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978-0-521-31269-1 - The French Peasantry in the Seventeenth Century

Pierre Goubert

Excerpt

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*A bird's-eye view
of the French countryside*

Apart from the angelic hosts, their satanic counterparts, a few witches looking for sabbaths, and Cyrano de Bergerac's balloon-traveller drifting towards the moon, nobody in the seventeenth century could have seen the kingdom from this height. It would unquestionably have been a frightening sight, as at this period everybody, except a few (urban) poets, saw mountains and forests as wild and hostile, and regarded nature as something dangerous. But if an inhabitant of twentieth-century France agreed to go up and have a look he would see that, by and large, little had changed in the disposition of the countryside.

The main outlines

There were the same expanses of great bare plains dotted at regular intervals with large villages, the same woodlands as were there until the recent reallocation of the land, with their few scattered hamlets, the same water-courses, except that there were only two or three canals, almost the same stony, sandy, and marshy areas (with some exceptions); there were the same snow-covered high mountains, and lower mountains covered with forest, huge woods, and pastures that were already much-used; the same towns, for the most part, stood in the same places, although they were smaller, and still surrounded by their walls; there was the same pattern of roads and paths, although there were many more of them, and they were

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much less straight. All this could easily be observed from a considerable height.

The only difference is that none of the mountains except the Massif Central was then entirely French, and in fact a part of the Massif still for a time belonged to the King of Spain, who was Duke of Charolais, until Louis XIV reached a peaceful settlement with him. The Vosges were part of Lorraine, and therefore belonged to the Holy Roman Empire, only the short Alsatian side having become French in 1648. The Jura were part of Franche-Comté, and therefore Spanish, until 1678; all the main peaks in the Northern Alps, including Mont Blanc, belonged to Savoy, and then Italy, until 1860: their glaciers and snows reached lower than they do nowadays, because of the 'mini ice-age' which lasted through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The *comté* of Nice and its alpine hinterland remained in foreign hands for longer still. And the recently rechristened Atlantic Pyrenees had only been French since the King of Navarre's reign, while the Spanish-Catalonian Rousillon and Cerdagne only became French after 1659.

All round the coast, wherever the land was unsound because the ground was marshy or sandy, Henry IV had brought in the best engineers in Europe, the Dutch, to dry it out, desalinate it, drain it, and build polders with their canals, locks, meadows, and low farms, many of which still bear their names today. This kind of work was carried out on the bay of the Somme, on the meanders of the lower Seine, in Normandy, and round Mont Dol, as well as in those much more extensive regions, and those where the famous areas of salt marsh were retained and remodelled – the 'bay' of Bourgneuf, which supplied part of western and northern Europe – the Poitou marshes, the *palus* of the Charente and the Gironde, which effectively took on their modern appearance at this time; the great ponds of the Languedoc, part of la Crau, and lower Dauphiné began to look different, and even some of the lakes of Auvergne began to be filled up. It was a vast undertaking, now almost completely forgotten, and it did also involve some 'ingenious' Frenchmen, like the Provençal Adam de Craponne; however, they were not yet able to tackle the big malarial zones such as the Sologne, the Dombes, or the 'Lannes' (i.e. les Landes). But this is the period when both the geographical outline and the human aspects of the kingdom of France took on the pattern that we recognise today.

The ancient system of roads is no longer there. They were

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Gaulish, Roman, medieval, timeless, and the system was much denser than that of today, made up of 'ways' (one cart at a time), tracks, and footpaths, hardly any of them paved except a few roads into and through the towns, and the 'high road from Paris to Orléans'. They formed a complex yet natural network linking one village with another, a village to its pasturage, summer pastures to winter pastures, one grid of plots of land to another, one bridge (probably said to be Roman, but in fact medieval and much repaired) to another or to a good ford, and old Roman cities to others, often starting from Lyons, the capital of Gaul, then from Paris, the capital of the kings of France. It was in the eighteenth century, the century of bridges and highways – after the short-lived works carried out under Sully – that the roads were straightened out, at considerable cost (even in those days the state had to pay for the compulsory purchase of land!), and were broadened and extended; later it was Napoleon who oversaw the building of new highways.

But whether the old roads were narrow or wide, they were full of activity, although it went at a slower pace than nowadays. There were people walking with a hoe or a spade over their shoulder, going to 'labour' in the vineyards or the fields; small groups converging on their way to the local market, carrying baskets of eggs, chickens, a 'warp' of serge (to be finished off by weaving), newly made clogs or needles; young men in their best clothes attracted by the feast, the gathering, the patronal festivities – and by the promise of games, wine, and dancing; fish-carts, or itinerant potters, driving mules loaded with 'fresh' sea-fish, and earthenware bowls and cooking pots; pedlars with bundles on donkeys or on their backs, with needles, trinkets, sacred or profane booklets, holy (and not so holy) pictures, and also bearing all the local news. On the wider roads, there were wooden carts with iron axles, moving at the slow pace of the oxen which (more often than horses) pulled them, carrying stones, wine, sheaves of corn, hay, dung, or wood, depending on the season and what was needed. Now and then could be heard the muted trot of a diligence, or more likely a stage-coach, struggling through the sand or mud; less frequently, the light trot of a chaise, or an elegant carriage; more dangerously, the frenzied gallop of the king's horses going post-haste (they were the only ones allowed to travel at this speed) from one stage, or one inn, or one relay to the next. But there were relatively few of the heavy

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waggoners' carts which were already known as *camions* (waggon, lorries), because it was still usually cheaper and easier, if slower, to transport everything except light and costly goods by water. The highroads were seasonal substitutes, or permanent links, between different rivers.

The first canals were just being built, inevitably by the Dutch, linking the Loire and the Seine, at Briare and Orleans; then, at the time of Colbert and Riquet, these were followed by one between the Garonne and the Mediterranean, the 'canal des Deux-Mers'; and soon after that, the canal network in the north was improved, on the Flemish model of course. Everywhere, even on the smallest rivers, fragile wooden boats which would look minuscule to our eyes sailed with the current, or were hauled upstream by powerful horses, along towpaths that are still visible (where they have not been washed away by the current); peacefully, they carried stone, gravel, bricks, and sand to build towns and ports, wheat to provision them, wines for their inhabitants to drink, and less often people to live in them. Scarcely less slow were the passenger-barges used by great ladies like Mme de Sévigné, and on the Rhône by the great Cardinal himself. And almost everywhere there were ferries wherever there were no fords, or where these had become submerged. Every so often there were obstacles to be traversed: rapids, sand-banks, sunken boats, or a toll-gate, where a bridge-keeper or a toll-collector levied his right of passage; these were usually fairly small, but sometimes a substantial fee was charged, as at the powerful customs post at Ingrandes on the border with the duchy of Brittany, which was so high that it (fortunately) forced the wine producers upstream to make nothing but superior quality wine. Even beyond the reaches navigable by small boats, rivers in the seventeenth century, whether they were royal, or seigneurial (the smallest), were an integral part of the lives of those who lived beside them, and their neighbours: they drew their water from them, fished in them (even without permission), and refreshed themselves by swimming in them, until the clergy turned into the upholders of a new sense of public modesty.

Then there was the forest, which took up so much of the view of our hypothetical astronauts. Marc Bloch long ago described those woods, which had been occupied and to some extent civilised since the Middle Ages: they were full of clearings, under cultivation, at least temporarily, with wood-cutters, wood-gatherers, and

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charcoal-burners, game and livestock grazing or crunching acorns, sometimes legally and sometimes not, with women and children surreptitiously driving their cattle there; and hunters, and poachers, and people gathering fruits, and a few wrong-doers, but many fewer robbers than in the streets of Paris. Then with the new foresters, and Colbert's legislation, the great forests were surveyed, recorded, and protected, and access to them, as far as it was possible, was prohibited: timber for ships, for construction work, and for burning was valuable capital which needed to be preserved from the peasants who seemed to think it was all theirs. The overall area of forest, however, was not very different from that in the twentieth century, although the trees themselves were different, with far fewer conifers.

There may be little alteration on the large scale, but there are a multitude of changes in detail. The old towns, of course, were all in the same places, all fairly small in size, with only Paris having a population greater than 100,000. The towns were still clustered within their walls, although kings now left them to crumble instead of demolishing them. They would all have had ten or so church towers, sometimes many more, and here and there there would be strange empty spaces: an uneven square, a green for arquebusiers or archery, areas for walking and exercise, orchards, small pastures, a walled vineyard, cesspits, and 'shambles', the forerunner of our abattoirs; these towns were permeated by the country, including livestock, and a few houses also stood outside the town gates, which were closed each evening, beside the main roads, or down rough tracks.

Those old French towns which escaped the industrialisation of the nineteenth century could not have looked very different, before the introduction of concrete in the late twentieth century, except that there would have been fewer church towers and suburbs, and the walls would have been turned into boulevards. As far as the peasants were concerned, they were still the sites of fairs and markets, justice and administration, the place where the notary and the 'bourgeois' landowner lived, and where they came to meet people, to discuss matters, perhaps over a few drinks.

There was no town, just as there was no river and certainly no 'cart road', which was out of the orbit of the peasants of the seventeenth century.

Yet their lives were focussed on their everyday place of work,

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their land, and we shall understand that better if we look at it first from above.

If the rural historian's hypothetical aircraft came down to 200 or 300 feet he would no longer see things in terms of lines and masses; instead he would be perceiving the simple or complex, often harmonious, sometimes unexpected, always intelligent architecture of one of those microcosms of human society known to our forebears called *terroirs*.

A *terroir* meant a locality, which included all the buildings, courtyards, gardens, vineyards, fields, open or enclosed, meadows and pastures of all sorts, wasteland, moorland, woods, forest, not forgetting the network of tracks and streams, which all made varying contributions towards the existence, survival, and prosperity of a group of human beings which might be as large as a big village, or a small one, or just a single, isolated, farm. There was obviously an infinite variety of these localities then as now, although naturally most of the component elements are fairly universal.

Let us look at some.

Terroirs in the north

The best known, and obviously the most common, is found in at least a quarter of the kingdom, including the north, the east and part of central France, as far as the wooded country. The landscape here is mostly flat and expansive, on the edge of the Great European plain, where fertile alluvial soil reaches, at some points, to beyond the Loire.

The landscape can be described in a few words; a village concentrated at the centre of cornfields, which are divided by old cart-tracks and bounded by sparse woodland, with perhaps one or two windmills on a hill, or a large fortified farm. It is typical of Picardy, the Beauce region, the drier parts of Champagne, and the greater part of the Brie region.

However, in the seventeenth century it did not much resemble the seas of corn, rippled by the wind, beloved of later poets. There were no fields, as there are today, full only of tall wheat freed from weeds by the advances of scientific agriculture, nor any beets or maize. Different cereals alternated, with oats here, barley there, and weak stems of wheat usually mixed with rye and scattered with corn-

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flowers, poppies, wild vetch, and other plants which neither improved its quality nor made it easier to keep. Far from reaching to the horizon in all directions, the different colours of cereal, with their different purposes (barley for making beer, oats for the horses, *bledz* (wheat) often *mesteils* (mixed) for men) did not even cover all the available and workable area. A third, or perhaps less, was fallow, sometimes 'green', sometimes pasture, sometimes ploughed, according to the season: it was fallow because it was thought, quite reasonably at a period and in places where there was little manure and fertilisers were unknown, that the land had to be rested one year in three, even in these naturally fertile plains. So here and there we would see a group of fields, or a farmyard, or a topographical feature where the grass grew, grazed by small, yellowish sheep -- the 'wool-animals', the *bélineal* (ram) and *brébial* (ewe) -- often guarded by a shepherd and one or two dogs, to keep them out of the neighbouring fields where crops were growing. At other times, in spring or autumn, the *sombres* (the local name given to the fallow fields, especially in Burgundy) would have been ploughed up, either to break new ground or to prepare it for sowing new crops, and the land would appear in shades of brown or black earth, often full of nodules of flint, or turned-up fragments of chalk.

Without the unbroken vistas of wheat we have come to expect, we are reminded of another fact which the amalgamation of farms and reorganisation may have made us lose sight of. The arable land was almost always laid out in strips, generally ten times as long as they were wide but sometimes longer; this is sometimes, though not fully, explained in terms of adaptation to the use of the wheel and mould-board plough, and the need to share inherited land equally (in accordance with local custom). These pieces of land were normally bounded by a furrow larger than the others (and which had twenty different local names: in Anjou it was called the *rèze*), and by large stones dug well in at each end, and they would be served by one or more tracks which grouped them together, so that it was naturally in the interests of those cultivating them to grow the same things in the same way, especially when it came to harvesting. Layout and custom both inevitably led to collaboration, and these agreements often became enshrined in provincial custom and practice, which carried the full weight of law within a locality or a region, and which had been set down in writing in the sixteenth century, and had to be complied with.

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Interrupting this dominant pattern of long straggling fields, squarer patches of better land would often appear, extending over several *arpents* (an *arpent* being a frequently used measure, something between a third and a half a hectare); these were usually the best fields in the seigneurial domain. They would either be close to the château, or to its *basse-cour* (which would be a good field, almost next to the courtyard itself, which belonged to the seigneur, literally as well as figuratively), or else much further away, at the edge of the locality, where we shall encounter them again.

Roughly at the centre of the locality would be the hundred or so houses where the people who cultivated it lived. In the middle would be the church, with the cemetery and presbytery adjacent to it, and the square nearby. Not far from there would often, but not always, be a château, or a manor or some big house. From above it all looks very simple.

Some villages seem to have had a circular or clustered pattern, with two concentric roads and several radial tracks. Others were stretched out along a stream, or along both sides of an ancient roadway (which was less likely to be Roman than people thought); some had two central foci, which sometimes corresponded to two places of worship, or more uncommonly to two minor seigneuries, or to two smaller localities which had amalgamated, or occasionally to a village which had been partly burned and rebuilt on a slightly different site. Whatever their shape – and the commonest were grouped together or linear – they created islands of greenery in the bare expanse of fields of crops interspersed with fallow areas, with roofs nestling in it or emerging from it. Here in the north, almost all the roofs were thatched with wheat or rye-straw, long, tough stems cut close to the ground, providing the houses with coolness in summer and some warmth in winter for almost no cost (beyond the strain of arms and backs), though with the ever-present danger of fire and burning. Two or three houses, though, the richest, were roofed with tiles, or slates, depending on the proximity of slate to be quarried, ease of transport, and the possibility of heating ovens to fire clay.

In addition to these visible signs, every village in the north and east possessed some sort of legal and customary status of which various concrete indications were visible. First of all, it had boundaries, which would often be marked physically, for example by a

circular road which went behind the gardens or the enclosed fields. Beyond this point were the fields, which were not considered to be part of the village, but had a different status. Another way of marking boundaries was to plant wayside crosses, or large trees, such as pear trees, at what could be termed sacred places, on the four or five roads that converged in the centre of the village, by the church; raised stones and artificial tumuli were also used. Crosses, which were later given new uses, particularly by the catholic and royalist missions of the next century, were the most usual markers, and old documents speak of villages *intra cruces*. Within them, therefore, a different set of laws obtained and the cluster of houses takes on the aspect of a land of liberty, where people could grow pretty much what they liked in their gardens, and enjoyed a degree of freedom or exemption, too, because they paid a lower rate of tax on the surface area of their land to the seigneur and the church; sometimes even being immune from tithes.

In reality, every northern village – and often those elsewhere – boiled down to a collection of contiguous *manses*, *mazures*, *meix* or *mas* (the meaning of the latter shifted in the south): all these words stem from the Latin (*mansus*: a dwelling place, in the primary sense) and they are found almost universally. Included in the *manse* would be the house itself, the yard where the dungheap stood and the fowls scratched and where the tools lay about, the outbuildings joined on to the house or close to it for beasts or storage, the garden (almost always enclosed), and sometimes another field close by and well-manured, known to the seventeenth-century Burgundians as the ‘wing of the *meix*’ or the ‘house field’ (which was no doubt the most important of all). Living in a *manse* also gave rights over the land in general as well as over the commons, where they existed: these were communal pastures which were often mediocre but useful for the poorer inhabitants.

Nothing of this would be visible from above, beyond the bricks and mortar, except the fruit trees and the carefully-tended beds of ‘herbs’ (usually green vegetables, leeks, and cabbages) and ‘roots’ (the only root vegetables of the period were carrots and turnips, which were far from tender). There would be no sign of the twenty different sorts of beans and ‘peas’ (our dried haricots: in the seventeenth century ‘haricot’ meant not beans but a stew of lamb and turnips), stomachs fed (if at all) on the plainest food.

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If we now gain height and leave the village in order to look down on the wheat and fallow fields to try to pick out the livestock, we will find some surprises. Apart from large flocks of thin sheep grazing together over stubble fields, the sparse common land, and those fallow fields not yet ploughed in preparation for sowing, we might well see several strong teams of heavily-built horses – two, four, or sometimes six to a team – pulling a heavy plough with wheels, coulter, share, and mould-board, or an even heavier cart: these would belong to the ‘powerful’ members of the village; but there would be almost no cattle, except perhaps five or six cows grazing in front of the house if there was a sort of grassy bank (although often overgrown) between it and the road. And we would then realise the grave weakness of these broad plains of wheat: the frequent absence of pasturage, and therefore of cattle – *aumailles*, as they were often called – in any significant numbers, and thus of dung to fertilise the fields, which sheep cannot do adequately. So whenever a small river ran through a locality, the water meadows were tremendously valuable; their principal function was to provide hay, and beasts were not generally allowed on to them until a second harvest, an ‘aftermath’, had been cut: they were a great help, nonetheless. However, if there were some poor outlying fields at the edges of the *terroir*, too stony or too rocky to make it worthwhile sowing them, these would at least provide some indifferent grazing, usually communal (although sometimes claimed by the seigneur), where everyone would try to take at least one cow, in the permitted seasons. And where there was practically nothing to support weak and expensive cattle, we can more easily understand how the fear of a shortage of wheat (no substitute known for it) could drive populations to put all the available acreage under cultivation without keeping any space (except village gardens) in reserve for other crops or speculations. These vast reservoirs of grain also had to feed the great northern cities, especially Paris, which meant 3–400,000 mouths at the beginning of the century, and 500,000 at the end.

Towards the edges of these plains localities there was often a small wood, one or two windmills, and a large farm. The woods, which belonged to the seigneur, harboured countless rabbits, small rodents, and birds of all kinds, which in principle only the seigneur was allowed to hunt, but resourceful poachers also took advantage of this small-scale reserve, which functioned as both dovecot and