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Peter M. Jones, *Agricultural Enlightenment: Knowledge, Technology, and Nature, 1750 – 1840*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. xi + 256 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. $100.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN: 9780198716075

Review by Stephen Miller, University of Alabama at Birmingham.

Peter Jones is an accomplished historian. His monographs exhibit meticulous research on peasants and politics in the century surrounding the French Revolution. In regional and village studies, he has integrated his findings into the vast scholarly literature and, in so doing, provided informative resolutions of the debates and established the conceptual framework for the field. Jones, moreover, has developed his scholarship in additional synthetic books for scholars and students on the relations between noble and bourgeois elites on the one hand and the great majority of the French residing in the rural communities on the other. [1]

This latest book represents something of a departure in that Jones brings forth original research on the process of learning about agriculture in the age of revolutions and, in this way, engages, for the first time in his career with the scholarships on economic development. As we will see, Jones determines, in continuity with his previous books, that politics represented the decisive variable in the agrarian question of the period.

Jones begins his analysis by describing the essential traits of European agriculture. Prior to the transportation revolution of the 1840s, markets were short-range, most land was devoted to cereals, and bread grains were consumed locally. Farmers were leery of replacing land planted in grains with vines, industrial plants, or green forage for cattle. They would be skeptical of claims that one could gain more output from fewer arable acres. Only a small number of intensively farmed belts around cities escaped two, three or four-year rotations with fallow land. In the 1780s, about 69 percent of France, Jones reveals, was subject to two-field rotations, and another 31 percent to three. The cultivators thus left extensive tracts of potentially crop-bearing land unplanted all the time. In short, people regarded farming as an activity oriented toward the production of food for local consumption. They did not share, Jones argues, the capitalist assumption that a diligent class of wealth creators should exploit the land for money.

From the Atlantic to the Urals, farms consisted of scattered strips located in each of the fields of a village. All households in the community, Jones explains, thus had compensation for soil variability, crop disease, adverse weather conditions, and harvest failures. In about 1920, villagers in mountainous parts of France still had strips of land at different altitudes. At this time, officials pondered a law to instigate farm consolidation, but the administration of the Charente department replied that the farmers would resist. They preferred to continue cultivating the lands of their ancestors on the plateaus, plains, and hillsides.

The strips in village fields did not allow for independent access. The community or seigneurial manor, not the individual farmer, therefore controlled what the households planted, when they sowed the land, and when they harvested the crops. The community also regulated access to common lands so that all members had rights to glean and to graze their livestock.

This sort of farming for local use, Jones shows, militated against technical progress. The scythe, for example, cut lower than did the sickle, and was especially handy for lower-growing crops like clover and meadow-grass for haymaking. The scythe permitted growers to farm additional acreage and economize on labor. The sickle became obsolete in England, on the Junker estates east of the Elbe, and Sweden by 1850. But in France, and on the peasant farms of Germany, the sickle remained the predominant harvest tool well into the nineteenth century. By cutting low, the scythe spilled the grains consumed in the communities. The scythe only made sense in areas such as those east of the Elbe where land was in more abundant supply than was labor.

It was not only the peasants, Jones demonstrates, who preferred this labor-intensive subsistence farming. In the Hainaut region of France, fallow land endured largely because landlords made their tenants adhere to the traditional three-field system. All over France, Jones shows, rather than encourage the tenants to improve productivity, the leases were prescriptive with the purpose of preventing the tenants from exhausting the soil. They prohibited the planting of cereals on the same fields two years in a row. Leases rarely lasted beyond nine years, a brief interval which deterred the planting of nitrogen restoring crops such as sainfoin or lucerne. In the Bordelais, lords collected dues on grape harvests and threatened tenants with expulsion for altering land use.

Government officials, by the 1760s, acknowledged the need to curtail collective rights if farmers were to improve their properties. But often the landlords gained wealth as commercial grazers and opposed the enclosure of the common lands. In Lorraine, they blocked the authorization of enclosures in 1767 and the partition of the commons in 1771. The Parlement of Burgundy, a high tribunal staffed by noble landlords, prevented any curtailment of pasturing rights in these years.

Jones' thesis is that this system, dominant on the European continent, did not evolve toward capitalist development. After 1750, rather, intellectual debate about the economy and the appropriate changes to the age-old practices of agriculture became an obsession all over Europe. Many believed that the accumulation of useful knowledge and improved schemes for the national economy would raise farm output. States then started to enact policies to make these changes occur.

Economic historians, by contrast, generally assume that a movement of ideas could not exercise leverage over the material forces and deep-seated traditions. Yet this assumption, Jones argues, leads to economic determinism. He contends instead that one should use the Enlightenment in the study of the eighteenth-century economy, because those engaged in the intellectual debates were chiefly concerned about attainable ends and incremental improvements. Governments looked to the Enlightenment as an opportunity and guide to enhance the fiscal resources available from the land.

Jones' clearest evidence comes from his study of Scandinavia. The monarchy of Denmark-Norway enacted agricultural Enlightenment, largely in the former country, between about 1780 and 1810. Prior to this transformation, households with hereditary lands on the manor farmed in strips and open-fields under the watchful eye of the community. Village fields often consisted of a tangled web of peasant strips and demesne or manorial land retained by feudal lords for their private use. The burden of corvée work owed to the lords increased to the point that in 1770 well over half of the population performed 200 days a year of labor services. In 1773, all male peasants were bound to their place of birth on the manor.

In 1757, the king of Denmark set up a commission to restructure the agricultural system. His reformers envisioned a productive freehold peasantry separate from the manor. They sought to eradicate labor services, consolidate and enclose farmland, abolish the village community and communal rights, and introduce the nitrogen-restoring crops and animal husbandry prevalent in England. The monarchy established a credit bank, the first of its kind in Europe, to advance loans for improvements and facilitate the redemption of manorial obligations. The monarchy thus legislated serfdom out of existence by 1807.

The Swedish crown, Jones continues, explicitly modeled its edicts of 1757 on the accelerating reform acts passed by Parliament in England. Yet these laws did not eliminate three-field rotations or the village community. In the 1780s, the Baron Rutger Macklean, on his private initiative, consolidated 51 fields, each with 60-100 parcels, into 73 farms of 40 continuous acres each. These farms, in the main surplus-producing province of Sweden, were suited to the growing of fodder crops and the elimination of fallow. The break-up of the village community then proceeded swiftly on the southwestern plains. Rental agreements of the Scania province of Sweden, at the beginning of the 1800s, began to contain improving clauses. Yet these leases did not find many takers because of the risks involved in introducing clover into rotations. The peasants preferred to farm edible crops. Nevertheless, in the early 1800s, the Swedish crown enacted policies to enclose farmland and raise its productivity.

Jones argues that the bureaucratic states of Denmark-Norway and Sweden successfully implemented agrarian reforms and spurred growth. By 1820, Sweden became an exporter of grain, whereas it had previously imported grain in the eighteenth century. In Denmark, agricultural growth, by the 1830s, stimulated the development of an efficient food-processing industry.

Jones shows that the French Revolution of 1830 led the monarchy of Hanover to re-convene the Diet and pass the decree of 1831 abolishing seigneurial privileges and obligations in an effort facilitate rural development. By this time, however, reformers had grasped that the sluggishness of the economy arose more out of the common rights over the unenclosed fields than simply out of the persistence of seigneurial dues. Abolishing dues was not enough to spur productivity. Noble landlords exploited stubble grazing and pasturing on meadows after the first haying. These were rights vested in the rural community, which governments would have to extinguish if they were to facilitate growth. Thus, a local revolution, triggered by events in France and Belgium, precipitated reform in the Duchy of Brunswick. Legislation of 1834 dissolved the legal bonds between lords and peasants and divided the common lands. The legislation set up a bank to enable the redemption payments to the lords.

The anomaly to Jones' thesis is the Netherlands and especially England, where, he acknowledges, Jan van Zanden, Eric Kerridge, Robert Allen and other historians document the divergence within Europe between these countries and the rest of the continent characterized after 1400 by economic stagnation. In England, long before the Enlightenment, agriculture and manufacturing, real wages, and commercial production all surged forward. The agricultural revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries entailed the floating of water meadows to stimulate early grass growth, the flexible alternation of tillage and fodder crops, and the dramatic expansion of animal husbandry. Jones could have pointed out, to buttress his argument, that England in this period saw an intellectual movement emphasizing reason and science in husbandry, including agronomic writers such John Worlidge and Jethro Tull amid a general expansion in the volume of publications on farming. [2]

All-in-all *Agricultural Enlightenment* displays the qualities of an historian in complete command of his subject thanks to a fruitful career of primary research and study of the scholarly literature. Jones shows, through his careful reconstruction of the evidence, that, in the face of roughly the same slow rates of urbanization and industrialization, agricultural growth only took place in England and Holland. It failed to materialize everywhere else in Europe apart from Denmark, Sweden and a few other principalities where states imposed changes to the traditional agrarian structures.

For this reason, one is shocked to read Jones' purported agreement with the dominant school of thought regarding rural development. At various points of his analysis, Jones alleges to have come to the same opinion as Adam Smith—an opinion reiterated by Johann Heinrich von Thunen, Michael Kopsides and Nikolaus Wolf with regard to the German territories—concerning the sequence leading to economic development. According to this opinion, the growing demand of the new industrial population in the towns created incentives for agriculture and led to new uses of the arable lands. Farmers adjusted agricultural practices in order to take advantage of the opportunities for gain. Agricultural productivity thereby increased.

Yet as this review of *Agricultural Enlightenment* makes clear, Jones demonstrates the exact opposite. In case after case, he shows that the opportunities offered by urban demand did not lead to progress on any appreciable level. Peasants and lords both had rational approaches to agriculture, only not ones oriented toward the accumulation of money. Peasants sought to strengthen their communities, the basis of their efforts to have secure lives. The seigneurial classes had traditional means of taking wealth from this community-based farming. Neither peasants nor lords responded to prospects for gain by altering their economic ethos. What Jones demonstrates is that rural development only took place after state reformers in various monarchies and principalities, armed with agricultural Enlightenment, intervened politically in rural affairs to break up the village community and reorient the economic behavior of the peasants and lords.

In fact, Jones acknowledges that in Scandinavia, scholars reject the Smithian paradigm that the pull of the market drove forward agricultural change. Scandinavia was relatively rural compared to the rest of Europe. These scholars note that institutional land reform stimulated the economy of Scandinavia, whereas other parts of Europe did not see much growth despite their better access to urban markets. Jones' own research should have led him to agree with his Scandinavian colleagues. His book then would have stood out as a polemic in the positive sense of the term; for it is the paradigm-shifting works that attract interest and bring publicity to an academic field, prompt debate and further research, and lead scholars from other domains to adapt its findings and methods to their own areas of study. [3]

NOTES

[1] Peter Jones' monographs on the peasantry include *Politics and Rural Society: The Southern Massif Central c. 1750-1880* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985) and *Liberty and Locality in Revolutionary France: Six Villages Compared, 1760-1820* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003). His synthetic works on the Revolution include *The Peasantry in the French Revolution* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988); *Reform and Revolution in France: The Politics of Transition, 1774-1791* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995) and *The French Revolution, 1787-1804* (London and New York: Pearson Longman, 2003).

[2] C. G. A. Clay, *Economic Expansion and Social Change: England 1500-1700* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 131.

[3] A few such profile-raising books include: François Furet's polemic against the classic interpretation of the French Revolution. *Interpreting the French Revolution* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Robert Brenner's innovative perspective on the transition to capitalism. T. H. Aston, C. H. E. Philpin, eds., *The Brenner Debate: Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985); and William Beik's argument against the commonly-held assumptions about Louis XIV's imposition of royal authority. *Absolutism and Society in Seventeenth-Century France: State Power and Provincial Aristocracy in Languedoc* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

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