

Karl Alexander von Müller, “The Influence of the Peasantry in the National Community of the *Volk*” (1938)

Abstract

In this essay from 1938, Karl Alexander von Müller discusses the importance of the peasant spirit for German culture and for the health of the national community. In the previous century, Müller argued, Germans had experienced more dramatic and rapid change than they had in the previous thousand years, a fact that he felt threatened the health of the national body. The very earth beneath the peasants’ feet was “quaking and quivering” with the drastic and sudden changes brought on by modern life, which made it difficult for the peasant—or indeed, the entire *Volk*—to adjust.

Luckily, German peasants, he argued, were a hearty, stubborn folk who could safeguard Germany’s heritage into the brave new future of the *Volksgemeinschaft*. The peasantry, he believed, would always remain firmly anchored in German tradition as the country evolved with modernity. As a result, the peasant was a model for all Germans—independent, respectful of the land, hard-working, and skeptical of outsiders.

Source

[...]

Nor is it any different in the remaining rural areas of Germany’s peasant community, for although the peasants in each of these areas differ in terms of their economic systems, domiciles, heritage, and customs, and in politics, they are the natural representatives of those uniquely German qualities upon which the diverse wealth of German history in particular rests—and at the same time, the unmistakably German peasant: a typical figure, with simple, wood-cut features, who in turn demonstrates an affinity for similarly simple, broad-cut, and complete creatures and creations.

By his very nature, he is the formidable picture of his people’s perseverance. Why? Not for sheer love of the old-fashioned, not for sentimental reasons. He is not cut from such fainthearted cloth. But he is not content to experiment with innovations in theory, testing them out in his mind where thoughts may easily dwell side by side; he must put them to the test in the harsh, unrelenting reality of nature; nor is he content to leave others to bankroll his inventions; he must bear the costs of each innovation himself, pay from his own pocket. This is why he is naturally suspicious of dogma passed down from the ivory tower. This is why he clings to those things he knows from his own experience, with the same degree of dogged tenacity that has served him for centuries as he has wrenched his fruits from the soil, down to the very last detail. The wooden fences such as those described in the oldest-extant Bavarian statute book from twelve hundred years ago [...] are still to be found here in our country; the blades of straw demarcating paths that were not to be taken through the fields still mark these paths today. So even positive innovations are usually adopted by German peasants very slowly. How long did it take for the peasant to take a liking to the potatoes that now constitute his primary source of nourishment? Very often, it is only through hardship, hunger, or war that he has been forced to accept crucial economic improvements.

[...]

And yet this ancient world of German peasantry has seen the advent of a new epoch in the past century as our modern era of sciences and technology, of machines, of traffic, of lending institutions, of the urban

metropolis and heavy concentrations of people and industry has encroached on every sector of life. And the ground beneath the peasant's feet is quaking and quivering today from the earthshaking upheavals of changing times in which nothing seems secure anymore. For the peasantry, as for the entire *Volk*, the changes of the past century have been greater than those of the past thousand years, and many of these changes seem to be directly aimed at the very nature of the peasants' way of life.

But the peasantry is, as we have seen, by nature a perseverant class—and change has become a sign of our times. One of the most important internal prerequisites is the opportunity to maintain a consistent, regular source of secure income; two of its greatest dangers are the sudden shift in economic conditions and the dependence of even the smallest agricultural business on a ready store of cold cash assets. Today we are experiencing the dramatic increase in precisely these dangers; this internal prerequisite seems most acutely at risk. Germany has become a predominately industrial country in the course of the past generation. For the first time in all the centuries of our history, the peasantry no longer constitutes the bulk of the German *Volk* as a whole. At the same time, modern transportation and technology threaten to suspend the geographical limitations that have thus far protected its uniqueness. Will these developments continue to wreak havoc on the German peasantry and throw it completely off its track? Will they completely destroy the thousand-year traditions of the peasantry, completely crush its thousand-year heritage? If the culture of ownership were ever to be truly shaken beneath their feet, German history would have reached its profoundest and most dangerous turning point.

For even today, the German peasantry is the ballast that keeps not only the ship of our state but indeed of our entire folkloric heritage and our *Volk* from capsizing in the storm. The need for this ballast in our German *Volk* is in fact twofold because we are still lacking the compass of a solid national instinct that guides other people through all the tides of change and upheaval. The German peasantry is the last great bulwark of nature in the fastidiously overrefined house of artifice our culture has become.

[...]

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