

Introduction

It might be argued that, with the publication in 1975–6 of the four-volume *Histoire de la France rurale*, under the general editorship of Georges Duby and Armand Wallon, little more remains to be written on the subject of the French peasantry.¹ Nevertheless, some fifteen years later, there does seem some point to writing this current book, if only to attempt a synthesis of some of the recent ethnographic and historical theses which, in their infancy in the 1960s and early 1970s, have come to fruition today.

The current work focuses first and foremost on the peasantry, and the place it has occupied in French society. Because of that, it moves beyond a consideration of agriculture alone but, by the same token, is not able to include the totality of the rural world. Of course, the very term peasant is a notoriously difficult one to pin down.² In the eighteenth century, the peasant was, above all, a country-dweller, rooted deep in his native soil.³ His skills were clear-cut and well defined: in the words of one of La Fontaine's characters: 'I am a peasant, no more nor less . . . I can sow seeds, plough the soil, graft the vine and that's all'.⁴ Then, three-quarters of the population were peasants and agricultural activity dominated the rural economy. At the same time, the term peasant had undoubted pejorative connotations, which lasted throughout the nineteenth century. It was largely synonymous with a coarse, crude, uncultured person. It is hardly surprising, then, that politicians chose to use more neutral, perhaps more flattering, terms such as cultivator, in their speeches. Those landed gentry, passionate agronomists, much preferred to speak of themselves as farmers.

At the start of the twentieth century, however, the word peasant was rehabilitated thanks to agrarian thinkers. Agricultural organisations in the inter-war years consciously sought to use the word peasant as a rallying cry and source of pride. In the years after 1945, the era of the farmer-technician, the word again took on somewhat unfavourable connotations. Not that these lasted long. By the end of the 1960s, in a rural world in which the place of agriculture was increasingly marginalised,

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the term peasant seemed, to town-dwellers at least, to represent stability and a sense of belonging in a world that was rapidly changing. But, one might ask, does the peasantry still exist? Does the term peasantry signify a community of shared values and solidarity? Outside attitudes, sometimes hostile, at other times favourable, will determine, to a large extent, the future use of the term.

The way in which the word peasant has shifted its meaning over time is especially indicative of how the world at large has defined, identified and recognised the peasant world. To what extent is that world now fully integrated into the French nation? Maurice Agulhon has suggested that, after centuries of resistance, especially fiscal, by the start of the Third Republic it had become one of the chief anchors of the regime. Equally, however, both Eugen Weber and Henri Mendras have painted a picture of a peasantry which remained, in part at least, foreign to society at large. For Mendras, peasants were, above all: 'people who live in a society with a high degree of economic and political independence and autarchy from society at large and who have their own, distinctive, patterns of living'.⁵ Perhaps in this sense, then, the 1960s saw the end of the peasantry.

Equally controversial is the economic and social position of the peasant. Is he a capitalist entrepreneur, owner of his means of production? Or is he rather exploited by a society which draws from him the products it needs and pays him but poorly in return? The land, then, cannot be simply regarded as but one more factor of production. The evolution of the peasantry and the national and global economy cannot be separated. The ways in which agriculture has changed have determined the relationship between the peasantry and the society that surrounds it.

The current work, then, cannot escape such difficult questions. Over-simplification is undoubtedly a real danger. The peasant world evolved only slowly up until the early 1950s, but the rate of that evolution varied from one region to the next. However, a full study of the regional cases is especially difficult, simply because so many regional monographs focus on 'problem peasantries' south of the Loire. The risk of over-generalisation must, however, be tackled in order to identify long-term secular trends. The Revolution marked a vitally important staging-post. Even if it failed to bring about a massive modification of agricultural structures, the abolition of seigneurial fines and taxes permitted the peasantry to keep more of what it produced. From this fact flowed the slow improvements in living conditions once demographic pressures had begun to ease. The end of the Second Empire marked an important turning-point. The long agricultural depression made land investment

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less attractive for non-farmers, whilst improvements in communications accelerated urban influences in the countryside. The wars and the crisis of the 1930s which separated them brought many peasants face to face with the gap that separated their lives from those of their fellow citizens. That gap closed rapidly between 1950 and 1970. In under twenty years the peasantry was confronted by massive changes. Such changes were to call into question the very existence of the peasantry.

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From the ancien régime to the Restoration: 1789–1815

The quarter of a century which separated the fall of the ancien régime and the Restoration was a decisive one for the French peasantry. In the space of a generation, the social structure and organisation of rural society was both challenged and changed. The rural population, more than three-quarters of the total, was far from indifferent to the tumultuous events in Paris; what is clear is that it is far from easy to determine its precise role in the break up of the old regime and the implementation of the new revolutionary politics. This debate continues apace. One need do no more than consult the impressive bibliographical material devoted to agrarian problems over the last ten years for evidence of this.¹

Controversy has ranged over a number of key issues regarding the economic and social evolution of the countryside in the second half of the eighteenth century. Did agricultural production grow or stagnate in this period? The answer will to some extent determine the historian's interpretation of the economic crises and peasant unrest of the immediate pre-revolutionary period. There has also been much debate over the place of the peasantry in the revolutionary process itself. For at least the last forty years the interpretation of Georges Lefebvre, that the peasant revolution, both anti-feudal and anti-capitalist, existed and functioned independently of the bourgeois revolution has held sway. This view was challenged some ten years ago when Albert Soboul, following the work of the Russian historian, Anatolii Ado, argued that the peasant movements were a variant of, rather than distinct from, the bourgeois revolution. François Furet and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie have further argued for an autonomous type of peasant engagement in the revolutionary upheavals, which was essentially conservative and opposed to the technical innovations which bourgeois farmers were introducing. This basically conservative attitude on the part of the peasantry explains, they argue, the hidden areas of resistance to the Revolution, areas which have long preoccupied the historiographers of the Revolution. The continued polemic is, furthermore, greatly accentuated by the enormous diversity of local conditions and constraints which seem to render the

search for generalisation illusory. Only the continued development of regionally based research can advance the debate.

1. A dominated and dependent peasantry

Ancien régime society was overwhelmingly rural in character. Of the 27 or 28 million people that made up the nation in 1789, at least 22 million were rural-dwellers whilst some 18 million – men, women, young and old – were engaged in agriculture. Almost three out of four French people were peasants. They comprised not one but a multitude of different peasantries living in a diverse kingdom in which regions and districts jealously guarded their differences and autonomy. Beyond this diversity, however, some points of convergence are clear. The peasant was not an isolated individual, and an apparently uniform set of economic, social and legal systems and practices helped to structure patterns of life in these diverse village communities.

Agricultural systems

The routines of peasant life, profoundly marked by conditions of work, were closely dependent on agricultural practices. Northern farming systems have perhaps received most attention. They were based primarily on a division of village territory into three parts, each distinct and with a different legal status, but together forming a complementary whole.

At the centre, in the village, were the houses and gardens (the latter not always directly adjacent to the former). These lay largely outside the collective constraints which structured the community. The garden area was subject to neither the property tax (*dîme*) nor, as a rule, to the various seigneurial taxes. The peasant could use it as he wished; he tended, above all, to grow vegetables or the vine. Part of the land would perhaps be reserved for flax. In many regions, the limits of this personal garden area would be marked by some form of fence or, more simply, by a series of crosses or markers adjoining the pathways.

Beyond such boundaries stretched the cultivated land, given over primarily to cereals. This agricultural zone was subject to the twin constraints of heavy seigneurial taxation and the strong communal control which formed the base of most eighteenth-century peasant communities. The best-known such constraint was the right of common grazing (*vaine pâture*). After the harvest, the status of the land would change. The fields would become common property. The poor of the village had the right to glean those cereals that had escaped the harvesters and the animals of the village, herded together, were able to pasture on the newly harvested land. This right of common grazing was precious to the poorer peasants,

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Table 1. *The three-field system*

| Year | Field 1 | Field 2 | Field 3 |
|------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| 1 | Winter wheats | Spring wheats | Fallow |
| 2 | Spring wheats | Fallow | Winter wheats |
| 3 | Fallow | Winter wheats | Spring wheats |

constrained as they usually were by a shortage of pasture land. Common grazing, however, also implied constraints on field rotations. Since individual boundaries were forbidden on these lands, individual farming practices were hardly practicable. The land would usually be divided into three parts or *soles* and a triennial rotation was the usual pattern (see table 1).

On each field, the cycle would commence with autumn cereals, most commonly wheat or rye, sown in October. The harvest would be taken fairly late in early August of the following year. The land would then be left as stubble for a few weeks, ploughed and worked once or twice between October and March, after which barley or oats, occasionally wheat or beans, would be sown. After harvesting in August and a period of liming, the field would be left fallow for a year until the following autumn. In that time it might be ploughed six or eight times, depending on the region. Only when the field was in stubble would common pasturing be allowed.

In addition to the gardens and cultivated land, the village community usually possessed a range of uncultivated lands – heaths, forest, marshland and waste areas. These constituted an invaluable resource for the village. They helped, for example, to provide animal litter, firewood and materials for building repairs and additional rough pasture for animals. But the extent of these communal lands showed marked regional variations. In the Artois they rarely exceeded 3 per cent to 4 per cent of agricultural land, whereas in the Massif Central up to half a community's land could be made up of these 'waste' areas.² In the second half of the eighteenth century, they were constantly under threat. As cereal prices rose, certain nobles sought to extend their territories here; a peasantry hard pressed by demographic expansion often sought to nibble away likewise at community land. The attitude of the authorities was usually circumspect for fear of arousing strong peasant reaction. In the north and east, as well as in the south-west, however, some divisions of communal land were authorised: one-third to the nobility, two-thirds to the village community. Thus, in the Artois, between 1770 and 1781, one-fifth

of all communal land had been divided in this way. For both peasants and labourers without land the gains were immediate. But the opposition of some large farmers, conscious that they were losing pasture land, limited these operations.³ Elsewhere there was opposition to the one-third share of the nobility. What is clear is that these land divisions exacerbated the divisions within many rural communities.

The three elements of the farming system – gardens, cultivated land and communal territory – showed marked variations from one region to another. In regions where cereal production was less dominant, a different division often operated. In Brittany and the centre-west, where pastoral farming was significant, communal areas were often vast and unencumbered by complex restrictions. Likewise, where cultivated land could be enclosed by high hedges, there were few limitations on individual farming practices. South of the Loire, climatic conditions and relatively infertile soils again meant a somewhat different farming system from that in the north. On the ‘cold soils’ of the Auvergne and Limousin, a biennial rotation was widespread. Here a year of fallow would succeed an autumn cereal, usually rye. It may be supposed that the triennial rotation represented an advance over the biennial. But in terms of productivity, this was not necessarily the case, for the March harvest often represented but half of what would be obtained from a good autumn sowing. In practice there was often little difference between a biennial rotation giving one harvest every second year, and a triennial which gave one and a half harvests every three. The principal advantage of the triennial rotation was that the period of preparation for the spring sowing fitted in well with a traditional ‘dead’ period in the agricultural calendar. Nonetheless, the triennial rotation was technologically limiting. The attempt to produce two successive crops from one field meant that the fallow had to be maintained, whereas it was possible, with a biennial rotation, to gain a catch crop of, say potatoes, during the lull in working the land.

Occasionally the land would be left fallow for a number of years, a system of farming known as *pâtis*. In Mediterranean France, farming systems were much more varied. Because the summer drought often prevented spring wheat from fully maturing, biennial rotations were the rule (often with fruit trees interplanted), except where irrigation was a possibility. If these trees gave variety they also limited the extent of common grazing. Animals were thus usually confined to the communal lands. In viticultural areas, the fallow often disappeared altogether. It should be clear that these farming categories are merely a pale reflection of the true diversity of the countryside, a diversity which defies the cartographer. Nonetheless, François Sigaut has attempted to map the varied

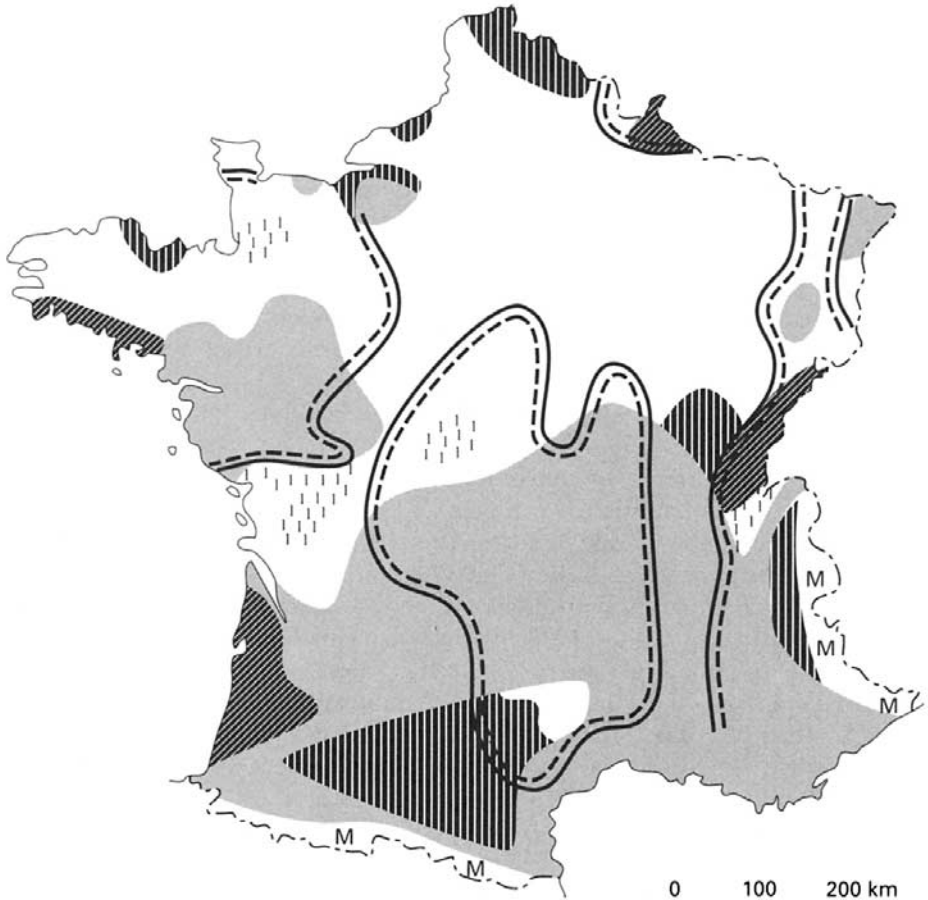
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farming systems in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and his map, whilst not exhaustive, serves admirably to emphasise the diversity of local situations and systems evident at the end of the ancien régime.⁴

Notwithstanding such diversity, it is possible to identify some common characteristics of these agrarian systems (see figure 1). Except in areas of viticulture, all of them give a clear priority to subsistence products, especially cereals. Antoine Lavoisier noted this fact in 1787: 'Agriculture in most French provinces . . . can be regarded as a producer of cereals above all else; animals serve merely as beasts of burden and providers of manure.'⁵ It is above all the shortage of animals, and therefore of manure, that lies at the root of the poor yields. Whilst information on these is sparse, they can be crudely measured in terms of the number of grains harvested for grains sown. Averages seemed to oscillate between 4 and 6 to 1, a return which can be roughly equated to about 7 to 9 quintals per hectare. Only in the most fertile regions, such as Picardy, would returns of around 20 per hectare obtain. The provision of seed, therefore, represented a major drain on production. Between one-fifth and one-quarter of the harvest would therefore have to be reserved, perhaps even more in poor years. These poor yields meant that land devoted to animals was limited and therefore manure in short supply; this was the 'vicious circle' described by Marc Bloch. Cereals became a 'necessary evil' in the system.

Animals were present, however, in all systems. In the Paris region, the *viticulteurs* fed their cattle with the grass used to train the vines⁶ and pastoral farming undoubtedly progressed in upland regions in the course of the eighteenth century. Overall, however, techniques remained poor and productivity low, with primitive tools and practices evident. For ploughing, the heavy plough (*charrue*) dominated in the north, the lighter (*araire*) in the south.⁷ Human labour remained at the base of all farming systems, with large inputs required for only meagre returns. In such conditions then, what kind of progress was possible?

The taste for agronomic discourse might lead us to believe that progress did take place. From about 1750, under the impulse of Quesnay and the Physiocrats, the agronomists emphasised the importance of agriculture. For them, land and land alone was the ultimate source of productivity: 'The land is the unique source of wealth; only agriculture can secure and increase these riches.'⁸ Modernisation of the economy, it was argued, depended on the modernisation of farming. A more dynamic agricultural system, based on the English model with the introduction of forage crops into new rotations and the expansion of animal



System of rotation, with fallow years

- Biennial (winter corn - fallow)
- Triennial (winter corn - spring cereals - fallow)
- Quadrennial (three grain crops, then fallow)

System of rotation, without fallow

- Two or three successive harvests of cereals + application of manure or long periods of waste
- Flanders system (with industrial and forage crops)
- Pasture (periods of waste interpolated with periods of rotation)
- Mountain or upland cultivation

Figure 1 Systems of cultivation in France, c. 1800. (Source: F. Sigaut, 'Pour une cartographie des assolements en France au début du XIXe siècle', *Annales ESC*, May–June 1976, pp. 632f.)

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Excerpt

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production, was the preferred solution. Intellectuals and enlightened aristocrats vied to advocate and imitate the English model and sought to propagandise their views in their newly formed rural academies, societies of agriculture and agricultural journals. In reality their impact was limited. Voltaire, ever sceptical of such pronouncements, many of which emanated from his rival Rousseau, sardonically noted in his *Dictionnaire philosophique*: 'around 1750, the nation, its palate jaded by a surfeit of verse, tragedies, comedies, opera, novels and theological disputes over the nature of grace, finally settled on the subject of cereals . . . Many eminently useful things were written on farming; everyone read them, except, unfortunately, the farmers themselves.' Arthur Young himself was severe in his judgement of French farming.⁹ The English model, so dear to his heart, appeared to have had precious little influence in France.

Are we therefore to conclude that there was no progress in French farming? The question is complex and controversial. According to the economist Jean-Claude Toutain, there was an undoubted increase in agricultural production between 1700 and 1790.¹⁰ The annual rate of growth of agricultural production may have reached as much as 1.4 per cent between 1750 and 1790. Michel Morineau, however, has questioned the methodological base on which these figures have been built,¹¹ and has emphasised the gaps in documentation and statistics for this period. In 1840, the date of the first national agricultural census, agriculture hardly seemed to have made dramatic progress. It would seem, therefore, difficult to sustain the view of an agricultural revolution prior to this date. What is more, the very concept of a national agricultural revolution may be unreal, given the enormous regional differences. It was the strength of these regional differences that led Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie to talk of 'small steps of agricultural progress' linked to the 'steady introduction of new technologies which took the place, in France, of an agricultural revolution on the English model'.¹² Thus, in Languedoc, yields rose only slowly from the 1730s but the rise noticeably quickened after 1750. These results were obtained by a combination of growth factors. Transport improvements and the intensification of manpower were the most important. The introduction of secondary crops, notably potatoes and maize, was also important. Patterns of demographic growth in the second half of the eighteenth century also appear to suggest an improvement in the availability of food. In most regions, birth rates remained high at around 35 to 37/1,000, birth limitations being achieved largely through late marriage. Death rates fell slightly to around 30/1,000. Advances in medicine and hygiene, barely perceptible in the countryside, can hardly explain such a fall. It seems clear that the