

REVIEWS

TROSSBACH, WERNER. *Soziale Bewegung und politische Erfahrung. Bäuerlicher Protest in hessischen Territorien 1648-1806*. Drumlin, Weingarten 1987. 333 pp. Ill. DM 38.00.

Werner Troßbach has written a book well worth reading because it poses questions outside the theoretical perspective which inspired it. His title, *Social Movement and Political Experience*, signals his intention to further specify the role of the “common man” in the history of early modern Germany. He breaks new ground with “thick description” of ten conflicts between peasant communes and landlords and/or territorial princes which festered between 1602 and 1806 occasionally becoming violent. The conflicts occurred in the Wetterau/Vogelsberg, an agricultural region with a deserved reputation for productive soils and shattered sovereignty. Specifically, he directs his attentions to the ways and means peasants carried out conflict with feudal authorities, in what political arenas they were carried out, what results they achieved, how strategic and tactical decisions came to be made, and finally whether political experience changed peasant consciousness.

Troßbach's ten cases support his assertion that, as in other small territories, the main issues of contention between peasants and dominant classes in the Wetterau/Vogelsberg were increased labor services, taxes, and encroachment by the authorities on common rights. Petty princes of the area bore the brunt of peasant resistance because in this region *Landherrschaft* (territorial authority) had merged with *Grundherrschaft* (landlordship). After rehearsing a litany of conflicts of interest the author concludes that material factors were usually the primary motivation behind peasant willingness to take on the authorities. Mediating and qualifying their response was a subjective perception of their own “relative deprivation”. This concept is used to explain why outbreaks of resistance do not correlate perfectly with conjunctural changes.

Peasants responded to new encroachments through legal suits which attacked particular tributary impositions before imperial courts. These suits developed a broader significance as peasants cloaked their arguments in “old law” or custom. Eventually, they made extreme demands for the complete removal of labor services and freedom from the Wetterau association of counties that had been established during or immediately after the late middle ages. Authorities frequently could document their claims better than peasants forcing the latter to more abstract levels

of argument which recalled a time before human memory. On this plain they laid a more general claim to a “good life”, “livelihood”, and “subsistence”, which might be based on “godly law”. Troßbach asserts that some peasants may have gone even further to make arguments based on “natural law”. The evidence at this point is scanty and his argument appears stretched.

Larger jurisdictional associations (*Gerichte* or *Ämter*) were the usual units of peasant resistance but decisions about participation in lawsuits and other forms of action were made by villages. Important questions arise from the “thick descriptions” of the application of communal forms of coercion against individuals unwilling to participate in resistance movements. The “*Ruhigen*” or “quiet ones” in a village refused to take part in acts of non-cooperation or to contribute to village treasuries that supported lawsuits. As a result they could expect to be cut off from the use of communal property, subject to misdemeanor charges before village courts, and sometimes even beatings and building burnings. This material calls into question the idealized picture of the German peasant village as a unified focal point for the resistance of a peasant “class” against feudal overlordship.

Troßbach recognizes with discomfort the parallels between this coercive peasant behavior and Nazi era forms of public repression. However, it seems he could have gone much further than this by carefully and perhaps quantitatively identifying “*Ruhigen*” and their persecutors within the village. To find groups of peasants related by kinship persisting over generations defined as “outsiders” in the absence of ethnic and religious differences suggests an analysis based on class or status differences. Such social analysis would free us from the need to accept the political definition of these groups given them by their persecutors. He argues that the “*Ruhigen*” shared little beside their political dissent but this is difficult to believe.

Consonant with the theme of “peasant political experience” the author seeks to show that peasant reticence to engage in violent behavior in the 17th and 18th century Wetterau was not simply the result of successful repression by authorities, but a “rational” recourse to alternative means of pursuing their interests. Most prominent among these opinions were lawsuits in imperial courts, organized non-cooperation with mandates, and collective actions against authorities attempting to enforce sanctions against resisters. The “rationality” of bringing suit against their immediate authorities may be questioned because, as he points out, peasants lost the vast majority of their cases even when their legal position was strong. The “legalization of social conflict” was a strategy on the part of authorities which was apparently successful in preventing uprisings from spreading beyond small areas by limiting issues to relatively narrow grounds based on peculiar local conditions. However, encouraging peasant participation in legal processes did not eliminate violence – on the contrary frequently peasant defeats in trials could only be sustained through pitched battles between peasants and authorities. Such responses suggest that peasants did not completely integrate themselves into the systems represented by imperial and territorial legal institutions. Rather, they maintained a cultural identity that was at least partially separate from that of their rulers.

Much work on European peasant culture argues that habitual and regular patterns of behavior manifested in confrontations with authorities indicated an incapacity to learn or a consistently conservative value structure on the part of peasants. However, Troßbach argues vigorously and convincingly that the conclu-

sions of these studies cannot be applied to the German peasants in the Wetterau/Vogelsberg. Rather, because rural dwellers used trials to structure their resistance, habitual mentalities and behavioral forms were modified into a form of interest representation based on flexible and calculated strategies. Thus, peasant behavior in the 18th century region became less predictable in terms of the regularities of peasant culture and more predictable in terms of peasant interests.

The most convincing evidence of this process of learning, as Troßbach calls it, comes from letters between leaders of peasant movements pursuing trials in Vienna and those who remained at home. Letters frequently counsel restraint and demonstrate an increasing willingness to engage authorities on a long term basis by manipulating imperial legal rules with moderate success. At other times, the letters direct those at home to use the on-going trial to resist enforcement attempts on the part of territorial authorities. Thus they also demonstrate a capacity to balance and play off the different imperial and territorial legal systems in rational ways. Furthermore, it becomes clear that the trial itself, regardless of its outcome, was an important organizational tool for a peasant movement. In using it, organizations began to resemble modern interest groups and their representatives.

It is argued that by sending representatives to Vienna and regional seats of the imperial courts to pursue lawsuits, hire advocates, and speak with referees, peasant movements laid themselves open to a problem of differentiation between leadership and rank and file. In the course of their activities peasant deputies not only came to dictate policy to the movement back home but developed a legal knowledge upon which the villagers became dependent. Unfortunately the position of the deputies demanded a relatively constant flow of encouraging reports in order to maintain the confidence of a mistrustful rank and file. Villagers devoted substantial resources towards maintaining deputies at trial sites, providing necessary bribe money for case referees, advocates' salaries, and finally towards care for families and work that the farmer/deputies necessarily left behind them. Because it was difficult for villagers to justify to themselves such expenses without promise of success, the deputies fell into the bad habit of reporting falsely on the progress of suits and ultimately betrayed the trust of their quasi-office in other ways as well.

The author analyzes this split as a base/leadership problem which he sees as common to more recent political movements rather than as typical of most *Ancien Régime* conflicts between authorities and peasants. However, it seems more appropriate to see such difficulties as typical of brokers mediating between corporately organized groups. In such a view trials and related actions become a strategy of class or status mobility on the part of deputies. One of his prominent cases – that of Niclas Diemer, a deputy from Bettenhausen – may be used to illustrate such an alternative interpretation. Striking, was Diemer's growing independence from his fellow villagers manifested in his conversion to catholicism in Vienna, his bigamous relationship with a Viennese woman, and his expressed and eventually realized desire never to return to his native village. Such behavior recalls the financial and political independence of retired stem family elders (*Auszügler*) described by Hermann Rebel in his work on 17th century upper Austria.¹ Moreover, to see deputies in this light puts

¹ Hermann Rebel, "Peasant Stem Families in Early Modern Austria: Life Plans, Status Tactics, and the Grid of Inheritance", *Social Science History*, vol. 2, 1978, nr 3, gives us

them in a similar social context as the multiplying village offices of mid-eighteenth century Hessen-Kassel just to the north of the Wetterau.² Finally it suggests that intra-village conflict over participation in resistance may have been a conflict between peasant movers and peasant dodgers. Regardless of the approach the book raises the critically important question whether deputies and their kin were hijacking the institutions of public power in village and elsewhere to support a new mediating position between partially integrated villages and different structures of authority. Pursuit of this question might tie peasant political behavior in the Wetterau more firmly to *Ancien Régime* forms of authority which almost always had to operate through brokers. The author himself proceeds suggestively in this direction with his discussion of the advocates who represented peasants before the courts. His next book might well be “Political Movements and Social Experience”.

Peter Keir Taylor

LENGER, FRIEDRICH. *Zwischen Kleinbürgertum und Proletariat. Studien zur Sozialgeschichte der Düsseldorfer Handwerker 1816-1878*. Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 1986. 332 pp. DM 68.00.

German writers have had much to say about the history of craftsmen, or *Handwerker*. For a long time attention focused on the demise of the guild system and the decline in craftsmen's economic conditions. Historians such as Wolfram Fischer countered this tendency by looking at the contribution made by craftsmen to economic growth through their adaptation to new circumstances. More recently there has been a series of studies that have followed neither “pessimist” nor “optimist” line, but have offered an increasingly differentiated economic and social history of craftsmen which embraces not only changes in production and distribution but also variables like migration and social mobility. Friedrich Lenger's book on Düsseldorf is an exemplary work within this genre. At the same time he has made a major contribution to our understanding of class formation in nineteenth-century Germany, building on (and sometimes transcending) the work of historians such as Hartmut Zwahr and Jürgen Kocka. Lenger's book also has valuable arguments about *Handwerker* politics between 1848 and the late 1870s, so that the work considered here is one of major importance.

examples of stem family elders wandering far from home using the resources of the estates already passed on to their heirs as a basis for adventure, financial and political speculation during the Thirty-Years-War. It seems as if the deputies are using the lawsuits in very similar ways.

² Peter Keir Taylor, “The Household's Most Expendable People: The Draft and Peasant Society in 18th Century Hessen-Kassel”, unpublished Ph.D. diss., University of Iowa, 1987, and George Thomas Fox, “Studies in the Rural History of Upper Hesse”, unpublished Ph.D. diss., Vanderbilt University, 1976, both find substantial evidence for the formation of a peasant elite as the 18th century progressed. The formation of the elite appears to be based both on property relations and on control of village offices which increased substantially in number until later in the 18th century when villages began to complain about the cost.