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Chapter 1

Rural France in the eighteenth century

France, it has often been remarked, is an aggregate which should be studied piece by piece. Nowhere is the truth of this dictum more evident than in the field of rural history. Many of the topics examined in this chapter resist analysis in global terms. The 'country dweller', 'patterns of land ownership', 'agrarian structures', 'common rights' and so forth are convenient portmanteau phrases which few historians would choose to be without. But they are meaningful only in a context of time and place. Rural history is perforce local history – the history of villages, peasants and peasantries conflated into an intelligible whole. Nevertheless, the lives of all country dwellers were shaped by biological rhythms, and these rhythms controlled the fortunes of the poor to a considerable degree. Beneath the surface of late *ancien régime* society an important demographic transition was taking place.

Demographic recovery

What was the population of France in 1789? The answer partly depends on which of France's several frontiers is adopted as the basis for calculation. Notwithstanding these adjustments, however, population historians have revised their estimates upwards in recent years. In place of the traditional estimate of 25 or 26 millions, it is now suggested that the hexagon numbered within its borders (those of 1861, admittedly) some 28 million inhabitants on the eve of the revolution. This revision has implications for the way in which we conceptualise population growth across the century, as well. The Institut National d'Etudes Démographiques has computed a figure of 24.6 millions for 1740 which is at least 2 millions higher than previous best estimates. Such a figure calls into question the so-called watershed decade of the 1750s when population growth in France is said to have begun in earnest. Instead we are left with a gentler profile of growth. From a threshold of 21.5 millions at the turn of the century, an

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increase of roughly 14 per cent had been registered by 1750. Thereafter the rate of growth gathered momentum to yield a 19 per cent increase by 1800. Even so, the contrast between the first half of the century and the second is scarcely dramatic. Nor does an overall growth rate of 33 per cent across the century appear impressive when compared with equivalent indicators for England (+61 per cent), Sweden (+67 per cent), Spain (+72 per cent) and European Russia (+80 per cent). As a description of crude population increase, the contention that France experienced a 'demographic revolution' in the course of the eighteenth century is misplaced.

Nevertheless, the population of France *did* increase across the century and that increase was sustained into the next (+25 per cent between 1800 and 1850). This contrasts with the mediocre profile of growth during the seventeenth century (+10 per cent at best), and it calls for an explanation. One approach is to assume within a given population a natural capacity for growth which is realised to a greater or lesser degree as a result of the interplay of several external 'regulators'. According to this theory recurrent bouts of warfare, epidemic disease and, above all, famine depressed reproductive capacity during the final decades of the seventeenth century. Thereafter, the virulence and frequency of these 'regulators' eased and population growth resumed. Initially, this growth simply took up the slack in the rural economy, but ultimately it risked a repetition of the cycle, unless, that is, the food supply kept pace with demand. Such a neo-Malthusian model of population change still has explanatory potential provided that we do not apply it too mechanically. It focuses attention on the role of the harvest, and more especially of harvest failure or a succession of poor harvests, in triggering demographic crises. Pierre Goubert succinctly describes the price of corn as the 'barometer' of short-term population change and suggests that we confine the term 'demographic crisis' to those years in which the usual death rate doubled and conceptions plunged by a third or more.[1] When such harvest crises occurred at frequent intervals, as happened in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, population levels dropped or stagnated. The pool of marriageable women was reduced in size and the losses of one generation were passed on to the next. When, on the other hand, the intervals between catastrophic crop failures lengthened, as happened in the second half of the eighteenth century, reproductive capacity remained buoyant and losses were soon made good. Epidemic disease and warfare could, of course, take their own toll, but deaths from the plague virtually ceased after the 1720–2 outbreak in Provence.

The neo-Malthusian model provides a pleasingly balanced and global explanation of demographic fluctuations, but it simplifies the processes involved to an unacceptable degree. The scenario of an even growth in

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population pressing uniformly against finite food resources with evenly distributed consequences cannot be demonstrated in practice. Some localities and regions undoubtedly experienced over-population in relation to available resources, but there was no generalised crisis of over-population in France at the end of the *ancien régime*. As Jacques Dupâquier has pointed out, emigration – the classic symptom of an over-populated countryside – was negligible in either the seventeenth or the eighteenth century.[2] Moreover, acute food shortages and outbreaks of epidemic disease were by no means restricted to densely populated areas. The point is surely that no single, monolithic demographic regime ever existed: rural France was divided into numerous petty demographic regimes with highly individual characteristics.

A further objection levelled against the neo-Malthusian approach is that it emphasises mortality at the expense of fertility. Whilst a modest decline in mortality, especially infant mortality, is beyond question in this period, research has shown that fertility can no longer be ignored as if it were a constant impervious to short-term fluctuation. From this has followed the realisation that the rural population actively contrived to limit or promote fertility and that different social groups practised different types of demographic behaviour. To take the first point, it seems clear that mortality and fertility should not be viewed in isolation, for Dupâquier has demonstrated how periods of demographic crisis could be followed by periods of high fertility (expressed in terms of a lowering of mean age at first marriage), which more than compensated for earlier losses.[3] His findings suggest that a small decline in the pool of marriageable women would *not* necessarily reduce the childbearing potential of the next generation.

The second point is more controversial and concerns the likely impact of different patterns of demographic behaviour on overall population growth. 'Was there a demographic regime for the rich and a demographic regime for the poor?', asks Bernard Derouet.[4] He provides an unambiguous answer in a case study of four villages on the cereal plains to the west of Paris. In common with other researchers, he draws attention to the technique of controlling fertility by varying the age at first marriage. Thus, the decade 1710–19 marked a population nadir and the period of lowest age at first marriage, whereas age at first marriage was adjusted upwards as population pressure rose in subsequent decades. More important, however, he introduces a socio-economic variable and shows how the reproductive cycle of the well-to-do peasant household and that of the agricultural labourer differed in important respects. For example, when the average age at first marriage dropped, that of labourers (men as well as women) dropped even lower. By contrast, the fertility of landed households remained fairly stable. Far-reaching conclusions flow from this line

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of argument for it appears that the profile of population shifts can be explained in terms of the expansion or contraction in the numbers of agricultural labourers within the rural community. On the other hand, many rural communities did not contain a substantial percentage of peasant proletarians. And in any case we should allow for the possibility that differential levels of fertility were counteracted by differential levels of mortality. Derouet seems to acknowledge as much when he likens the category of day labourers to 'shock absorbers'[5] which acted to limit the damage caused by periodic demographic crises.

Whether this pioneer research into the social and economic dimension of reproductive behaviour will result in a new vision of *ancien régime* demography is not yet clear, but it has already undermined the global assumptions of the neo-Malthusian model. We must now take this process a stage further and distinguish between the total population and the rural population and, if possible, between the rural population and that population actively engaged in agriculture. The crude totals proposed by historians can be ignored because they are based on divergent computations of global population, but this does not alter the validity of proportional estimates. According to the Institut National de la Statistique et des Etudes Economiques, 83 per cent of the population of France were country dwellers in 1700, compared with 78 per cent in 1789 and 77 per cent in 1801.[6] In a pre-statistical age, these figures should be regarded as approximations, but it is reassuring to note that they do not fundamentally depart from those suggested by E. Le Roy Ladurie (1660 = 85 per cent; 1789 = 81.5 per cent).[7] Estimating the agricultural population of *ancien régime* France is a more hazardous exercise which has rarely been attempted, but the I.N.S.E.E. statisticians put it at 79 per cent in 1700 (93 per cent of the rural population) and 67 per cent in 1789 (87 per cent of the rural population). Le Roy Ladurie opts for a slightly lower figure and describes 82 per cent of country dwellers as peasants in 1789. So the urban population of France grew in the course of the eighteenth century, but that growth was uneven and unspectacular. Most of the excess served to swell the ranks of village society.

Population growth was also exceedingly patchy. In parts of Flanders the population doubled between 1750 and the revolution, and growth was especially rapid in the eastern provinces of Lorraine, Alsace and the Franche-Comté, too. These were all regions which had suffered badly from the effects of warfare during the seventeenth century. In the Massif Central, the Centre and the Ile-de-France demographic recovery was more measured. Sometimes the expansion was steady and cumulative, at least until the 1770s (Toulouse region; Vivarais), sometimes it occurred late and in the form of headlong spurts (Normandy; southern Champagne) and

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sometimes it made a timid appearance only to be cut back by waves of epidemic disease. This was the situation in the western provinces of France (Brittany, Anjou, Maine, Touraine). Brittany registered only a small net population increase over the century after outbreaks of dysentery and pneumonia arrested and then reversed the trend in the 1770s and 1780s. Population growth was imperceptible in Anjou, too. Indeed, the province may have counted fewer inhabitants in 1789 than in 1720.

The differential impact of dearth and disease can be held principally responsible for these unevennesses. However, another factor seems to have been in play: the conscious and deliberate limitation of fertility within marriage. Historians have long been aware that France's demographic vitality began to ebb towards the end of the eighteenth century; the problem has lain in ascribing a cause or causes to the phenomenon which was manifested nowhere else in Europe at this time. The obvious answer is to point to the wholesale revision of social habits unleashed by the revolution, but, unfortunately, the available documentation does not permit such a neat compartmentalisation of the problem. Two facts stand out: birth control was not unfamiliar to the peasants of the late *ancien régime*, and the birth rate actually went up during the revolution, not down. It has been suggested that modern methods of family planning were pioneered in two regions of the country: the South West and Normandy.[8] Derouet agrees and points out that raising the age at first marriage – the traditional response to increasing population pressure – could not be pushed beyond a certain point.[9] Thereafter, alternative stratagems were called for. By the 1770s that threshold had been reached in the villages along the southern borders of Normandy, or so he believes.

Nevertheless, the evidence to underpin this fundamental shift in popular behaviour is mainly inferential. In an attempt to introduce some rigour to the whole question of demographic transition, Dupâquier and Berg-Hamon pieced together all the fragmentary census data relating to the period 1784–1801.[10] The first hard fact to emerge was a graph of the marriage rate showing a slump coinciding with the onset of the pre-revolutionary crisis (1787–9), a marked recovery between 1790 and 1792, and a peak in 1793–4 which surely reflected the efforts of young peasants seeking to avoid conscription. More marrying spelt more children: after a downturn consequent upon the postponement of many marriages at the very end of the *ancien régime*, a buoyant birth rate was quickly restored. From 1793 until 1800 it held steady at a record level of about a million a year. Notwithstanding wartime losses, the total population of France increased by 1.3 million during the revolutionary decade. So it seems that the most immediate impact of the political crisis of 1789 lay in the encouragement it gave to marriage. The decline in the annual tally of births only

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set in during the Consulate. The year 1804 witnessed 933,700 births – the lowest level since 1748.

This puzzling development is the starting point from which historians have inferred the resort to birth control. Dupâquier and Berg-Hamon contrived to obtain a clearer picture of what was happening by conducting a region-by-region comparison of total births in the periods 1780–9 and 1800–9. This rough and ready method of analysis revealed the major areas of declining vitality to have been the Centre and the West. The presence of Brittany and the western provinces in this category holds no surprises, for here a depressed birth rate can be attributed to the crises of the 1770s and 1780s. The altered pattern of fertility in the Centre (in reality an amorphous region embracing Burgundy and the Franche-Comté as well as the Loire Country and the Massif Central) is less easily explained, however. Perhaps the 'dark secrets' of birth control, against which the church fulminated so forcefully, had begun to make headway among the peasantry, but there is a perplexing randomness about the areas which were first to register declining levels of fertility. In Normandy and the provinces of the South West contraceptive practices made a precocious appearance among the peasantry, or so we are told, and yet the birth rate remained remarkably stable in both regions between the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. None the less, it cannot be denied that, nationwide, the birth rate plummeted from 38.8 per thousand to 32.9 per thousand between the end of the *ancien régime* and the end of the Consulate. Nor should we underestimate the impact of the revolution on demographic behaviour. If the freer social atmosphere prevailing after 1789 removed some of the traditional constraints on marriage, there is a *prima facie* case for arguing that – sooner or later – it also undermined the old taboos on the subject of procreation.

We return, then, to the disputed notion of 'demographic revolution'. Applied to the annual incremental increase in population registered in the course of the eighteenth century such a term is surely excessive. Applied to the forms of demographic behaviour uncovered as a result of family reconstitution studies it has greater validity. Sophisticated and efficient techniques of family limitation reached the masses during the second half of the eighteenth century. Moreover, they reached the rural masses before the urban masses, or so it would seem. Dupâquier likens the progress of birth control to an ink stain: limited to western and central Normandy around 1770, it quickly spread outwards towards the Paris basin, the Massif Central and the East.[11] He salutes the new posture as a victory for peasant individualism over the moral doctrines of the church, a victory which the revolution could only reinforce.

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The peasantry

But who were the peasantry in 1789? The vast class of the wronged, retorted the revolutionaries: those who had shouldered the entire burden of the state while deprived of their rights. Even the term smacked of degradation: in 1802 the historian Amans-Alexis Monteil noted that the word *paysan* had gone out of use and had been replaced by the neutral-sounding *cultivateur*.[12] Such rhetorical definitions were designed to obscure social and economic realities, however. Our task must be to uncover them. In one sense the peasantry have already been identified: they were that portion of the population engaged in agricultural pursuits and who, by virtue of their close links to the soil, shared a common lifestyle and a common outlook. This could be termed the maximalist definition of the peasantry, for it embraces in a single category both owner-exploiters and those who worked the land of others for a wage. The minimalist definition invites an altogether more precise use of terms. It confines the label 'peasant' to self-sufficient farmers whose interests and outlook were sometimes opposed to those of other denizens of the countryside (landless labourers, rural artisans). Each definition has its merits, as the pages that follow will attempt to show. Sometimes the peasantry, in the broadest sense, thought and acted *en masse*. In so doing, they demonstrated a formidable capacity to shape the course of the revolution. Sometimes they spoke with many voices, only to dissipate their energies in sterile in-fighting. First, however, we must weigh up the peasantry in generic terms and compare them with the other groups forming *ancien régime* society.

On the eve of the revolution peasant households accounted for roughly 67 per cent of the population and yet it is unlikely that they owned more than 33 per cent of the land. This figure has been arrived at by averaging the results of case studies into property structures and it compares tolerably with the estimates proposed by Georges Lefebvre in 1932–3.[13] The trend of peasant land ownership is wellnigh impossible to quantify. Some historians believe that the peasantry owned less land in 1789 than at the start of the century, but there seems no good reason to suppose that this might have been so. On the contrary, population growth unleashed a massive assault on abandoned, waste and even collectively owned land surfaces, and the peasantry were the principal beneficiaries. In general, therefore, we are dealing with a landed peasantry, compared with the semi-servile peasantries across the Rhine where land remained imprisoned within the manorial system, and the dispossessed yeomanry of England with a title to no more than 10 per cent of the land by the end of the century.

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Possession was one thing, however; access to land was arguably more important. Virtually the entire arable surface of the kingdom was farmed by the peasantry, either as freeholders, or as tenants, or as squatters. But such distinctions have a limited value, for, prior to the revolution, ownership was an imprecise concept. At one extreme the king, as feudal overlord, laid claim to all the territory of France; at the other the peasantry nourished a deep-seated conviction that they 'owned' the land. The practice of renewing tenancies tacitly and the existence of a formidable array of collective rights (see pp. 128–37) served only to deepen that conviction. All peasant households shared one overriding ambition: to assemble, by inheritance, by marriage, by purchase or by renting, a holding which would enable them to live decently. In some regions this was easier to achieve than in others. Peasant holdings tended to be densest in upland and mountainous areas where soil fertility was low and competition for land from members of the privileged orders less intense. In the Béarn, Haute-Provence, the Dauphiné, the Auvergne and along the western flanks of the Massif Central over 50 per cent of the land used for agriculture had fallen into the hands of peasant proprietors. Few of these proprietors approached the threshold of self-sufficiency; on the other hand few peasant households had failed to acquire a plot of land of some description on which to grow vegetables or cereals. In the Auvergne perhaps 5 per cent of households could be included in this latter category. Around the cities and even quite small seats of local government, competition from the privileged orders and the professional bourgeoisie proved irresistible and, in consequence, peasant property remained scanty and fragmented. The rich cereal-growing plains of the Beauce to the south-west of Paris were entirely dominated by noble and bourgeois landlords, while the clergy possessed substantial estates in Picardy and around the towns of Laon and Cambrai. According to Lefebvre, whose memorable thesis on this north-eastern corner of France (the future department of the Nord) contains a painstaking analysis of property structures, ecclesiastical possessions covered 40 per cent of the land surface of the Cambrésis.[14] When this region was caught up in the first flush of agrarian revolt in April–May 1789, monasteries and monastic storehouses were the obvious targets for popular anger.

So against the picture of a deeply rooted peasantry with a considerable stake in the land, we must set that of a rootless and, at the lowest reaches, semi-proletarianised peasantry struggling to retain control over the land in the face of pressure from seigneurs and bourgeois purchasers. Nor did the challenge issue solely from outside the rural community: in the eyes of the poor, the rich peasant who sought to engross the holdings of his neighbours was every bit as much of a social menace as the *forain* or *horsain* –

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the absentee landlord. These latent tensions were undoubtedly most acute in the wheat-growing belt around Paris. In eastern Normandy, in the Beauce, in the Brie, the peasantry rarely owned more than 25 per cent of the land surface, and often far less. In the hinterland of Versailles, their stake had dwindled to insignificance. Correspondingly, the ranks of agricultural labourers bulked large and it is principally from these districts that we hear the authentic voice of the landless poor during the revolution. Comparable statistics are hard to come by since some historians prefer to group the 'virtually landless' together with the 'literally landless' which introduces an element of arbitrariness and confuses the picture. None the less, a sampling of thirteen villages in the Beauce and Gâtinais (department of the Loiret) revealed 24 per cent of the peasantry to have been non-proprietors, compared with 55.5 per cent in the Versailles district.[15] Further to the north, in the district of Amiens (department of the Somme), Florence Gauthier defines the 'rural proletariat' as those without holdings save, perhaps, for a small garden and estimates that they totalled 21 per cent of the rural population.[16] To label this substantial section of the peasant community a 'rural proletariat' is unhelpful, however, for it implies a polarisation between the 'landed' and the 'landless' which is much too neat. Derouet's study of several villages in the Thimerais district between Chartres and Dreux, which has already been discussed in a different context, enables us to take the analysis a stage further. While he notes that 'literally landless' labourers were not uncommon, he finds that 50 per cent of such households owned their dwellings; between 60 and 70 per cent owned a small garden; 27 per cent owned a cow and 7 per cent owned some sheep. The presence of livestock spells out once again that access to land was often the crucial factor. Free-for-all grazing on wastes, commons and unenclosed meadows and arable after the removal of the harvest mitigated the condition of landlessness to no small degree. It is noteworthy that during the revolution the defence of common rights became a key issue, perhaps *the* key issue, in the political programme of the poor peasantry.

Described variously in the documents as *journaliers*, *brassiers*, *manœuvriers*, *locataires* or *travailleurs de terre*, the number of landless peasants was increasing rapidly in the final decades of the eighteenth century. Most were born into this precarious social station, but some were driven into it as a result of the economic malaise which developed in the 1770s and 1780s. The echelon of the peasantry most likely to be precipitated into the ranks of the wage earners in the event of a crisis was that of the petty proprietors whose ability to live independently turned on finding additional land to rent at a price within their means. Before the revolutionary sleight of hand homogenising all peasants under the title of *cultivateurs*, such households appeared in multiple guises. In southern Picardy

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and the Ile-de-France they were known as *haricotiers*, in the Vexin and the Thimerais as *sossons*, and in the South West as *bordiers*. The amount of land farmed by these individuals varied a good deal, as did the proportion of freehold to leasehold. Around Beauvais *haricotiers* generally owned about four hectares, but might easily rent as much again. The *sossons* of the Thimerais exploited five or six hectares on average, of which two-thirds might be rented, whereas the *bordiers* of Bas Poitou worked holdings of up to fifteen hectares, often on the basis of a share-crop lease. 'Holding' is something of a misnomer, however, for petty peasant proprietors rarely enjoyed the luxury of farming compact units. Theirs was a life of patient accumulation of disparate plots in the hope that one day they could be welded into a *domaine*, that is to say a balanced agricultural exploitation. It follows, then, that the claim of the small landed peasant to self-sufficiency was highly precarious. During periods of economic buoyancy when harvests were plentiful and the products of cottage industry found an easy outlet, he and his family managed to avoid the recourse to day labouring. The position of the *vigneron* or small winegrower was little different in this respect. But the true mark of self-sufficiency was the ownership of draught animals. When it came to ploughing the small peasant proprietor had to rely on the resources of his larger neighbour.

These larger neighbours with ploughs and oxen or horses were usually described as *laboureurs*. The term seems apt, but it is also elastic. In most eighteenth-century usage *laboureur* denoted a substantial peasant farmer who owned the land which he cultivated and lived comfortably thereon. However, it could also be used to refer to peasant proprietors of less exalted status. In the Soissonnais the label was applied indiscriminately to large tenant farmers *and* to those whom we have described as *haricotiers*. In the Lauragais and the area around Carcassonne *laboureurs* were a humble species not very far removed from agricultural wage earners. The term *ménager* presents a similar problem. For most purposes it can be regarded as a synonym for independent peasant proprietor or *laboureur*. Like *pagès* and *bientenant*, *ménager* was a word with a southern flavour, but, on the other hand, Lefebvre describes the *ménager* of Flanders as a poor peasant with little land.[17] Indeed, he lumps them with day labourers to form a somewhat generously defined rural proletariat.

Confusing nomenclature should not be allowed to cloud the overall picture, however. In nine cases out of ten *laboureurs* were peasant landowners of independent means. They stood at the apex of the peasantry in southern France where the spectrum of wealth was more restrained and social differentiation less acute. In the North this coveted position was occupied by a higher echelon of large tenant farmers known as *gros fermiers*, but the *laboureurs* were men of considerable substance for all

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