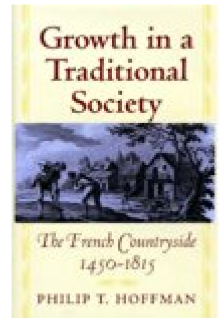
H-Net Reviews in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Philip T. Hoffman. *Growth in a Traditional Society: The French Countryside, 1450-1820.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996. xvi + 361 pp. $39.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-02983-2.



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In a recent on-line review of an economic history text edited by T. G. Rawski, historian Michael Dintenfass of the University of Wisconsin remarks that the book "invites historians to discuss matters that no longer interest them deeply."[1] In his volume on pre-Revolutionary French agriculture Philip Hoffman also seeks to write an economic history which will make concepts and findings influenced by the cliometric revolution accessible to historians.[2] I fear that despite his meticulous and imaginative research, Hoffman will meet the same fate as the authors of Rawski's volume and find that he is talking past his audience. Yet historians of early modern and revolutionary France, even those of a postmodern bent, will have to take into consideration his conclusions about the agricultural economy if they want to understand the behavior of most French men and women of the preindustrial era.

Hoffman's goal is to teach historians of early modern France that cliometrics has something to offer them and that they can understand its lessons even if not conversant with economic theory and econometric methods. Specifically he wants to revise the "consensus" view that the French agricultural economy was stagnant for more than 350 years before the Revolution because small farms were inefficient and the village community was hostile to innovation. After outlining this position in the first chapter, the rest of the book argues that the consensus is wrong on all particulars: early modern agriculture was not stagnant, at least not in all times and places; small farms were no less efficient than large ones; members of the village community were not bound by unyielding tradition but sought their individual interests, which sometimes might be served by traditional arrangements, sometimes by innovation.

Chapter Two ("Common Rights and the Village Community") begins with a dispute, revealed in legal documents, from a village near Nantes on the Loire in which the local farmers seem to be defending their traditional rights to pasture on the common against a local lord who wants to enclose it. But Hoffman springs a surprise on us: the poor farmers insisting on their common rights were pasturing, not their family cows, but sheep, which they leased from merchants in return for a share of the profits. In this way the poor used traditional rights to break into "nascent rural capitalism" (p. 23). The story is complicated, but by no means is it one in which the poor cooperated to uphold tradition in face of a modernizing capitalist elite. Instead, strife was more common among the villagers than cooperation, and they were equally likely as the rich to be involved in the market.

In Chapter Three ("Labor Markets, Rental Markets, and Credit in the Local Economy"), Hoffman disputes the claim that markets were risky, maintaining that they reduced rather than increased the variation of peasants' income. Most peasants were involved in one market or another, whether labor, rental, or credit. Here he finds another assumption to disprove: that higher rent on smaller parcels of land resulted from either the power of large tenants or the land hunger of the poor. Rather he finds that the difference resulted from the landlords' collection of a risk premium from the poorer tenants of smaller parcels because they would be more likely to default on their payments.

With Chapters Four ("Agricultural Productivity in France, 1450-1789") and Five ("Explaining Productivity in a Traditional Economy") Hoffman comes to the center of his concerns. What was the output of farms and how did it change? What were the reasons for the changes which occurred? At first glance, it would seem that answering these questions would have to begin with measurements of the total output of French agriculture at several points in time. But that is probably impossible since no one was collecting national data until the eighteenth century, and, even if contemporaries had collected such data, the researcher would face problems such as changes in national borders. So Hoffman adopts another strategy: comparison of Total Factor Productivity (TFP) at different times and places. TFP measures how efficiently producers turn their inputs–in agriculture typically land, labor, and capital–into output–wheat, wool, and so on. When TFP rises it means that the same inputs yield a greater output. The advantage of using this measure is that TFPs can be compared even if areas are very different because what is being measured is the output per unit of input. Nevertheless, direct measurement of the factors runs into almost as many problems as does measurement of total output, so Hoffman adopts a technique used by Robert Allen ("The Efficiency and Distributional Consequences," *Economic Journal*, vol. 92, 1982) to circumvent these problems. Instead of trying to measure how much wheat was produced or how many hours of labor were needed in its production, he measures prices, wages, and especially rents. Given certain assumptions about the agricultural economy, mostly that it participated in a competitive market, Hoffman can derive its TFP. I would accept Hoffman's assumptions, which recent studies of Italian, English, French and United States farming tend to reinforce.

The conclusions are that despite considerable regional and temporal variation, agricultural efficiency grew considerably in the Parisian Basin from the sixteenth to the late eighteenth centuries. There was also growth after 1750 in the Albigeois and Beaujolais and in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Normandy. Elsewhere, at least in the twenty communities which form Hoffman's sample, the consensus view of a stagnant agriculture is borne out.

What caused stagnation in some times and places and growth in others? "Peasant mentalities" and communities were not responsible for stagnation. Nor were obstacles to combining small farms into larger ones (e.g., by enclosure), since small size was not in itself a cause of inefficiency and small plots could be combined to produce larger ones if farmers wanted. Recurrent wars and taxes, which caused uncertainty, were more to blame. So conversely, peace encouraged growth, as did demand from large cities and reduction of transport costs. Only Paris was really large enough to have a stimulating effect, and productivity in the Parisian Basin rose steadily at levels comparable with those of England. If the rest of France remained behind, one might conclude, as does Vernon Ruttan for a later period, that the fault was not in the farm sector, but in the slow growth of the urban economy ("Structural Retardation," *Journal of Economic History*, vol. 38, 1978).

Hoffman is a member of an increasingly rare breed, the historian doing economic history. As a historian, he has read manuscript sources in archives scattered throughout France, with special attention to leases for farms owned by the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris. Account books and court cases provide not just statistics, but enable the construction of narratives, which can be equally valuable as sources of human behavior. Hoffman is attentive to specific conditions and thus is careful to reveal the different patterns of growth over time and place, even if it means that at the end we receive a set of nuances, not a dramatic bang.

At the same time, Hoffman is also an economist. His undergraduate degree in mathematics and advanced training in economics allow him to manipulate econometrics and economic theory with assurance. This is important because the computation of TFP and determination of the causes of its rise or fall are not straightforward. Hoffman can do the necessary calculations because he knows that seemingly irrelevant information may be vital and is able to turn that information into data for his analysis.

Growth in a Traditional Society is thus a truly interdisciplinary book and should be read by economists who want to understand how growth can occur in a preindustrial economy and by historians who wish to put behind them the stereotypes of pre- Revolutionary French society.

Notes:

[1]. Michael Dintenfass on eh.teach@cs.muohio.edu, 30 September 1996, reviewing Thomas G. Rawski, ed., *Economics and the Historian.* (1996).

[2]. Other French and American historians working in the same vein include Gilles Postel-Vinay, Jean-Marc Moriceau, Jean-Laurent Rosenthal, and George Grantham.

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