

THE PROBLEM WITH 'PEASANTS'

Language matters. The words that we choose to describe what we do influence the terms in which others will interpret, accept, or reject our actions. Calling a new movement by a name which has nearly always been used disparagingly isn't likely to be helpful. The word 'peasant' has gained currency lately among a new wave of back-to-the-land-ers, encouraged by the new political voice offered by La Via Campesina UK. Let's examine this word with care, for it is a false friend.

In *Working Class Hero* (1970) John Lennon sang: "And you think you're so clever and classless and free / but you're all still fucking peasants as far as I can see." No, he didn't mean it nicely - he was just using it in its normal English sense, as a pejorative. Historically, it has no obvious roots in the English language. The French 'paysan', the Spanish 'paisano', come simply from *pais*, the land. No problem there; but in the British collective subconscious, its origin in Norman French is offputting. Doubtless the post-1066 Green Men (*Land 13*) would have resented the description. It's just not an English thing to be. Back in 1817, William Cobbett explained it thus:

"There has come into the heads of ... [the country gentlemen] ... a notion, that it is proper to consider the Labouring Classes as a *distinct cast*. They are called, now-a-days, by these gentlemen, "*The Peasantry*". This is a new term as applied to Englishmen. It is a French word, which, in its literal sense, means *Country Folks*. But in the sense in which it is used [abroad], it means, not only country people, but also a distinct and degraded class of persons, who have no pretensions whatever to look upon themselves ... as belonging to the same society, or community, as the Gentry; but who ought always to be "*kept in their proper place*". And it has become of late the fashion to consider the Labouring Classes in England in the same light, and to speak of them and treat them accordingly, which never was the case in any former age."

Consider the Cambridge Dictionary's definition of peasant: "a person who owns or rents a small piece of land and grows crops, keeps animals, etc. on it, especially one who has a low income, very little education and a low social position. This is usually used of someone who lived in the past or of someone in a poor country"; plus "a person who is not well-educated or is rude and does not behave well". Or the *OED*: "One who lives in the country and works on the land, either as a small farmer or as a labourer; any rustic of the working classes; a countryman,

a rustic. In early use, properly only of foreign countries; often connoting the lowest rank, antithetical to *noble*." It then lists usages such as: "Bastardy, peasantry or dishonour". So the word comes heavily freighted with negative history. We are, collectively, a class-riddled and xenophobic society with a bad attitude to muddy fingernails. Of course we should resist such attitudes, but this is better done with a clear awareness of the issues, and using words that are helpful to all parties.

In Europe an unbroken tradition of small farming continues. When Bonaparte called Britain "a nation of shopkeepers", he was deriding our sedentary bourgeois culture in contrast to France's sons of soil and toil - genuine peasants. This survival occurs in societies where property is inherited equally by all siblings, so that each retains a little of the ancestral patch. Not so in Britain. We have primogeniture, which destroys peasantry. But we do, also, have an ancient and honourable tradition of independent small farmers, called, not peasants, but *yeomen*.

A yeoman is "a man holding a small landed estate; a freeholder under the rank of gentleman; hence *vaguely* a commoner or countryman of respectable standing; *esp.* one who cultivates his own land" (*OED*). Independence, reliability, respectability and hard work are the key attributes. Thus the Yeoman Farmer became the exemplar, "the backbone of the nation". It's highly unlikely that any NFU member would describe him or herself as a 'peasant', or thank you for so doing; whereas yeoman (or yeoperson, just possibly) is more likely to be acceptable to the broad agricultural community. And when you live in the country, it's wise to get on with the neighbours. But no - *yeoman* is now far too quaint and smacks of morris-dancing. That'll never work.

New land-workers are urgently needed. In *The Land* we discuss the many unnecessary obstacles to repopulating the countryside, and campaign for their abolition. We wish all new entrants to small-scale farming the best of luck (and weather). It would be tragic if their efforts capsized upon the reef of an ill-chosen description. And so we greet the re-naming of La Via Campesina UK as The Landworkers' Alliance with relief. 'Land-worker'? It says what it means, and though it doesn't sound glamorous or clever, it is at least classless - and free.

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It's a great life, if you don't weaken ... The traditional definition of 'peasant' implies a life of unremitting toil and drudgery, as shown by this woman harvesting seaweed on Inishmore, Aran Islands in the 1930s. Is this what newcomers to peasantry have in mind?