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Patrick Joyce: Why we risk a great deal when we forget our peasant past



In Europe there were peasants, but in Ireland they were called country people, or just farmers. Image: Getty

Patrick Joyce

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“Peasants” is a tricky word. Especially when you are writing about your own family. My forebears in the Joyce Country north of Connemara and in rural Wexford would probably not have used the term. They perhaps did not even know what it meant.

Those who were called peasants elsewhere would be called country people in Ireland, or just farmers. In Irish, I am told, there is no word beyond “tuathánach” (a country person), which is neutral and not pejorative.

“Peasant” is from “pays” – countryside; the English word is a borrowing from French. That is all “peasant” means: a country person. However, the opprobrium that is so widely attached to the word, as to peasants themselves, means that the term itself is shunned. This is absurd.

When I started work on my new book, *Remembering Peasants*, setting the Irish experience within the bigger picture, I was amazed no one had done such a thing before.

It would seem surprising that so simple a matter as the associations of a word would prevent the Irish from seeing they are part of what the historian Eric Hobsbawm (1917-2012) called the most dramatic and far-reaching social change of his time, one that cuts us off for ever from the world of the past: the death of the European peasantry.

In the introduction to his work on late-20th century peasant experience, *Into Their Labours*, John Berger wrote: “In western Europe, if the plans work out as the economic planners have foreseen, there will be no more peasants within 25 years.”

He wrote those words over a quarter-of-a-century ago, and got it very nearly right.

The urban dwelling proportion of the world's population has increased from just over 20pc in 1950 to approaching 60pc. In Ireland in 1913, almost half the employed population were in agriculture. When Ireland joined the now EU in 1973, the proportion was a quarter. Now it is less than 5pc.

As for the so-called industrial nations in Europe, in France, once the greatest peasant country in Europe, the percentage of people in agriculture (of total employment) in 1913 was 41pc. In 1950, it was 23pc, but by 2019 it was only 3pc. The figures for the same years in Germany are respectively 37pc, 14pc and 1pc. For Spain, Portugal and the other less-industrialised nations, most of all in eastern Europe, the figures for those in agriculture in 1950 were much higher and the decline more precipitous.

I do not know if it is the word "peasant" that prevents Ireland's story being told as part of this much larger one, but I do know how strange it is that what have so often been highly charged debates about national identity have been conducted almost completely without reference to this great collective peasant death. Whatever the case, the Irish are just as much European when they recognise they have been peasants as when they identify themselves as moderns.

There is a whole history to be unearthed here, a comparative one of what the European nations have done with their peasant pasts. This history is in part a history of forgetting or of never even knowing in the first place.

In fact, Ireland seems to me to do a decent enough job of remembering compared with many of the others when it comes to music, language and sports, which are matters of embodied practice.

Peasants matter because of what the pattern of their lives reveals about being human. What they have to tell us concerns how the Earth and the heavens can be lived in a different way from our own. Theirs is the outlook of those who cannot bend the world to their will, of those who do not conceive of a world of unlimited increase.

Unlike our modern world, in which we have willed the planet and its people to the edge of disaster. This willing we call progress. Peasants were, after all, right to distrust it. We may all have to learn before too long how to be survivors, and peasants – the class of survivors – have things to teach us.

Unlike us, peasants' direct exposure to the natural world gave them an understanding of nature that is assuredly not ours, but which nonetheless we can learn from. They had a vision of a world that included the recognition that the dead – and, with them, the past itself – have a foundational role in human existence.

'Remembering Peasants' by Patrick Joyce is published by Penguin on February 15