



German History in Documents and Images

Volume 3. From Vormärz to Prussian Dominance, 1815-1866

Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl on Peasant Particularism: Excerpt from *Civil Society* (1851)

In this selection from *Civil Society* [*Die bürgerliche Gesellschaft*] (1851), Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl vividly describes the persistence of regional identities, especially among Germany's rural population. Riehl introduces peasants as "born particularists" and describes how, even at mid-century, they still identified with their old political regions, which had been long since assimilated into other territories following the French Revolution, the Napoleonic Era, and the Congress of Vienna.

Let us first look only at the influences of the external political arrangements of the nineteenth century. The shape of Germany's states changed three to four times during this time. Here and there an old political bond was cast off, the whole inner geography of Germany was thrown into a thorough mess, and no one was hurt more by these territorial changes than the peasant. Indeed, it appeared to nobody to be more arbitrary than to the peasant. Thus the peasant refuses to let go of the old geography and embrace the new one. The Prussian Westerwälder does not say he is from the district of Arnsberg, but rather from the "Oranischen"; the peasant in the area of Schwalbach still to this day calls his land "the lower earldom of Katzenelnbogen"; the peasant of Lahngau calls his home the "Solmsisch" or the "Weilburgisch" or the "Wied-Runkelisch" or the "Kurtrierisch" district. In the area of Baden's "Oberlande," the "Hanauer Ländchen" exists in the local language of rural people still to this day; it does not occur to the ostracized inhabitant of the Palatinate to call himself a "Rhenish Bavarian" or a "Rhenish Hessian" or an inhabitant of the "Neckar district of Baden." One expects these people to display "ancestral loyalty," although they themselves say that what is meant is loyalty to the non-ancestral. Educated persons know that it could only be this way and not another, even if they regret that the process of state formation was, on the one hand, far too radical and, on the other hand, not nearly radical enough. The peasant does not know this. How should he? He is shaped by an inherited, vague sympathy or antipathy for politics, which, in miniature, resembles the southern Germans' instinctive hatred of the Prussians and the north's vague aversion to Austria. The peasant is a born particularist, and his particularism is not an arbitrary one, but rather stems from historical tradition. This peasant particularism, unlike its dynastic and diplomatic counterparts, will not engage in an open struggle with the national idea; he has no interest whatsoever in this. The peasant is a natural particularist, one of narrowness, not of jealousy, selfishness, envy, or conceit like the other particularists. However, to the extent that his natural particularism is deeply and, as he believes, unjustly offended, he will oppose the existing state structure. He becomes radical out of conservatism. He himself, not just his Prince, is

mediatized. In lands formerly held by the Church, where not just political, but also church particularism is ingrained in the peasant, we often find that he is not yet able to become accustomed to the new national sovereign. The mood of the peasants in Rheinpreussen and Münsterland will provide evidence for this assertion for a long time to come.

Source: Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl, *Die bürgerliche Gesellschaft* [*Civil Society*]. Stuttgart: J.G. Cotta, 1851, pp. 67-68.

Translation: James Sievert