally transmitted body of wisdom and knowledge, their own medicine, their own techniques and sometimes their own language. It would be wrong to suppose that all this constituted an independent culture, unaffected by the dominant one and by its economic, social or technical developments. Peasant life did not stay exactly the same throughout the centuries, but the priorities and values of peasants (the strategy for survival) were embedded in a tradition which outlasted any tradition in the rest of society. The undeclared relation of this peasant tradition, at any given moment, to the dominant class culture was often heretical and subversive. "Don't run away from anything," says the Russian peasant proverb, "but don't do anything." The peasant's universal reputation for cunning is a recognition of this secretive and subversive tendency.

No class has been or is more economically conscious than the peasantry. Economics consciously determines or influences every ordinary decision which a peasant takes. But his economics are not those of the merchant, nor those of bourgeois or Marxist political economy. The man who wrote with most understanding about lived peasant economics was the Russian agronomist Chayanov. Anyone who wishes to understand the peasant should, among other things, go back to Chayanov.

The peasant did not conceive of what was extracted from him as a surplus. One might argue that the politically unconscious proletarian is equally unaware of the surplus value he creates for his employer, yet the comparison is misleading—for the worker, working for wages in a money economy, can be easily deceived about the value of what he produces, whereas the peasant's *economic* relation to the rest of society was always transparent. His family produced or tried to produce what they needed to live on, and he saw part of that produce, the result of his family's labour, being appropriated by those who had not laboured. The peasant was perfectly aware of what was being extracted from him, yet he did not think of this as a surplus for two reasons, the first material and the second epistemological. 1) It was not a surplus because his family needs had not already been assured. 2) A surplus is an end product, the result of a long-completed process of working and of meeting requirements. To the peasant, however, his enforced social obligations assumed the form of a *preliminary obstacle*. The obstacle was often insurmountable. But it was on the other side of it that the other half of the peasant economy operated, whereby his family worked the land to assure its own needs.

A peasant might think of his imposed obligations as a natural duty, or as some inevitable injustice, but in either case they were something which had to be endured *before* the struggle for survival opened. He had first to work for his masters, later for himself. Even if he were sharecropping, the master's share came *before* the basic needs of his family. If the work were not too light in the face of the almost unimaginable burden of labour placed on the peasant, one might say that his enforced obligations assumed the form of a permanent handicap. It was *despite this* that the family had to open the already uneven struggle with nature to gain by their own work their own subsistence.

Thus the peasant had to survive the permanent handicap of having a "surplus" taken from him; he had to survive, in the subsistence half of his economy, all the hazards of agriculture—bad seasons, storms, droughts, floods, pests, accidents, impoverished soil, animal and plant diseases, crop failures; and furthermore, at the base frontier, with the minimum of

protection, he had to survive social, political and natural catastrophes—wars, plague, brigands, fire, pillaging, etc.

The word *survivor* has two meanings. It denotes somebody who has survived an ordeal. And it also denotes a person who has continued to live when others disappeared or perished. It is in this second sense that I am using the word in relation to the peasantry. Peasants were those who remained working, as distinct from the many who died young, emigrated or became paupers. At certain periods those who survived were certainly a *minority*. Demographic statistics give some idea of the dimensions of the disasters. The population of France in 1320 was seventeen million. A little over a century later it was eight million. By 1550 it had climbed to twenty million. Forty years later it fell to eighteen million.

In 1789 the population was twenty-seven million, of whom twenty-two million were rural. The revolution and the scientific progress of the nineteenth century offered the peasant land and physical protection such as he had not known before; at the same time they exposed him to capital and the market economy; by 1848 the great peasant exodus to the cities had begun and by 1900 there were only eight million French peasants. The deserted village has probably almost always been—and certainly is again today—a feature of the countryside: it represents a site of no survivors.

A comparison with the proletariat in the early stages of the industrial revolution may clarify what I mean by a class of survivors. The working and living conditions of the early proletariat condemned millions to early death or disabling illness. Yet the class as a whole, in numbers, its capacity, its power, was growing. It was a class engaged in, and submitting to, a process of continual transformation and increase. It was not the victims of its ordeals which determined its essential class character, as in a class of survivors, but rather its demands and those who fought for them.

From the eighteenth century onwards populations all over the world mounted, at first slowly and later dramatically. Yet for the peasantry this general experience of a new security of life could not overlay its class memory of earlier centuries, because the new conditions, including those brought about by improved agricultural techniques, entailed new threats: the large-scale commercialisation and colonialisation of agriculture, the inadequacy of even smaller plots of land to support entire families, hence large-scale emigration to the cities where the sons and daughters of peasants were absorbed into another class.

The nineteenth-century peasantry was still a class of survivors, with the difference that those who disappeared were no longer those who ran away or who died as a result of famine and disease, but those who were forced to abandon the village and become wage earners. One should add that under these new conditions a few peasants became rich, but in doing so they also ceased, within a generation or two, to be peasants.

To say that peasants are a class of survivors may seem to confirm what the cities with their habitual arrogance have always said about peasants—that they are backward, a relic of the past. Peasants themselves, however, do not share the view of time implicit in such a judgement.

Inexhaustibly committed to wresting a life from the earth, bound to the present of endless work, the peasant nevertheless sees life as an interlude. This is confirmed by his daily familiarity with the cycle of birth, life and death. Such a view may predispose him to religion, yet religion is not at the origin of his attitude and, anyway, the religion of peasants

has never fully corresponded with the religion of rulers and priests.

The peasant sees life as an interlude because of the dual contrary movement through time of his thoughts and feelings which in turn derives from the dual nature of the peasant economy. His dream is to return to a life that is not handicapped. His determination is to hold on to the means of survival (if possible made more secure, compared to what he inherited) to his children. His ideals are located in the past; his obligations are to the future, which he himself will not live to see. After his death he will not be transported into the future—his notion of immortality is different: he will return to the past.

These two movements, towards the past and the future, are not as contrary as they might first appear because basically the peasant has a cyclic view of time. The two movements are different ways of going round a circle. He accepts the sequence of centuries without making that sequence absolute. Those who have a unilinear view of time cannot come to terms with the idea of cyclic time: it creates a moral vertigo since all their morality is based on cause and effect. Those who have a cyclic view of time are easily able to accept the convention of historic time, which is simply the trace of the turning wheel.

The peasant imagines an unhandicapped life, a life in which he is not first forced to produce a surplus before feeding himself and his family, as a primal state of being which existed before the advent of injustice. Food is man's first need. Peasants work on the land to produce food to feed themselves. Yet they are forced to feed others first, often at the price of going hungry themselves. They see the grain in the fields which they have worked and harvested—on their own land or on the landowner's—being taken away to feed others, or to be sold for the profit of others. However much a bad harvest is considered an act of God, however much the master/landowner is considered a natural master, whatever ideological explanations are given, the basic fact is clear: they who can feed themselves are instead being forced to feed others. Such an injustice, the peasant reasons, cannot always have existed, so he assumes a just world at the beginning. At the beginning a primary state of justice towards the primary work of satisfying man's primary need. All spontaneous peasant revolts have had the aim of resurrecting a just and egalitarian peasant society.

This dream is not the usual version of the dream of paradise. Paradise, as we normally understand it, was surely the invention of a relatively leisured class. In the peasant's dream work is still necessary. Work is the condition for equality. Both the bourgeois and Marxist ideals of equality presume a world of plenty; they demand equal rights for all before cornucopia, a cornucopia to be constructed by science and the advancement of knowledge. What the two understand by equal rights is of course very different. The peasant ideal of equality recognises a world of scarcity, and its promise is for mutual fraternal aid in struggling against this scarcity and a just sharing of what the work produces. Closely connected with the peasant's recognition, as a survivor, of scarcity is his recognition of man's relative ignorance. He may admire knowledge and the fruits of knowledge but he never supposes that the advance of knowledge reduces the extent of the unknown. This non-antagonistic relation between the unknown and knowing explains why some of his knowledge is accommodated in what, from the outside, is defined as superstition and magic. Nothing in his experience encourages him to believe in final causes, precisely because his experience is so wide. The unknown can only be eliminated within the limits of a laboratory experiment. Those limits seem to him to be naïve.

Opposing the movement of the peasant's thoughts and feelings about a justice in the past are other thoughts and feelings directed towards the survival of his children in the future. Most of the time the latter are stronger and more conscious. The two movements balance each other only in so far as together they convince him that the interlude of the present cannot be judged in its own terms; morally it is judged in relation to the past, materially it is judged in relation to the future. Strictly speaking, nobody is less opportunist (taking the immediate opportunity regardless) than the peasant.

How do peasants think or feel about the future? Because their work involves intervening in or aiding an organic process most of their actions are future-oriented. The planting of a tree is an obvious example, but so, equally, is the milking of a cow: the milk is for cheese or butter. Everything they do is anticipatory—and therefore never finished. They envisage this future to which they are forced to pledge their actions, as a series of ambushes. Ambushes of risks and dangers. The most likely future risk, until recently, was hunger. The fundamental contradiction of the peasant's situation, the result of the dual nature of the peasant economy, was that they who produced the food were the most likely to starve. A class of survivors cannot afford to believe in an arrival point of assured security or well-being. The only, but great, future hope is survival. This is why the dead do better to return to the past where they are no longer subject to risk.

The future path through future ambushes is a continuation of the old path by which the survivors from the past have come. The image of a path is apt because it is by following a path, created and maintained by generations of walking feet, that some of the dangers of the surrounding forests or mountains or marshes may be avoided. The path is tradition handed down by instructions, example and commentary. To a peasant the future is this future narrow path across an indeterminate expanse of known and unknown risks. When peasants cooperate to fight an outside force, and the impulse to do this is always defensive, they adopt a guerrilla strategy—which is precisely a network of narrow paths across an indeterminate hostile environment.

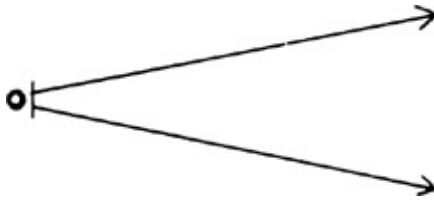
The peasant view of human destiny, such as I am outlining, was not, until the advent of modern history, essentially different from the view of other classes. One has only to think of the poems of Chaucer, Villon, Dante; in all of them Death, whom nobody can escape, is the surrogate for a generalized sense of uncertainty and menace in face of the future.

Modern history begins—at different moments in different places—with the principle of progress as both the aim and motor of history. This principle was born with the bourgeoisie as an ascendant class, and has been taken over by all modern theories of revolution. The twentieth-century struggle between capitalism and socialism is, at an ideological level, a fight about the content of progress. Today within the developed world the initiative of the struggle lies, at least temporarily, in the hands of capitalism which argues that socialism produces backwardness. In the underdeveloped world the “progress” of capitalism is discredited.

Cultures of progress envisage future expansion. They are forward-looking because the future offers ever larger hopes. At their most heroic these hopes dwarf Death (*La Rivoluzione o la Morte!*). At their most trivial they ignore it (consumerism). The future is envisaged as the opposite of what classical perspective does to a road. Instead of appearing to become ever

narrower as it recedes into the distance, it becomes ever wider.

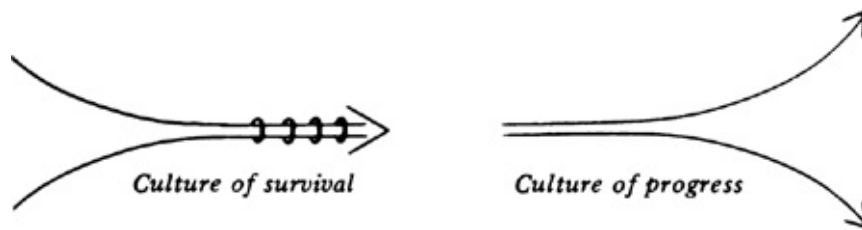
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A culture of survival envisages the future as a sequence of repeated acts for survival. Each act pushes a thread through the eye of a needle and the thread is tradition. No overall increase is envisaged.



If now, comparing the two types of culture, we consider their view of the past as well as the future, we see that they are mirror opposites of one another.



This may help to explain why an experience within a culture of survival can have the opposite *significance* to the comparable experience within a culture of progress. Let us take, as a key example, the much proclaimed conservatism of the peasantry, their resistance to change; the whole complex of attitudes and reactions which often (not invariably) allows the peasantry to be counted as a force for the right wing.

First, we must note that the counting is done by the cities, according to an historic scenario opposing left to right, which belongs to a culture of progress. The peasant refuses that scenario, and he is not stupid to do so, for the scenario, whether the left or right wing envisages his disappearance. His conditions of living, the degree of his exploitation and his suffering may be desperate, but he cannot contemplate the disappearance of what gives meaning to everything he knows, which is, precisely, his will to survive. No worker is ever in that position, for what gives meaning to his life is either the revolutionary hope of transforming it, or money, which is received in exchange against his life as a wage earner, to be spent in his "true life" as a consumer.

Any transformation of which the peasant dreams involves his re-becoming "the peasant" he once was. The worker's political dream is to transform everything which up to now has condemned him to be a worker. This is one reason why an alliance between workers and peasants can only be maintained if it is for a specific aim (the defeat of a foreign enemy, the expropriation of large landowners) to which both parties are agreed. No general alliance is normally possible.

To understand the significance of peasant conservatism related to the sum of peasant experience, we need to examine the idea of change with a different optic. It is an historic commonplace that change, questioning, experiment, flourished in the cities and emanated

outwards from them. What is often overlooked is the character of everyday urban life which allowed for such an interest in research. The city offered to its citizens comparative security, continuity, permanence. The degree offered depended upon the class of the citizen, but compared to life in a village, all citizens benefited from a certain protection.

There was heating to counteract changes of temperature, lighting to lessen the difference between night and day, transport to reduce distances, relative comfort to compensate for fatigue; there were walls and other defences against attack, there was effective law, there were almshouses and charities for the sick and aged, there were libraries of permanent written knowledge, there was a wide range of services—from bakers and butchers through mechanics and builders to doctors and surgeons—to be called upon whenever a need threatened to disrupt the customary flow of life, there were conventions of social behaviour which strangers were obliged to accept (when in Rome ... ), there were buildings designed for the promises of, and monuments to, continuity.

During the last two centuries, as urban theories and doctrines of change have become more and more vehement, the degree and efficacy of such everyday protection has correspondingly increased. Recently the insulation of the citizen has become so total that it has become suffocating. He lives alone in a serviced limbo—hence his newly-awakened, but necessarily naïve, interest in the countryside.

By contrast the peasant is unprotected. Each day a peasant experiences more change more closely than any other class. Some of these changes, like those of the seasons or like the process of ageing and failing energy, are foreseeable; many—like the weather from one day to the next, like a cow choking to death on a potato, like lightning, like rains which come too early or too late, like fog that kills the blossom, like the continually evolving demands of those who extract the surplus, like an epidemic, like locusts—are unpredictable.

In fact the peasant's experience of change is more intense than any list, however long and comprehensive, could ever suggest. For two reasons. First, his capacity for observation. Scarcely anything changes in a peasant's entourage, from the clouds to the tail feathers of a cock, without his noticing and interpreting it in terms of the future. His active observation never ceases and so he is continually recording and reflecting upon changes. Secondly, his economic situation. This is usually such that even a slight change for the worse—a harvest which yields twenty-five per cent less than the previous year, a fall in the market price of the harvest produce, an unexpected expense—can have disastrous or near-disastrous consequences. His observation does not allow the slightest sign of change to pass unnoticed and his debt magnifies the real or imagined threat of a great part of what he observes.

Peasants live with change hourly, daily, yearly, from generation to generation. There is scarcely a constant given to their lives except the constant necessity of work. Around their work and its seasons they themselves create rituals, routines and habits in order to wrest some meaning and continuity from a cycle of remorseless change: a cycle which is in part natural and in part the result of the ceaseless turning of the millstone of the economy with which they live.

The very great variety of these routines and rituals which attach themselves to work and to the different phases of a working life (birth, marriage, death) are the peasant's own protection against a state of continual flux. Work routines are traditional and cyclic—they repeat themselves each year, and sometimes each day. Their tradition is retained because

appears to assure the best chance of the work's success, but also because, in repeating the same routine, in doing the same thing in the same way as his father or his neighbour's father, the peasant assumes a continuity for himself and thus consciously experiences his own survival.

The repetition, however, is essentially and only formal. A work routine for a peasant is very different from most urban work routines. Each time a peasant does the same job there are elements in it which have changed. The peasant is continually improvising. His faithfulness to tradition is never more than approximate. The traditional routine determines the ritual of the job: its content, like everything else he knows, is subject to change.

When a peasant resists the introduction of a new technique or method of working, it is not because he cannot see its possible advantages—his conservatism is neither blind nor lazy—but because he believes that these advantages cannot, by the nature of things, be guaranteed and that, should they fail, he will then be cut off alone and isolated from the routine of survival. (Those working with peasants for improved production should take this into account. A peasant's ingenuity makes him open to change, his imagination demands continuity. Urban appeals for change are usually made on the opposite basis: ignoring ingenuity, which tends to disappear with the extreme division of labour, they promise the imagination a new life.)

Peasant conservatism, within the context of peasant experience, has nothing in common with the conservatism of a privileged ruling class or the conservatism of a sycophantic petty bourgeoisie. The first is an attempt, however vain, to make their privileges absolute; the second is a way of siding with the powerful in exchange for a little delegated power over other classes. Peasant conservatism scarcely defends any privilege. Which is one reason why, much to the surprise of urban political and social theorists, small peasants have so often rallied to the defence of richer peasants. It is a conservatism not of power but of meaning. It represents a depository (a granary) of meaning preserved from lives and generations threatened by continual and inexorable change.

Many other peasant attitudes are frequently misunderstood or understood in an exact opposite sense—as the diagram of the mirror-image has already suggested. For example, peasants are thought to be money-minded whereas, in fact, the behaviour which gives rise to this idea derives from a profound suspicion of money. For example, peasants are said to be unforgiving, yet this trait, in so far as it is true, is the result of the belief that life without justice becomes meaningless. It is rare for any peasant to die unforgiven.

We must now ask this question: What is the contemporary relation between peasants and the world economic system of which they form part? Or, to put this question in terms of our consideration of peasant experience: What significance can this experience have today in a global context?

Agriculture does not necessarily require peasants. The British peasantry was destroyed (except in certain areas of Ireland and Scotland) well over a century ago. In the USA there have been no peasants in modern history because the rate of economic development based on monetary exchange was too rapid and too total. In France 150,000 peasants now leave the land every year. The economic planners of the EEC envisage the systematic elimination of the peasant by the end of the century. For short-term political reasons, they do not use the word



*elimination* but the word *modernisation*. Modernisation entails the disappearance of the small peasants (the majority) and the transformation of the remaining minority into totally different social and economic beings. The capital outlay for intensive mechanisation and chemicalisation, the necessary size of the farm exclusively producing for the market, the specialisation of produce by area, all mean that the peasant family ceases to be a productive and consuming unit, and that, instead, the peasant becomes the dependent of the interests which both finance him and buy from him. The economic pressure on which such a plan depends is supplied by the falling market value of agricultural produce. In France today the buying power of the price of one sack of wheat is three times less than it was fifty years ago. The ideological persuasion is supplied by all the promises of consumerism. An intact peasantry was the only class with an inbuilt resistance to consumerism. When a peasantry is dispersed, markets are enlarged.

In much of the Third World the systems of land tenure (in large parts of Latin America one per cent of landowners own sixty per cent of the farm land, and one hundred per cent of the best land), the imposition of monocultures for the benefit of corporate capitalism, the marginalisation of subsistence farming, and, only because of these other factors, the mounting population, cause more and more peasants to be reduced to such a degree of absolute poverty that, without land or seed or hope, they lose all previous social identity. Many of these ex-peasants make for the cities where they form a millionfold mass such as has never existed before, a mass of static vagrants, a mass of unemployed attendants: attendants in the sense that they wait in the shanty towns, cut off from the past, excluded from the benefits of progress, abandoned by tradition, serving nothing.

Engels and most early-twentieth-century Marxists foresaw the disappearance of the peasantry in face of the greater profitability of capitalist agriculture. The capitalist mode of production would do away with small peasant production "as a steam engine smashes a wheelbarrow." Such prophecies underestimated the resilience of the peasant economy and overestimated the attraction of agriculture for capital. On the one hand, the peasant family could survive without profitability (cost accounting was inapplicable to the peasant economy); and on the other hand, for capital, land, unlike other commodities, is not infinitely reproduceable, and investment in agricultural production finally meets a constraint and yields decreasing returns.

The peasant has survived far longer than was predicted. But within the last forty years monopoly capital, through its multinational corporations, has created the new highly profitable structure of agribusiness whereby it controls, not necessarily the production, but the market for agricultural inputs and outputs and the processing, packaging and selling of every kind of foodstuff. The penetration of this market into all corners of the globe is eliminating the peasant. In the developed countries by more or less planned conversion; in the underdeveloped countries catastrophically. Previously cities were dependent on the countryside for their food, peasants being forced, in one way or another, to part with their so-called surplus. Soon the world countryside may be dependent on the cities even for the food its own rural population requires. When and if this happens, peasants will have ceased to exist.

During the same period of the last forty years, in other parts of the Third World—China, Cuba, Vietnam, Cambodia, Algeria—revolutions have been made by peasants, and in the name. It is too soon to know what kind of transformation of the peasant experience they

revolutions will achieve, and how far their governments can or cannot maintain a different set of priorities to those imposed by the world market of capitalism.

It must follow from what I have already said that nobody can reasonably argue for the preservation and maintenance of the traditional peasant way of life. To do so is to argue that peasants should continue to be exploited, and that they should lead lives in which the burden of physical work is often devastating and always oppressive. As soon as one accepts that peasants are a class of survivors—in the sense in which I have defined the term—an idealisation of their way of life becomes impossible. In a just world such a class would no longer exist.

Yet to dismiss peasant experience as belonging only to the past, as having no relevance to modern life, to imagine that the thousands of years of peasant culture leave no heritage for the future—simply because it was seldom embodied in lasting objects—to continue to maintain, as has been maintained for centuries, that peasant experience is marginal to civilisation, is to deny the value of too much history and too many lives. No line of exclusion can be drawn across history in that manner, as if it were a line across a closed account.

The point can be made more precisely. The remarkable continuity of peasant experience and the peasant view of the world acquires, as it is threatened with extinction, an unprecedented and unexpected urgency. It is not only the future of peasants which is now involved in this continuity. The forces which in most parts of the world are today eliminating or destroying the peasantry represent the contradiction of most of the hopes once contained in the principle of historical progress. Productivity is not reducing scarcity. The dissemination of knowledge is not leading unequivocally to greater democracy. The advent of leisure—the industrialised societies—has not brought personal fulfilment but greater manipulation. The economic and military unification of the world has not brought peace but genocide. The peasant suspicion of “progress,” as it has finally been imposed by the global history of corporate capitalism and by the power of this history even over those seeking an alternative to it, is not altogether misplaced or groundless.

If one looks at the likely future course of world history, envisaging either the further extension and consolidation of corporate capitalism in all its brutality, or a prolonged uneven struggle waged against it, a struggle whose victory is not certain, the peasant experience of survival may well be better adapted to this long and harsh perspective than the continually reformed, disappointed, impatient progressive hope of an ultimate victory.

Finally there is the historic role of capitalism itself, a role unforeseen by Adam Smith or Marx: its historic role is to destroy history, to sever every link with the past and to orientate all effort and imagination to that which is about to occur. Capital can only exist as such if it continually reproduces itself; its present reality is dependent upon its future fulfilment. This is the metaphysic of capital: the word *credit*, instead of referring to a past achievement, refers only to a future expectation. Such a metaphysic has come to inform a world system and has been translated into the practice of consumerism. The same metaphysic has lent its logic to the categorization of all those who are being impoverished by the system as *backward* (i.e., bearing the stigma and shame of the past). This trilogy has been written in a spirit of solidarity with the so-called “backward,” whether they live in villages or have been forced to emigrate to a metropolis. Solidarity, because it is such women and men who have taught me the little I know.

OVER THE COW'S brow the son places a black leather mask and ties it to the horns. The leather has become black through usage. The cow can see nothing. For the first time a sudden night has been fitted to her eyes. It will be removed in less than a minute when the cow is dead. During one year the leather mask provides, for the walk of ten paces between fasting-stable and slaughter-house, twenty hours of night.

The slaughter-house is run by an old man, his wife, who is fifteen years younger, and the son, who is twenty-eight.

Seeing nothing, the cow is hesitant to move, but the son pulls the rope round her horns and the mother follows holding the cow's tail.

"If I had kept her," the peasant says to himself, "another two months until she calved. We could not have milked her any more. And after the birth she would have lost weight. Now is the best moment."

At the door to the slaughter-house the cow hesitates again. Then allows herself to be pulled in.

Inside, high up near the roof, is a rail network. Wheels run on the rails and from each wheel a bar hangs down with a hook on the end of it. Attached to this hook a horse's carcass of four hundred kilos can be pushed or pulled by a fourteen-year-old.

The son places the springed bolt against the cow's head. A mask at an execution renders the victim more passive, and protects the executioner from the last look of the victim's eyes. Here the mask ensures that the cow does not turn her head away from the bolt which stuns her.

Her legs fold and her body collapses instantaneously. When a viaduct breaks, its masonry—seen from a distance—appears to fall slowly into the valley below. The same with the wall of a building, following an explosion. But the cow came down as fast as lightning. It was not cement which held her body together, but energy.

"Why didn't they slaughter her yesterday?" says the peasant to himself.

The son pushes a spring through the hole in the skull into the cow's brain. It goes in nearly twenty centimetres. He agitates it to be sure that all the animal's muscles will relax, and pulls it out. The mother holds the uppermost foreleg by the fetlock in her two hands. The son cuts by the throat and the blood floods out on to the floor. For a moment it takes the form of an enormous velvet skirt, whose tiny waist band is the lip of the wound. Then it flows on and resembles nothing.

Life is liquid. The Chinese were wrong to believe that the essential was breath. Perhaps the soul is breath. The cow's pink nostrils are still quivering. Her eye is staring unseeing, and her tongue is falling out of the side of her mouth.

When the tongue is cut out, it will be hung beside the head and the liver. All the head

tongues and livers are hanging in a row together. The jaws gape open, tongueless, and each circular set of teeth is smeared with a little blood, as though the drama had begun with a small animal, which was not carnivorous, eating flesh. Underneath the livers on the concrete floor are spots of bright vermilion blood, the colour of poppies when they first blossom, before they deepen and become crimson.

In protest against the double abandonment by blood and brain, the cow's body twists violently and its hind legs lunge into the air. It is surprising that a large animal dies as quickly as a small one.

The mother lets go of the foreleg—as if the pulse was now too weak to count—and it falls limply against the body. The son begins to cut the hide away around the horns. The son learns his speed from his father, but now the old man's actions are slow. Ponderously at the back of the slaughter-house the father is splitting a horse in two.

Between mother and son there is a complicity. They time their work together without a word. Occasionally they glance at each other, without smiling but with comprehension. She fetches a four-wheeled trolley, like an elongated, very large open-work pram. He slits each hind leg with a single stroke of his tiny knife and inserts the hooks. She presses the button to start the electric hoist. The cow's carcass is lifted above them both and then lowered on its back into the pram. Together they push the pram forward.

They work like tailors. Beneath the hide, the skin is white. They open the hide from neck to tail so that it becomes an unbuttoned coat.

The peasant to whom the cow belongs comes over to the pram to point out why she had to be slaughtered; two of her teats were decomposing and she was almost impossible to milk. He picks up a teat in his hand. It is as warm as in the stable when he milked her. The mother and son listen to him, nod, but do not reply and do not stop working.

The son severs and twists off the four hooves and throws them into a wheelbarrow. The mother removes the udder. Then, through the cut hide, the son axes the breast bone. This is similar to the last axing of a tree before it falls, for from that moment onwards, the cow, no longer an animal, is transformed into meat, just as the tree is transformed into timber.

The father leaves his horse and shuffles across the abattoir to go outside and pee. This he does three or four times each morning. When he walks for some other purpose, he walks more briskly. Yet it is hard to say whether he shuffles now because of the pressure on his bladder, or to remind his much younger wife that, whilst his old age may be pathetic, his authority is remorseless.

Expressionless the wife watches him until he reaches the door. Then she turns solemnly back to the meat and starts to wash it down and then to dab it dry with a cloth. The carcass surrounds her but almost all tension has gone. She might be arranging a larder. Except that the fibres of meat are still quivering from the shock of the slaughter, exactly as the skin of a cow's neck does in summer to dislodge the flies.

The son splits the two sides of beef with perfect symmetry. They are now sides of meat such as the hungry have dreamt of for hundreds of thousands of years. The mother pushes them along the rail system to the scales. They weigh together two hundred and fifty-seven kilograms.

The peasant checks the reading on the meter. He has agreed to nine francs a kilo. He gets nothing for the tongue, the liver, the hooves, the head, the offal. The parts which are sold to

the urban poor, the rural poor receive no payment for. Nor does he get paid for the hide.

At home, in the stable, the place which the slaughtered cow occupied is empty. He puts one of the young heifers there. By next summer she will have come to remember it, so that each evening and morning, when she is fetched in from the fields for milking, she will know which place in the stable is hers.

When she could no longer  
prepare mash for the chickens  
or peel potatoes  
for the soup  
she lost her appetite  
even for bread  
and scarcely ate

He was painting himself  
black on the branches  
to watch the crows  
who no longer flew high  
but kept to the earth

Smaller than the stove  
she sat by the window  
where outside the leeks grow

By the wood stack  
— the hillsides of brushwood  
she had carried on her back—  
he crouched and became  
the chopping block

Her daughter-in-law  
fed the chickens  
put wood in the stove

At night he reclined on each side  
of the black fire  
burning her bed  
What she asked him was his opposite?  
Milk he answered with appetite

Lining the kitchen  
family and neighbours followed  
her fight for breath

High up the mountain

---

he pissed on  
snow and ice  
to melt the stream

She found it easier if  
she laid her head  
on the arm of the chair

His urine was the shape  
of an icicle  
and as colourless

In her hand  
she held a handkerchief  
to dab her mouth  
when it needed wiping

On his black mirror  
there was never breath

The guests as they left  
kissed the crown of her head  
and she knew them  
by their voices

He trundled out a barrow  
overturned it  
on the frozen dungheap  
its two legs still warm

The seventy-third anniversary  
of her marriage night  
she spent  
huddled in the kitchen  
from time to time calling her son  
she called him by his surname  
who rocked on his slippered feet  
like a bear

One mistake you made  
Death did not joke like a drunk  
You should not have grown old

I was not a thief she replied

Dead she looked as tall  
laid out on her bed  
in dress and boots  
as when a bride  
but her right shoulder  
was lower than the left  
on account of all  
she had carried

---

At her funeral  
the village saw the soft snow  
bury her  
before the gravedigger



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