James Simpson
Family Farmers, Land Reforms and Political Action. An Alternative Economic History of Interwar Europe. Cham Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024. 269 pages.
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It is almost as though Simpson intends to do with this book for the whole of Europe what he did for Spain in his previous book, *Why Democracy Failed: The Agrarian Origins of the Spanish Civil War*, co-written with Juan Carmona. He suggests that Europe in 1918 was at the point of a "democratic spring." "… farmers were now the largest political constituency. The creation of new national frontiers, liberal constitutions, and greatly extended suffrage produced a 'democratic spring', offering farmers the possibility of creating an alternative future, especially in Southern and Eastern Europe. Yet for this to happen, family farmers had to organise and fill the political void left by landed elites to exploit their electoral strength. In general, they were unsuccessful." (pp. 2-3). His book informs us of what happened instead. And: Did family farmers fail?

In analysing these rather evasive hypothetical questions, he answers practical ones: What was the effectiveness of land reform? Why were farmers sometimes reluctant to adopt new farming methods? Why did some governments respond to farmers' demands for market intervention while others did not? In this way, he analyses the relationships between family farmers, the state, and the market in agriculture, and how this influenced long-term economic growth and political change.

After the introductory chapter, he begins Chapter 2 by discussing the role of agriculture and economic growth after the 1870s, when "the growing integration of the Atlantic economy set off changes that by the interwar period had radically altered European agriculture and the role of the state in guaranteeing food security." (p. 249). In Chapter 3, he addresses farming and agricultural dynamics, while informing the reader about how these dynamics differ according to the character of agricultural products, with a particular focus on cereals, dairy, and wine. In Chapter 4, he highlights the changing state capacity, especially after the First World War. Chapters 5 and 6 are key to his analysis. In Chapter 5, he explains how the landed elites, in one respect, lost their political power in different parts of Europe, while in another, they retained it by creating mass political parties. In Chapter 6, he focuses on land reform and its consequences. All these changes had implications for the predominance of the family farm in the interwar years. In Chapter 7, he describes how family farmers organised agriculture, from villages to cooperatives and agrarian parties. Chapter 8 highlights the activities of another social group: the labourers. This is followed by a chapter on agricultural economics during the depression period, which posed a new challenge not only to all these groups within agriculture but also to those outside of it, as well as to the market and the state. Before concluding, in Chapter 10, he addresses the different implications of the economic developments for the political representation of agriculture.

In all these chapters, Simpson distinguishes between North-Western Europe (including France and sometimes Scandinavia), Southern Europe (the Iberian Peninsula and Italy), and Central Europe (including the Balkans). He also uses the labels *industrial societies* (the United Kingdom, Belgium, the Netherlands, sometimes referred to as urban-based), *transforming societies* (where Spain and Italy are joined by Ireland, Czechoslovakia, and even Scandinavia and Germany), and *agrarian-based economies* (primarily Central European countries). These labels are often synonymous

with the regional distinctions, and vice versa. With the help of these distinctions, Simpson outlines three main trajectories of development.

In North-Western Europe, the elites lost their political power early on due to the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars but regained it by creating mass political parties before 1914, which also integrated the rural population. The integration of the Atlantic economy made family farms more competitive than large estates due to declining agricultural prices and rising wages for farm labourers. Family farms also benefited from a strong demand for high-value foods. Higher prices allowed them to mechanise in response to growing labour shortages and use artificial fertilisers to conserve land. They organised themselves into cooperatives, strengthening their ties to the market. Although the 1920s were not the best years for agriculture in North-Western Europe, when family farmers were hit by the Depression, their organisations and market orientation helped push governments to intervene in favour of agriculture.

In contrast, the trajectory in Central Europe was quite different. The landed elite retained power for a longer period and saw no need to create mass political parties. After losing power in 1918, land reform was introduced, resulting in the creation of many family farms and the formation of new political parties. Specific agrarian parties emerged but could not overcome the ethnic, cultural, and national divisions within the electorate. Agrarianism as an ideology remained too confusing and contradictory. The Central European farmers could not follow the economic path of North-Western Europe either. Geological, geographical, and market conditions were different—they faced low farm prices, underemployed farm labour, and weak productivity growth. There were no strong economic incentives for agricultural organisations like cooperatives, which made them less organised. As a result, during the Depression, they lacked a strong lobby to advocate for agricultural interests, which drove them further away from the market and towards self-sufficiency.

The transforming economies of Southern Europe followed a path more similar to Central Europe than to North-Western Europe. The main difference was the role of land labourers and their political voice through labour unions and socialist parties. The legacy of the Depression period, as such, was a strong bond formed between the agricultural sector and governments.

Simpson offers a clear analysis. He challenges simplistic political and cultural explanations for historical events and favours economic ones. His approach aligns well with rational choice theory, which is helpful in rejecting simple cultural explanations for differences between farmers in North-Western Europe, Southern Europe, and Central Europe. Instead of attributing behaviour to tradition or ignorance, Simpson suggests that it can often be better understood through economic (market), geographical, and political contexts. This is refreshing, and his emphasis on the unique trajectories of Central and Southern Europe during the interwar years is a key reason why this book deserves a wide readership. It is a joy to read a work that intelligently integrates Central and Southern Europe into European history, which is often dominated by North-Western Europe. He also deserves to be applauded for having written a history that moves forward in time, instead of looking at the interwar years from the perspective of the Second World War and its aftermath, and one that pays attention to the sequence of processes, such as creating a hierarchical mass political party before the widening of male suffrage.

However, for my taste, Simpson is too reductionistic in his interpretation and too parsimonious in explaining his interpretative framework. What he gains in clarity, he loses in explanatory power. While his approach is effective in explaining the large differences in Europe during the interwar years, it tends to be too mechanistic. There was more to the success of the democratic spring than simply filling a political void left by the landed elites. The processes of state formation and nation-building cannot just be reduced to rational economic models. As clear as he is about his objectives in the introduction, he is equally implicit about his methodology and the concrete historical circumstances in which his story is embedded. I would have preferred if he had explicitly told the reader the contexts in which these new nations were created after World War I and what their specific challenges were. As it stands, the treatment is rather abstract. For example, what was the political development like in Hungary, Poland, Bulgaria, and Romania? Although a significant portion of the population worked in agriculture, what were the specific contexts in which these workers had to find a voice? Who were the other social groups in society? What did they want to achieve?

Simpson often discusses austerity policies in the interwar years due to adherence to the Gold Standard. This allows him to highlight the importance of the balance of payments and trade balance in shaping agricultural policies. However, he doesn't explore why the Gold Standard was the default policy or whether there were criticisms of it. Who criticised the adherence to the Gold Standard, and why? Furthermore, political cleavages play a significant role in his analysis, but again, a systematic introduction to these cleavages is missing. Why does he not explain the cleavage model by Rokkan and Lipset, which addresses societal divisions such as religion, local versus central government, the Church versus liberals, labourers versus employers, and urban versus rural society? Instead of systematically using the cleavage model, he applies it much more ad hoc. It would be useful to show how these societal cleavages played out in Central European countries over time and how they interacted.

Simpson places family farmers at the centre of his analysis, yet he does not tell us how these farmers interacted with other social groups. His analysis remains abstract, focusing on general spatial differences rather than the dynamics of specific historical processes. In fact, he does not define what he means by "family farmers." The term is used quite broadly, much like our contemporary use of the label "middle class" to refer to anyone who is neither very poor nor extraordinarily wealthy.

Simpson has written a stimulating book. He demonstrates the necessity of considering the whole of Europe, rather than focusing solely on Western Europe, and the advantage of writing history forwards in order to avoid a deterministic narrative. His book invites us to build on his work with more specific and national studies that could refine, elaborate, and challenge his rational choice framework by paying more attention to how different social groups in the processes of democratisation, state formation, nation-building, commercialisation, economic transformation, and urbanisation interacted with each other and created a different future than one might initially suspect.

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