

Book Review

THE VANISHING PEASANT

Innovation and Change in French Agriculture
by Henri Mendras. Translated by Jean Lemer.

M.I.T. Press, Cambridge, 1970.

Most countries in the world find that their agricultural sector lags behind other areas in developing into a modern economy. In Papua New Guinea the recent rapid development of our economy has largely been the result of new business enterprises owned by expatriates. Many village people have entered the cash economy by growing small areas of new crops or rearing livestock, but most of these people have continued to regard themselves as subsistence gardeners. They have remained on the edge of the cash economy and have not adopted new practices which would increase their productivity. This is causing concern to planners who want to see Papua New Guinea develop her economy rapidly.

Planners who are concerned with the failure of Papua New Guinea villagers to adopt more productive innovations should read "The Vanishing Peasant". Although it deals with the French peasant, many of the findings of Henri Mendras in his extensive study of rural communities in France are applicable to other countries including Papua New Guinea. The study is one of the most extensive ever carried out on the various aspects of change in rural communities. In particular his study of basic attitudes to work, the land, the family, the farm and to time contribute to our understanding of traditional societies. To the peasant, says Mendras, the fundamental professional qualities are a "feeling for the land" and "courage". The universal values of science, the economic rationality and the imposed direction of work and time, familiar to the town-based extension worker, are foreign values which are not rel-

evant to their life. To the peasant the extension worker recommending changes is often seen as a threat. He is usually made more so by the methods he uses if he seeks to deal with individual farmers and have them adopt new innovations. The following passage would seem to have particular relevance to Papua New Guinea.

"The mechanism of change is essentially collective and social in nature: innovation must be integrated into the common routine of the entire village in order to be accepted. Hence the peasant is never inclined to be the only one to do something unaccustomed; on the contrary, he is carried along by his group. Extension work that is based on the assumption that it can be more effective when directed toward individuals is misguided. A single individual has great difficulty in making decisions, as psychologists have shown and recent experience has confirmed. Agricultural progress has been much more rapid when it was the act of groups and institutions" (p. 40).

Mendras concludes with a view of possible future developments in French agriculture. To revitalize rural life, he proposes a national system of agricultural "workshops" organized around towns of 4,000 to 6,000 people. His proposals verge on an ideal model for society that would in all probability prove impracticable, but they are based on a belief in the ability of peasant communities to adapt rapidly to change if they are given the right conditions; a vital condition is that a new, visible and easily understood system is rapidly established. A study of "The Vanishing Peasant" by planners in Papua New Guinea should assist them to ensure that the "right conditions" are developed here. This should enable a rapid change by village communities which will keep them in balance with the developments in urban centres.

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