

## Der denkende Landwirt. Agrarwissen und Aufklärung in Deutschland 1750-1820

By Verena Lehmbrock. Vienna and Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 2020. Pp. 309. Cloth €45. ISBN 978-3412517953.

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This book is an important contribution to the history of the development of scientific agriculture (agronomy) in Germany. By introducing the metaphor of “a social and epistemic area” as a guideline “to analyze the struggle of various groups for authority and recognition of their knowledge claims within the debates of the Agricultural Enlightenment” (268), Verena Lehmbrock takes an innovative approach. She succeeds in explaining Albrecht Daniel Thaer and his *Principles of Rational Agriculture* (1809–1812)—considered the founding document of German agricultural sciences—as the product of seven decades of ongoing disputes. The novelty of Lehmbrock’s approach is that it embeds the emergence of modern agricultural sciences in the radical changes that the term “scientific” underwent during the period of the so-called Agricultural Enlightenment described here. She convincingly connects theoretical discussions to the disputes among various actors such as cameralistic state officials and professors, practical farmers (mainly well-educated operators of large estates), and “enlightened” publicists whose social status needs are taken into account as factors. It is of great interest for the reader to understand how the previously disdained concept of empiricism is finally established by Thaer as the basis of any serious, scientifically correct, agricultural research.

The author does not conceal the price that had to be paid for the agreement on a uniform understanding of science in the newly emerging agricultural sciences: the denunciation of peasant agriculture as an unreflective, tradition-bound activity that must be eliminated at all costs if sustainable agricultural growth was to be achieved. All the negative aspects of a purely experience-based agriculture without theoretical reflection were projected onto peasant agriculture, while Thaer successfully combined empiricism with theory and thus tended to assign the new agricultural sciences to the modern (natural) sciences, or rather to a pursuit of profit declared as rational. As Lehmbrock rightly emphasizes, this is one of the reasons why historical research has only recently recognized the important contribution of peasants and family farmers of all categories to German agricultural development during the 1750–1914 period.

The book is both highly readable and intellectually challenging. This results from the successful combination of conceptual history with a modern history of science. Lehmbrock concentrates on the analysis of texts. This is also where the author’s strengths lie, and where she makes her pioneering contributions to explaining the emergence of modern agricultural science in Germany. However, her attempt to build bridges to agricultural historiography, especially in its more economic, quantitative dimensions, remains in need of improvement. Thus, it is simply not true that more economically oriented agricultural historians use the concept of the *homo oeconomicus* as the theoretical basis of their analyses (86–87). This anthropological zombie from static microeconomic analysis is totally unsuitable for explaining historical processes. In fact, economically oriented agricultural historians have been instrumental in appreciating the enormous contribution of peasant agriculture to the transition to modern growth in German farming and to counter a simplistic understanding of “rational agriculture.”

One question remains: what follow-up research can result from this important book? The question of what impact the Agrarian Enlightenment had on agricultural development ca.

1750–1820 is still unresolved. In this reviewer’s opinion, there is a great deal to be said against a perceptible effect of the so-called Agrarian Enlightenment on contemporary agriculture. Verena Lehmbruck counters this with affirmation of the effectiveness of the Agrarian Enlightenment without explaining her position in more detail (44). Further research is indeed urgently needed here. In general, it is important to ask whether the representatives of rational agriculture were not simply following developments that were taking place in the agricultural sector as a result of fundamental changes in the economy as a whole, or whether they actually represented the avant-garde that helped “agrarian modernity” achieve its breakthrough. In other words, were peasants in Germany not able to see their economic opportunities and therefore in urgent need of “enlightenment,” or were they often simply lacking the economic conditions to take on the high risks of intensification?

Following Johann Heinrich von Thünen, it seems that only industrialization created the necessary conditions to make “rational agriculture” profitable and thus “rational” in more and more German regions after 1840. However, in this context, the question remains whether the rapid spread of agricultural associations after 1840 did not serve as an accelerating force for the spread of “modern” or “enlightened” agriculture into almost all strata of rural society. Such a massive organizational substructure to spread the ideas of “rational agriculture” into the capillaries of rural society was simply lacking during the period 1750–1820. From the perspective of development economics or economic history, the diffusion of innovation is at least as important as the innovation itself. Looking at the period 1840–1914 as the late heyday of an enlightened German agrarian economy would connect social history and history of science with current economic history emphasizing the role of human capital, especially for a successful mastering of the post-Malthusian phase in the transition to sustained growth.

These are just further thoughts, however, and not intended as criticism of Verena Lehmbruck’s sophisticated study. The book’s intellectual highlight is the fourth chapter, “Epistemology of the Agricultural Enlightenment,” which among other things analyzes “science” and “scientific” as historical concepts that underwent fundamental changes in Germany in particular during the period, though other chapters also make for more than worthwhile reading.

doi:10.1017/S0008938922000176

## **Nationalism Revisited: Austrian Social Closure from Romanticism to the Digital Age**

**By Christian Karner. New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2020. Pp. vii + 255. \$135 (cloth). ISBN: 978-1789204520.**

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This ambitious study by Christian Karner, a sociologist who has published widely on nationalism, ethnicity, and memory studies in Europe, revisits the topic visited more often than any other in Habsburg and Austrian history: nationalism. The book weaves together a number of “macro” social scientific theories and selected snippets from historians’ “micro” studies of particular nationalist contexts over 200 years. The author’s approach