

Book Reviews

Eric Vanhaute, *Peasants in World History* (New York: Routledge, 2021). 146 p. ISBN 9780415740944.

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Bringing together a comprehensive account of peasants' trajectories in world history is a massive project. Eric Vanhaute has delivered it in the form of a concise and straight-forward book which nonetheless highlights the diversity of ways in which peasants have propelled social changes. To get there, he takes the reader back to the formation of early Agrarian states and then moves forward up to the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Peasants in 2018. Vanhaute is mainly preoccupied with showing that (expanding) peasant frontiers have been fundamental to the rise and fall of capitalism, empires and civilisations. More precisely, peasantries have since the invention of agriculture not only supplied food and materials, but also fuelled societies' abilities to grow. The key variables in this review are the social organization of peasantries, their integration into broader societies, and the networks linking such processes locally, regionally and globally.

The book is organized in seven brief chapters, the first one laying out the goals and key concepts upon which the other six present, chronologically, how peasant frontiers were created, expanded and (not) exhausted over history. Peasantries have not only persisted into our times, they are thriving. While they have apparently been doing the same for ten millennia, namely tilling the earth for their own livelihoods and producing surpluses, Vanhaute aptly situates them as the most recurrent frontiers for civilisation. This has happened, he argues, through processes of agrarian change, which are never complete but have incorporated agrarian and rural worlds within broader societies and economies. The first of those agrarian changes, which is itself not complete, was the rise of agriculture, farming and herding, which enabled larger populations to live closer together and to develop more complex social organization models. These were not rarely based on hierarchy and exchange. Upon this, early Agrarian states emerged in different world re-

gions and at their own pace between the fourth and third millennium BCE. And they did so by creating new peasant frontiers.

Centralizing power became an increasingly widespread trend across world regions, as indicated by Vanhaute's tally of about 60 Agrarian empires between 3000 BCE and 1800 CE. These empires were the scenarios for a more intense social hierarchisation, and particularly for lasting divisions of productive and symbolic roles between men and women. While they deployed various strategies to control population (politics) and resources (economics), a common feature was their increasing dependence upon extending frontiers to access more resources and afford more labour. Such social transformations were especially evident during the last three centuries of this broader period, though, 1500 to 1800 CE, when more sophisticated systems of labour coercion and agricultural production were interconnected across the world within (chiefly European) empires. The result was a global wave of peasantisation and of emerging exchange networks.

Finally, the most accelerated expansion took place after 1870, with the consolidation of global markets and modern states. The combination of both has altered social orders across all the world regions, albeit at different rhythms. The result has been a shift towards a more prominent role of individuals, including peasants, in work and exchange. A few decades into this greater integration, the share of the world population whose livelihoods depended on tilling the earth fell sharply. The trend was so dramatic that peasants became a subject of scholarship (around 1960) to find out how they were going to disappear. Nevertheless, while food scarcity became less of a problem throughout this period, environmental damages as a result of intensified exploitation of natural resources have challenged further expansion. And moreover, at this point in the third millennium CE, peasantries have not only survived but their ways of reconciling work, land and nature have become, according to Vanhaute, 'both a social and ecological imperative' (p. 136). Upon closing with this call, readers are once again reminded that agrarian changes have not been completed.

In each of these junctures, Vanhaute has sought to balance both concurring patterns and the ubiquitous particularities across different regions of the world. Summarizing and situating such large and complex social processes within his argument is a bold exercise. Yet he is convincing and concise, in my opinion. This book may be brief but it does not seem apt for reading in a few sittings. Instead, each chapter is packed with clear arguments and more broad than deep evidence,

so it has a clear intention of providing a starting point for students or researchers less familiar with the field. In addition to this, however, it works as a good reference for more advanced students and researchers seeking to reflect on how their own findings may be situated in broader time frames, and in world history.

Sebastián De La Rosa Carriazo, KU Leuven & Minciencias Colombia

Maurits A. Ebben and Louis Sicking (eds), *Beyond Ambassadors. Consuls, Missionaries, and Spies in Premodern Diplomacy* (Leiden: Brill, 2020). x, 223 p. ISBN 9789004438842 (hardcover), 9789004438989 (e-book).

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The field of diplomatic history used to be firmly anchored in Garrett Mattingly's 1955 book *Renaissance Diplomacy*. Resident ambassadors that emerged with the Italian city states at the end of the fifteenth century formed the baseline for the historical analysis of formal inter-polity exchanges of the premodern period. In the last two decades or so, diplomatic history has developed in a field that includes cultural exchanges and the agency of people beyond just the ambassadors. This edited volume by Ebben and Sicking, which shares the results of a conference in Leiden in September 2016, does precisely that and contributes to the post-Cold War wave of renewed interest in diplomatic history from specifically Medieval and Early Modern historians.

The book is divided into an introduction and four parts of two chapters each. After a theoretical contribution, the subsequent three parts focus on case studies of consuls, missionaries, and spies. Each case study contains a medieval and an early-modern contribution in an attempt to overcome the divide between the two historical periods.

The introduction by the editors is an excellent summary of the historiographical developments since Mattingly's work and its primary boon for the Anglophone academic world is that it draws extensively from scholarly contributions in French and German. Although French might still be the *lingua franca* of present-day diplomatic exchanges, English has become increasingly dominant in scholarly work. Thus, making findings and historiographical developments available to a wider audience is very appropriate.