

THE AWKWARD CLASS: POLITICAL SOCIOLOGY OF PEASANTRY
IN A DEVELOPING SOCIETY: RUSSIA, 1910-1925. By *Teodor Shanin*.
Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972. xvii, 253 pp. \$15.25.

The Awkward Class contributes to the discussion which has been renewed recently, of the nature, causes, and consequences of differentiation and mobility of the Russian peasantry through an examination of the many studies by Russian and Soviet scholars in the quarter-century before collectivization. Mr. Shanin divides the literature into two major trends. The dominant trend, which included Marxists and economic liberals, contended that the economic forces generated by the growth of a modern market economy would undermine the traditional peasant economy and lead to the polarization of the peasantry. The prosperous peasants would evolve into a commercial farming class, while the larger pauperized mass would be forced to migrate to the cities or become rural laborers. The major opposing approach, known as the neopopulists or the Organization and Production School (including such figures as A. Chaianov and A. Chelintsev), maintained that the processes of socioeconomic differentiation and mobility among the peasantry are not polarizing but cyclical and repetitive. Stratum differentiation is determined not by external economic forces but by the ages and number of the members of the peasant household.

Shanin argues that both approaches were flawed by their lack of supporting empirical data and by the unwillingness of their proponents to acknowledge that both economic and demographic factors are significant determinants of differentiation. To find a satisfactory explanatory model he turns to a third group of scholars of this period (most prominent among them A. Khriashcheva) who did extensive empirical studies of the resources and patterns of mobility of peasant households. He presents a multifactorial model, based on their work, according to which mobility and differentiation are cyclical and multidirectional (simultaneously polarizing and leveling) in the aggregate, but the result of a complex of different processes. These processes are determined both by factors external to the peasantry (such as the market, the state, and nature) and internal to it (such as family size and growth). Tendencies toward polarization result generally from the cumulative effects of economic advantages and disadvantages and from chance factors. These tendencies are counteracted, in varying degrees, by leveling processes such as the merger of poor households, the partition of large, prosperous ones, and the disappearance through migration and extinction of the least viable.

Shanin's approach is useful, for it demonstrates the need to consider non-economic, cyclical processes at work within a peasantry when assessing its susceptibility to historical change. The model does not, however, provide an explanatory theory as much as a classificatory schema which specifies a large range of autonomous processes which must be studied to yield a picture of differentiation and mobility among a peasantry. The relative importance of each constituent process and potential effect of the large number of causal factors mentioned will vary in each historical case.

On the whole, *The Awkward Class* offers a valuable introduction to a neglected but important body of theoretical and empirical studies, and provides a framework for future comparative research on stratification and change among peasants.

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