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978-0-521-64213-2 - Fraternity Among the French Peasantry: Sociability and Voluntary Associations in the Loire Valley, 1815–1914

Alan R. H. Baker

Excerpt

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## 1

Peasants and peasantry in  
nineteenth-century France**The rural community**

There are many myths about the French peasantry. They have been both assiduously cultivated and painstakingly up-rooted.<sup>1</sup> More than forty years ago Harvey Goldberg dissected what he termed ‘the myth of the happy [French] peasant’, that of the idea of an independent, land-owning, stable, contented peasantry living and working in a balanced national economy and rural democracy.<sup>2</sup> There was also, as Gordon Wright has pointed out, the myth that France’s agrarian history really began with the Revolution of 1789 because it completely transformed the country’s rural structure; the myth that the peasantry, both before and after the Revolution, constituted a solid and largely undifferentiated bloc with common interests and aspirations; and the myth that the excessive parcellation of the fields of France was a product of the Napoleonic Code which abolished primogeniture in favour of partible inheritance.<sup>3</sup> Then there is the myth of France as a peasants’ republic:<sup>4</sup> although the peasantry could have been the masters of France, because in 1848 when universal male suffrage was proclaimed they and their dependants constituted more than half of the country’s population and even by 1939 they were still the largest single social grouping, they made little use of their potential political power because they were fighting on other fronts.<sup>5</sup> There is also, of course, the carefully and selectively nurtured myth of peasant traditionalism and backwardness,<sup>6</sup> or at least of the peasantry’s espousal of conservative attitudes towards property, religion and the family.<sup>7</sup> A related and equally pervasive idea – that of the emergence of the French peasant during the nineteenth century as a sturdy individualist and of the related decline of the rural community – is the focus of this present study.

If the problem of the rural community lies at the heart of the history of the French peasantry,<sup>8</sup> then the question of peasant individualism lies at the heart of the rural community itself. The cult of individualism – of *liberté* – might have triumphed with the Revolution of 1789, but the potentially conflicting

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concept of community – of *fraternité* – had roots in the ancien régime and came into flower well after the Revolution had passed into historical memory.

*The rural community towards the end of the ancien régime*

By the eighteenth century, there was a great diversity among the French peasantry but a sense of community was constructed locally because of shared experiences.<sup>9</sup> All peasants were, for example, subjects of the kings of France and so all were tied into a single political system, with its instabilities, and they were all linked into a fragile rural economy, with its environmental hazards and economic uncertainties.<sup>10</sup> Risk and insecurity were the norm, crises not exceptional. Shared perceptions of these external threats contributed towards the creation of an internal sense of community. A commonly shared experience of opposition to ‘outsiders’, for example, the lord, the tax-collector or the money-lender, helped to underscore the ‘insiders’ sense of social cohesion and local community. As Marc Bloch once wrote: ‘It was above all by opposing its enemies that the small collectivity of the countryside acquired a firmer consciousness of itself.’<sup>11</sup> Similarly, a shared awareness of the scarcity of resources and of the need for the collective management of some of them provided rural communities with a strong social and economic basis.

The foundations of the rural community were the collective ownership and use of communal goods, in particular collective constraints upon private property (such as prohibiting enclosure and prescribing a crop rotation) for the benefit of the group as a whole, collective rights of usage over forests (for grazing some livestock and for gathering wood) and fields (for pasturing the fallow and for gleaning the stubble), and collective regulation of farming (such as determining which lands were to lie temporarily uncultivated, fixing the dates of harvests, and managing the pasturing of common lands).<sup>12</sup> There were, of course, spatial variations and temporal evolutions in the precise character of such collective regulations and practices, but fundamentally the rural community was characterised by the duties it imposed on all or most of its members and by the constraints it imposed on individual property.<sup>13</sup> Co-operation, mutual aid and a sense of fraternity bred of practical necessity were embedded in the rural community of the ancien régime. This is not to deny that, as Philip Hoffman has recently emphasised, such communities were also infused with internal social and economic divisions.<sup>14</sup> A community’s consciousness of its interdependence, of its collective unity, no doubt owed something to the all-embracing role of the Church and to the assembly of villagers (*communauté d’habitants*) which determined issues of concern to the community (such as managing public property, like roads and bridges and the church, and appointing public officials, like a shepherd, hayward, schoolmaster, or collectors of tithes). But the rural community at the end of the eighteenth century owed its unity to its economic system more than to its religious

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or administrative institutions.<sup>15</sup> The Revolution, with its principled emphasis upon both individualism and fraternity, as well as upon equality, challenged the existing order of the rural community.

*The rural community and the Revolution of 1789*

The Revolution, while destroying the seigneurial regime and abolishing feudal rights, elevated the principles of liberalism and individualism, asserting the total right to property in both the 1789 and 1793 Declarations of Rights: it established the freedom of an individual to enclose and to farm his property, and it restricted collective rights of use over such property. The private ownership of property came to be regarded as the foundation of post-revolutionary French society, as the basis of social and economic progress, as the key to modernisation. For example, the right to vote in the early nineteenth century was closely linked to property ownership, being restricted not only to men of a certain age but also of a given liability to direct tax on wealth, itself derived principally from property. Hence the myth emerged of a property owning democracy, based upon an individualism which has been seen as giving free play to the development of the capitalist mode of production in the countryside and hastening the disintegration of the rural community.<sup>16</sup>

With hindsight, contemporary perceptions of the significance of the land settlement of the French Revolution may be viewed as part of a false consciousness. The current assessment of the situation has been summarised recently by P. M. Jones in his wide-ranging analysis of the peasantry and the French Revolution:

Contemporaries imagined that the sale of church property and the confiscated lands of *émigré* noblemen, plus the clearing of wastes and the division of common land, had brought into being a class of freehold peasant proprietors. That belief became a key component of the nineteenth-century republican myth . . . we now know that peasant land ownership was well-entrenched before 1789. All the Revolution did was to accelerate existing trends, but the transformation was scarcely dramatic because the quantity of property changing hands represented only a small percentage of the total land surface of the country.<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, while individual property rights were enshrined in the Rural Code of 1791, so too were collective rights over private property.

The ideology of individualism, of *liberté*, suffused rural France at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries but it was embraced much more by those who were already owners of viably sized farms than it was by the unpropertied and by the owners of small farms who were traditionally dependent upon usage of some lands in common in order to extend their resource base. The concept of collectivism, of *fraternité*, appears to have featured less in discourse although it continued to be of significance in practice. Sections of

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the peasantry successfully resisted the doctrinaire enthusiasms of bourgeois revolutionaries on the question of collective rights. Unhindered grazing, gleaning and scavenging affected the immediate livelihoods of many more of the rural population than did the attribution of tithes, or the sale of church and *émigré* estates, so that the Rural Code was more a pragmatic compromise than an ideologically grounded, revolutionary statement. As Jones has argued,

it offered landowners a (largely unenforceable) right to enclose, while allowing peasants an (eminently enforceable) right to graze their stock as tradition dictated. In effect, therefore, agrarian *liberté* was postponed indefinitely. All attempts to revise the Rural Code in a direction favourable to landowners stumbled against the political argument: the great majority of peasants relied on collective rights and would not be parted from them without resistance.<sup>18</sup>

The theoretical tension between individualism and collectivism found practical expression within rural communities. Although the former might have been dominant ideologically and was intended to mark a discontinuity in rural society, the latter's practical role persisted but it can hardly be claimed that it provided an underlying continuity in the collective consciousness of rural communities. The tension between individual and collective rights was in practice a major source of conflict within rural societies, undermining their cohesion.

There were other ways in which a rural community might either have retained or had reinforced a consciousness of itself. Without doubt, the most important institutionally was the Revolution's administrative reorganisation, creating a hierarchical system which linked the thousands of localities into a single state. The unifying social role traditionally played by the Church was, at least potentially, assumed by the State. Elected municipal councils now ordered and controlled much of the daily life of a community. Because of the range of their powers, the councils contributed to the creation of a sense of local identity, of locality and community, even though the right to stand for election and the right to vote were restricted to adult males with certain qualifications and the mayors of the councils were not elected but appointed by a higher authority. A municipal council was simultaneously both an expression of a self-governing local society and a local agent of central, state authority. Although by no means actively embracing all of the population of a commune, such a council nonetheless served to produce and reproduce a sense of place and of community.<sup>19</sup>

Other mechanisms and manifestations of community can also be recognised during the revolutionary period. To a degree, the peasantry were politicised by the Revolution. In each *communauté d'habitants* or *paroisse*, all men aged twenty-five and more who paid some tax, however little, had been given the opportunity to have their grievances recorded in *cahiers de doléances*, in

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the process learning a remarkable lesson in nascent democracy.<sup>20</sup> Also of potential significance were the local Jacobin clubs which mushroomed in France during the early revolutionary era, attracting patriots determined to defend the gains of the Revolution against a possible aristocratic reaction. They spread from towns and into the countryside, diffusing down the settlement hierarchy so that ultimately, according to Jones, about one in six or seven communes possessed a Jacobin club. Their impact was very uneven regionally as well as socially, and they were fundamentally a bourgeois conception; nonetheless, they became an integral part of the politicisation of many rural communities, but revealing conflicts within those communities rather than necessarily promoting their social cohesion.<sup>21</sup> Exceptionally, a basic and somewhat vague form of rural communism was advocated by François-Noël Babeuf, a socialist revolutionary, to no great effect at the time but sowing the seeds of a political movement which was to come to fruition in some regions of France during the nineteenth century.<sup>22</sup>

The Revolution did, then, go some way towards encouraging a sense of community within rural societies. In particular, it provided the experience of some form of local, municipal self-government. But the countervailing tendencies were probably more powerful: the peasant of 1815 was more likely to have been aware of the growing power of the State and of its use of the local council to exercise its own central control; and he was likely to have been increasingly conscious of the growing internal conflict with the community, of the developing power struggle for the ownership and use of scarce resources, in effect of the evolving class struggle within the countryside, of growing social differentiation. The rural community had by no means completely disintegrated, but it had been seriously undermined and a new sense of individualism – of what Alain Corbin, in a wider social context, has called ‘individuation’ – emerged to contest it.<sup>23</sup>

### *The rural community during the nineteenth century*

The nature of the rural community during the nineteenth century remains problematic. Some thirty years ago, Wright warned that ‘a social historian or social scientist would do well to avoid the quicksands of the [French] peasant problem’, given that ‘rural France is almost infinitely diverse, and almost any generalisation about the peasantry becomes partially false as soon as it is formulated’.<sup>24</sup> Generalisation about the French rural community in the nineteenth century is certainly fraught with difficulties: to differences from place to place and changes from period to period have to be added complexities arising from the many economic, social and political conflicts both among and within those rural communities. Peter McPhee’s cameo of rural France in the 1840s admirably celebrates such differences while highlighting the shared dimensions of all rural communities.<sup>25</sup> One such dimension, the tension

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between individualism and collectivism, will be the main concern of this book, which focuses upon practical expressions of the principle of *fraternité*. But before addressing that issue directly and empirically through a series of studies of fraternal associations in one region of France, a better general understanding will initially be sought in this chapter of the *mentalités* of the nineteenth-century French peasantry in general as portrayed by some of its contemporaries and as perceived by some of its modern observers. The following chapter will then examine the theoretical discourse within which the concept of fraternity was situated and had to find practical expression.

Perhaps at this point it is necessary to state that the term ‘peasantry’ is being used here – following many precedents – in a broad rather than a narrow sense, as a general term referring to agriculturally dependent populations within rural French communities rather than to specific, narrowly defined, economic and social groups within them. Of course, such rural communities contained within them ‘peasants’ whose circumstances differed considerably, for example in terms of the sizes, tenures and family based nature of their farms as well as in their degrees of self-sufficiency or market orientation. Such distinctions will, of course, be recognised when they illuminate the basic problem being addressed. But the term ‘peasantry’ has such a general usage in the literature that its continued employment here requires little justification.

There exist a number of surveys of the *mentalités* of French rural society during the nineteenth century.<sup>26</sup> There is consequently no need to undertake a comprehensive enquiry here. Instead, the focus will be on the contemporary and current portrayals and perceptions of the relative roles of individualism and collectivism as components of peasant *mentalités*.

**Contemporary portrayals of the peasantry***Word pictures*

The peasantry have left us with very few self-portraits: they existed predominantly within an oral rather than a written culture. But, for varied reasons, they attracted the attention of better-educated non-peasants who produced many descriptions of the peasantry in words, pictures and numbers. While all of those representations do not tell a single and unchanging story, collectively they constructed a generally unfavourable image of the French peasantry during the nineteenth century. It is, it needs to be remembered, an image of an ‘Other’ created almost entirely by a non-peasant – and sometimes non-French – ‘Self’.<sup>27</sup> During the opening decades of the nineteenth century, the French peasantry had a ‘bad press’, being criticised by disciples of the Enlightenment, by agronomists fascinated by the English model of agricultural improvement, and by government officials seeking good harvests as a way of promoting public order.<sup>28</sup>

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Two foreign influential image makers have been Arthur Young and Karl Marx. During his extensive, three-years' tour of France on the eve of the political revolution of 1789, Young observed its countryside as an agronomist fully acquainted with the pace and character of England's agricultural revolution. He was critical of many aspects of French agriculture, including its indifferent and often absentee landlords, the continuance of feudal ties, the persistence of fallow in field rotations and of uncultivated wasteland generally. He decried the absence of an enclosure movement, the predominance of small farms and the partible inheritance practices which produced them, and he was dismayed by the depths of rural poverty and by the extent to which rural populations were controlled by superstition rather than driven by the spirit of improvement. For example, of Brittany he wrote: 'The country has a savage aspect; husbandry not much further advanced, at least in skill, than among the Hurons, which appears incredible amidst enclosures; the people almost as wild as their country . . .' Young's account of his *Travels in France* was first published at Bury St Edmunds in 1792 and then, in a French translation, at Paris in the following year.<sup>29</sup> It has become embedded into the historiography of French agricultural history: in 1976 Young was five times cited as an authority in Maurice Agulhon's masterially edited essays on French rural history between 1789 and 1914, whereas Karl Marx received a single mention.<sup>30</sup>

'Barbarism within civilisation' was Marx's dismissive description of French peasants.<sup>31</sup> Duggett has argued that although such an epigram should not be taken too seriously, it is clear that Marx despised French peasants,<sup>32</sup> essentially because their individual self-sufficiency was a severe brake upon the development of any sense of community or class. In his 1852 analysis of the class struggle in France during the preceding four years, Marx wrote:

The peasants who farm their own small holdings form the majority of the French population. Throughout the country, they live in almost identical conditions, but enter into very little relationships one with another. Their mode of production isolates them, instead of bringing them into mutual contact. The isolation is intensified by the inadequacy of the means of communication in France, and by the poverty of the peasants. Their farms are so small that there is practically no scope for a division of labour, no opportunity for scientific agriculture. Among the peasantry, therefore, there can be no multiplicity of development, no differentiation of talents, no wealth of social relationships. Each family is almost self-sufficient, producing on its own plot of land the greater part of its requirements, and thus providing itself with the necessities of life through an interchange with nature rather than by means of intercourse with society. Here is a small plot of land, with a peasant farmer and his family; there is another plot of land, another peasant with wife and children. A score or two of these atoms make up a village, and a few score of villages make up a department. In this way, the great mass of the French nation is formed by the simple addition of like entities, much as a sack of potatoes consists of a lot of potatoes huddled into a sack.<sup>33</sup>



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For Marx, the French peasantry could be seen as a class to the extent that ‘millions of families live in economic circumstances which distinguish their mode of life, their interests, and their culture, from those of other classes’ but ‘insofar as the tie between the peasants is merely one of propinquity, and insofar as the identity of interests has failed to find expression in a community, in a national association, or in political organisation, these peasant families do not form a class’.<sup>34</sup> Although Duggett has shown that Marx was ambivalent towards peasants in general rather than, as Mitrany has argued, ‘against’ them,<sup>35</sup> it is clear that for Marx peasants in mid-nineteenth-century France were individuals lacking an awareness of their social and political potential as a community or as a class.

Images of the peasantry as ‘barbarians’ are also evident in French fiction. During the nineteenth century there are identifiable in novels about the rural world two contrasting representations, one ‘romantic’ and the other ‘realistic’, although the difference between them is not as wide as such a binary opposition might at first suggest.<sup>36</sup> All of the novels about the rural world were set in particular geographical localities and were concerned with historical actualities; virtually none of their authors had first-hand knowledge or experience of agricultural practices and problems; and almost all of the novels provide a view of a rural world seen from an urban perspective, contributing to a wider discourse about the distinction between ‘countryside’ and ‘town’, between peasants and other social classes, in France in the nineteenth century. Novelists were certainly not ‘indifferent’ to the peasant world.<sup>37</sup> Rémy Ponton has shown that pastoral novels like those of George Sand provided an idealised view of the rural world, a picture of a peasant utopia, of a society characterised by wisdom, balance and a purity of sentiments.<sup>38</sup> Such simplicity and naïveté in an apparently timeless, apolitical, world constructed a countryside which was, as Sand admitted, ‘a perfumed Eden where souls tormented and tossed by the tumult of the world can seek refuge’.<sup>39</sup> A fictional tranquil countryside was provided by these novelists as a counterpoint to real, turbulent towns: conservative peasants seemed to be more acceptable as subjects for novels than did radical workers. Such a pastoral vision of the rural world came to be incorporated into primary school reading books during the Third Republic, Ponton argues, because it served to inculcate the values of sobriety, thrift, diligence and fraternity which were vital to the maintenance of republican order.<sup>40</sup> These values seemed to make the ‘imagined’ peasantry the foundation of a stable French society.

But there were also other imaginations at work and even George Sand in her memoirs referred to the peasants as ‘ces êtres vulgaires’ (these unrefined beings) whom she had idealised ‘en sens inverse dans leur laideur ou leur bêtise’ (contrariwise for their ugliness and their stupidity).<sup>41</sup> The image of a barbarian peasantry was widely held and promoted by urbane authors, many of whom adopted a ‘realist’ stance towards their subjects. In effect, this meant



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painting a ‘black’ picture of the peasants’ way of life, of their continual conflict not only with the forces of nature and with outsiders such as representatives of the State and of the Church, but also among themselves. For example, Stendhal’s peasants in *Le rouge et le noir* (1830) were greedy and brutal; Balzac’s in *Les paysans* (1844) were materialist, selfish, immoral savages, self-confessed stupid animals; in Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* (1857) they are gullible, subservient to bourgeois officialdom; Maupassant’s Normandy peasants in his many short stories were unscrupulous, constantly thirsting for alcohol and hungry for sex; and Zola’s peasants in *La terre* (1877) were described specifically by the village schoolmaster as brutes and generally characterised as fighting among themselves for the possession of land, of women and of money.<sup>42</sup> This bleak picture of the peasantry portrays them as being essentially selfish, avaricious, suspicious, land-hungry individualists with little sense of community, of solidarity or even of social responsibility. Elements of that nineteenth-century picture were still discernible in rural novels of the 1950s and 1960s: they emphasised both the intimate, sexually-charged relationship between farmers and the lands they cultivated, and the independent, even autarchic, nature of a peasant existence characterised by liberty of the individual peasant and the absence of social constraints.<sup>43</sup>

At the turn of the nineteenth century portrayals of the rural world had been nuanced by novels – such as René Bazin’s *La terre qui meurt* (1899) and *La blé qui lève* (1907), Eugène Le Roy’s *Jacquou le croquant* (1899), and Emile Guillin’s autobiographical *La vie d’un simple* (1904) – which emphasised its internal class struggles, highlighting the different perspectives and interests of large landowners, of share-croppers, of tenant farmers, of small proprietors and of landless labourers, as well as the threats of rural depopulation and of urban modernisation upon very different French farming communities. These accounts tended to be more sympathetic to the rural world and one of these authors was the first French peasant novelist. Emile Guillin was a share-cropper and autodidact who provided in *La vie d’un simple* an exceptional, insider’s view of a peasant world which acts in some respects as a useful corrective to some of the pictures drawn by non-peasant observers.<sup>44</sup> Guillin’s country folk were (as Eugen Weber has noted) rough but not savage, truculent but not callous, indeed strangely pacific, perhaps in reaction to Zola’s savage brutes in *La terre*.<sup>45</sup> Guillin’s peasants were, however, individualists: he himself came to believe in the value of collective action as a non-revolutionary rural reform and in his *Le syndicat de Baugignoux* (1912) he provided an account of the protest movement which he led with the share-croppers of Bourbonnais, a movement which was unsuccessful because – in Guillin’s view – peasants were considered by others to be and also considered themselves to be socially inferior.<sup>46</sup> Collective action, it could be argued, foundered on the rock of individualism. Pierre-Jakez Hélias, in his vivid autobiographical account of life in a Breton village in the early years of the twentieth

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century, confirms the dominance of individuals and of families, as well of course as the school and the church, on the social stage.<sup>47</sup>

The overall picture portrayed by novels located in different places in France and situated in different periods of the nineteenth century is of a rural society founded upon competition rather than upon co-operation among individuals, of a peasantry grounded both in an environmental and social conflict and in a self-preservationist conservatism. That picture finds affirmation – in both positive and negative terms – in accounts by contemporary commentators and historians. For example, Hannah Lynch, in her account of French life in town and countryside at the end of the nineteenth century, noted the peasants' 'sturdy passion for independence. It is this passion that enables them to scrape, and serve, and suffer privation with dignity and patience. However meagre their resources may be, they are content with their lot, provided the roof they sleep beneath is their own, the land they till their own, the goat, the pig, the poultry theirs to do what they will with . . . the distinctive characteristic of the peasant is an indomitable spirit of independence'.<sup>48</sup> A similar sentiment was expressed by Mary Duclaux (née Robinson) at about the same time. Having commented sympathetically upon the plight of many small farmers in France, she concluded:

Unfortunately, the peasant is, as a rule, intellectually idle, incapable of combination, suspicious, and impatient of new-fangled ideas; he finds it simpler to sell his goods to the buyer from Paris as his father did before him, than to combine with his neighbours in an agricultural syndicate. The principle of solidarity has scarcely penetrated into rustic parts, but the need of resisting the low prices imposed by the large farms using machine labour will certainly, in time, teach the peasant many things. Let his mind once grasp the idea of a common prosperity – where Tom's good luck is not ensured by the misfortunes of Dick and Harry, but all are implicated in the well being of each – let him forget to suspect and learn to combine; from that day forth his social future and well-being are assured.<sup>49</sup>

The independence of the French peasant – as well as his industry, self-denial and frugality – was similarly stressed by the distinguished English agricultural historian, Rowland Prothero, in his survey of French farming in the early nineteenth century. Prothero also saw the morcellation of farms and the parcellation of fields as militating against peasant co-operation.<sup>50</sup> Similarly, although H. W. Wolff commented in his paper to the Royal Agricultural Society of England in 1900 that agricultural syndicates had brought a remarkable change to the face of French agriculture during the previous fifteen years or so, in applying the principle of combination to the furtherance of common interests in agriculture, he emphasised that it was 'one thing to make admission [to agricultural syndicates] easy and quite another to induce a sufficient number of the French peasantry to join, many of whom are backward beyond anything that we can conceive, and all of whom are wanting in personal initiative and expect to be pushed to whatever they are to do by some superior person'.<sup>51</sup>