

# The imperfect peasant economy

The Loire Country, 1800–1914

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# 1 Aims and scope

Why should an Englishman, trained in America, be interested in French peasants? Initial reasons are rarely the most important, but they do provide the catalyst. When I began this study in the early 1970s, my intention was to describe and analyze a rural society's reaction and contribution to the early forms of "industrialism" as they appeared in France. To many in a Britain that was at that time preparing, squeamishly, for membership in an expanded European community, France seemed an exception to the generally accepted rules of modern economic order. Indeed, France presented a formidable paradox. Its economy looked decidedly prosperous beside Britain's, yet how many English-speaking economic and social historians continued to explain that France was a late starter? that it was bound to traditional modes of production? that its population included a disproportionately large number of artisans and, more remarkably, of peasants? In the early 1970s, British newspaper readers were told a great deal about the inefficiencies of France's small-scale, labor-intensive production units. I remember one excited BBC reporter pointing out that the trip across the Channel to Brittany involved more than those choppy fourscore nautical miles; it was a journey into the preindustrial age. How could France survive and, apparently, survive so well?

To answer that question it seemed perfectly logical to return to the early stages of "industrialism" to see just how the French course of action differed from the prescribed economic model. That would take one back, according to the consensus today, to the mid-nineteenth century: France, under Napoleon III, "industrialized."<sup>1</sup> But, in order to study development, it was necessary to go beyond the limits of the Second Empire – I felt that the study would have to span at least a century, or three generations, to have any meaning at all. So I found myself going back to the Napoleonic Wars and moving forward to the First World War.

From the start my principal concern was with the peasantry. Here was the exception that needed explaining. Of course, the peasantry had hardly been ignored by historians. France possesses a rich literature – a large proportion written by the indomitable Gallican *thésards* – on peasant folklore, farming techniques, and other social customs. These works are more than simple rural histories; they have established methods that have become models for historical research both within and outside France (Georges Lefebvre, Marc Bloch, and Lucien Febvre are household names for social historians today). But precious little of this impressive output



of rural histories was devoted to the peasantry of the nineteenth century. Historians of that period onward, being eager to show change in the human condition, have tended to concentrate on the cities – their trade and their government – and, until recently, have almost entirely ignored the rustic beyond those city gates. Yet a glance at the official French census tables will tell us that, until 1931, the majority of Frenchmen lived in the countryside. Though the last 15 years have seen this gap in our knowledge partially filled, most of the more recent rural studies either stop short at the mid-nineteenth century<sup>2</sup> or concentrate on such isolated districts that it is difficult, if not impossible, to generalize from them what the *average* reactions to the evolving nineteenth-century economy might have been.<sup>3</sup> We should remember that the mass of the “rural population” recorded by the census did not live in the mountain districts, isolated plateaus, or the Mediterranean backcountry. They lived in the low-lying coastal plains, along the fertile river valleys, and around the major urban centers.

My decision to limit myself to two regions was again made at the outset of the work. French rural histories might exaggerate the countryman’s isolation, but they do not exaggerate his attachment to the land. France was, and remains, a country fashioned after its regions. French rural history is, of necessity, French local history. This is not to deny the presence of a national myth, of a national sense of belonging (which can be traced back at least as far as the *Chanson de Roland*). But it is impossible to understand the character of *French* peasant society without a knowledge of and, even more, a feeling for the regions. De Gaulle’s famous quip about the difficulty of governing a country with 328 types of cheese was founded on that basic truth.

To avoid an overly parochial history, this had to be a comparative work. The advantages were obvious: comparison allows one to attain a depth of research impossible in national studies while it opens one to a level of generalization higher than anything derived from a simple regional study. The dangers were equally evident. A comparison of two entirely different regions can lead only to a series of drawn-out platitudes; this has occurred too often in the comparative works of some sociologists who masquerade their cultural ignorance behind a technical language that communicates nothing and, in truth, means even less.

I deliberately picked one of the least-isolated areas of France, the Loire Country, and focused on the regions closest to two of its largest towns, Orléans and Nantes. We shall see how these two regions at once complemented and differed from one another. Both cities are on the same river; one has a river port, the other a seaport. Both regions lie on the same latitude and have similar climates, but one is situated on the calcareous Paris Basin, the other in the granitic Massif Armoricain. Fur-

ther, Nantes was to become one of France's major industrial cities, Orléans was not.

Major industrial cities? One problem troubled me more than most. What does one mean by "industrialism"? I soon realized that I was attempting to answer a loaded question. Each small town and village I visited, every conversation I had with the residents, pointed to a culture that was not merely unaware of how its locality "reacted and contributed" to an "industrial way of life" but to a culture where such abstract notions of historical process were entirely irrelevant. Moreover, the experience was repeated in the regional capitals, Orléans and Nantes. To be sure, there was ample concern about the numbers who annually left the fields for city jobs (especially among the young), the mechanization of agriculture, and the organization of cooperatives and unions to combat agriculture's problems. All this could have been fitted into currently acceptable notions of an "industrializing" society. But that is not what the members of this society were telling me.

These were, of course, personal impressions. They had not and, indeed, could not be subjected to the rigors of statistical analysis. But by what rite were such impressions to be superseded by abstract historical theory? I would be wary of calling this an alien culture. The quality of life appeared as satisfactory as any I knew in Britain and superior to some sectors I had found in America. They would appear no less prosperous. Their language was different, but I could hardly describe myself as having been out of place.

I thus saw my work developing, willy-nilly, into a critique of the widespread, albeit loosely defined, theories of "industrialization." My position grew along three main lines of thought. In the first place, I found myself reacting to the teleological element implicit in the very term "industrialization." There was no preordained purpose to the manner in which this rural society had evolved – much, I learned, was the product of mere chance. Second, I started to take a more critical look at the linear, hierarchical schemas that dominate our literature on social structures. A linear view of society complements a linear view of time, but neither adequately corresponded to the reality I was describing. Finally, I realized that this was not to be a study of the gradual assimilation of these rural communities into a larger, more complex society, but rather a study of how they managed to maintain their own particular forms of cultural identity.<sup>4</sup>

The second issue – that of social structure – loomed above all the others. The term "peasantry" needed to be defined and some sort of delimitation on who were peasants and who were not had to be set. The most immediate problem to be resolved was whether one should regard the peasantry as a social class. My conclusion was, essentially, that one

should not; the notion of a peasant class was, to borrow Teodor Shanin's phrase, so decidedly awkward that it ceased to be analytically useful.<sup>5</sup> For example, within the Marxist tradition, where class has been defined by its relationship to the means of production and, in particular, by the amount of property it owns, one is forced to consider the peasantry, which simultaneously consists of owners and workers of the land, as both entrepreneurs and laborers – an ambiguity that would hardly clarify the complexities of a group that was, in fact, internally differentiated by many contradictory and changing forms of property ownership. Marx, we know, had no special love for peasants or at least felt that they had no important historical role to play and, hence, were not worthy of any extensive amount of attention.<sup>6</sup> Marxists today, under the conviction that peasants could not engage collectively in class struggle and that their way of life tended toward division rather than unity, have apparently rejected the notion of a peasant class and now speak rather in terms of peasant systems. This has been presented either in a “historical” context (a stage preceding capitalism in which private property is underdeveloped and the worker is still a proprietor) or as a “subsumed” system within the more general capitalist system. In the latter case, the peasantry has been defined by the form of its exploitation by the “nonproducers” – through rent rather than wage labor. This, it has been argued, leads to a differentiation within the peasantry and hinders their final assimilation into the larger system. Although their historical schema is rigid and this broad definition of “rent” is about as impractical a notion as a “peasant class,” the Marxists have brought to notice two important issues, namely, the possibility of considering peasantry as a complete social system and the central role of property within that system. This last point had not, I felt at the beginning of my own work, received the attention it merited.<sup>7</sup>

Was Weber a better alternative? There is little doubt that his definition of class is much more flexible than that of the Marxists and, as a result, is easier to accommodate into a study on peasants. A class, says Weber, consists of people who have life chances in the market of ideal as well as material goods and services. A predetermined set of opportunities is the principal ingredient of class structure – an attractive proposition by virtue of its acknowledgment of free choice and the psychological implications that this conveys. What is more, the social and economic orders in the Weberian sense are not identical, though they are obviously related: Whereas the economic historian concentrates on the complexity of market mechanism, or the framework of choice, the social historian will (or should) concern himself with the actual choices societies have made. (These are two entirely different approaches. The market might define a given range of opportunities, but it cannot effectively explain final choices: To assume that the same kind of choice will always be made is to

assume extraordinary naiveté among the market's participants.) Weber does return to the market and the market rationale to establish the premise of class development, and it is here that the student of peasant society will encounter his first difficulties. For Weber, "The market and its processes 'knows no personal distinctions': 'functional' interests dominate it. It knows nothing of 'honor.'"<sup>8</sup> In a similar vein, Karl Polanyi explains that the market system corresponds to the ascendancy of formal economics, "a situation of choice that arises out of an insufficiency of means."<sup>9</sup> As we shall see, the formal logic of the market was not the only, nor even the primary, logic of the two peasant societies compared here.<sup>10</sup>

As a sequel to Weber's insistence on life chances in the market, I should also mention those – Ralf Dahrendorff springs immediately to mind<sup>11</sup> – who have defined class in terms of power structure (Weber described "power" as "the chance of a man or a number of men to realize their own will in a communal action . . .").<sup>12</sup> This might work well in the study of a society as politically articulate as, say, postwar West Germany, but it makes little practical sense when applied to the nineteenth-century French peasantry. It would find itself translated into such amorphous terms as the "ruled," a sort of *âme damnée*, establishing itself as a coherent, recognizable force only during years of severe stress but otherwise sinking into an apparent acquiescence of the powers that be.

In the place of a specific class, I finally defined the peasantry in terms of a pattern of interplaying social and economic sectors. I have emphasized the existence not of a peasant class but of a peasant society, a peasant economy; that is, a complete social group that includes distinctions of property holding, market involvement, and the ability to exercise power.

This has determined the shape of the book. My analysis of the social whole takes two different approaches. First, I concentrate on the forms of social and economic exchange found in our two regions. This helps to establish the crucial relationship between the society and its region and, more particularly, to define the outer spatial limits of that society. Second, I attempt to assess the manner in which the individual was associated with the group. Here we are especially concerned with changes in the lived experience over time, in its historical as well as individual, developmental sense. The two approaches, combined, provide a means of determining the kind of opportunities that French society saw before it and the kind of opportunity it actually took.

Accordingly, I have divided this study into three parts. Part I provides the essential background for the rest of the work: I have first outlined the main contrasts and similarities between the major regions concerned, stressing the geographic facts (Chapter 2), and have then presented a

conceptual framework for the analysis of their societies (Chapter 3). Part II begins this actual analysis by concentrating on exchange and the problems of social structure as defined in physical space: What were the potential relationships between the urban and rural communities (Chapter 4)? What social channels existed to make these relationships possible (Chapter 5)? How did rural society – given the varied land resources that it had at its disposal – actually take advantage of such relationships (Chapter 6)? Part III then looks at the same societies from the angle of time and the lived experience of time. This part is divided into a study of rural demography (Chapter 7) and the implications this has for the organization of rural properties (Chapter 8). Finally, Chapter 9 concentrates on the problem of agricultural crisis and indicates how the essential pattern of rural society retained the character that we define earlier in the study as “peasant.”

Let me point out that the study of a non-English-speaking society does create some language problems. The word *métayer*, for instance, is not accurately translated by the word “sharecropper”; nor does “day-laborer” adequately convey the meaning of *journalier*. In such cases, I decided to use the original French term rather than an inadequate and possibly misleading translation. Also, recent rural history is a relatively new field involving novel and sometimes complicated ideas. I have made an effort to avoid the excessive use of jargon out of the conviction that a phrase is preferable to a neologism (I belong to that ancient school of stylistics that maintains that new ideas are more important than new words.) Readers dismayed at the use of some mathematics in the following pages may be assured that few of the techniques employed fall outside the limits of a first-year course in statistics. Again, I have kept the jargon to a minimum, confining most of it to the tables and endnotes.

My hope is that this work will be compared with the rural histories on earlier periods and will also help explain the presence of an “anachronism” that seems to be here to stay for a while longer. It should at least provide a basis for a different, less unilinear view of European society over the last century and a half – a period that has until now been almost entirely, if not entirely, seen in terms of “class” and “industrialization.” An alternative approach is not merely possible. It is sorely needed.