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052146210X - Peasant and French: Cultural Contact in Rural France During the Nineteenth Century

James R. Lehning

Excerpt

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## 1

*Introductory positions*

## I

This history is about rural France during the nineteenth century. But we might begin with a story of a Frenchman in a different place at a different time. In Brazil in 1935, the young anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss met his first non-European civilization, the Tibagy Indians. Lévi-Strauss was a product of French civilization and its educational institutions, someone who had, almost on a whim, headed off to study primitive civilizations. His description of the Tibagy brings out his appreciation of the value of the indigenous civilization as well as his disappointment in the contamination by Europeans of his objects of study. But he saw their culture through the paradigm of Europe and France: while conscious of himself as an observer of the Tibagy, he viewed that civilization through its relationship to his own. Reading his account half a century later, we can notice how difficult it was for Lévi-Strauss to fit the Tibagy into the categories he brought with him to Brazil – “primitive” and “civilized.” They were, he wrote, “former savages” on whom civilization had been abruptly forced.<sup>1</sup>

Like ethnographers everywhere, Lévi-Strauss described himself as he searched for words to describe a foreign culture.<sup>2</sup> These ambiguities of description and the construction of identities also run through past constructions of country dwellers in his own country. Educated, urban Frenchmen have typically placed country dwellers in the category of “peasants,” an ambivalent identity different from themselves, curious,

1 Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes tropiques*, trans. by John Russell (New York: Criterion, 1961), 134–135.

2 James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988); Clifford Geertz, *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1988).

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and at times dangerous.<sup>3</sup> Country dwellers have almost always been timeless repositories of virtues, but this view has coexisted with a more malevolent one: “peasants” were superstitious savages, potentially given to irrational violence, a dead weight on French development, under the control of priests, politically conservative, and resistant to change. After the middle of nineteenth century those who lived in the countryside began to seem like an acceptable alternative to the militant urban working class, and the bourgeois politicians of the Third Republic came to rely on rural votes to hold off the Socialist challenge. For the Vichy regime during World War II, “peasants” even became the repository of everything that was good about France, and since World War II, they have been a symbol of opposition to a centralized, unitary national identity. In all of these variations, they have been an important part of the French nation’s perception of itself as, in different ways, participants in French culture have found in the countryside both sources of personal and national regeneration and a civilization profoundly at odds with their own selves and with the nation.

These images of the country dweller were founded on the view that “peasant” was different from “French,” whether the latter was constructed as the aristocrat of the ancien régime, an educated bourgeois of the nineteenth century, or the worker of the twentieth; and one can find these representations in literature, administrative records, and politicians’ speeches. But they are present in histories as well. As “peasants,” in their sixteenth- to eighteenth-century incarnations, became the subjects of histories, they were portrayed as relatively isolated from others, living in a “peasant civilization.”<sup>4</sup> This image has also marked analyses of the rural culture of more recent centuries.<sup>5</sup> But most historians of rural France agree that in the last several centuries “civilization” came to French peasants. National and urban culture found its way into the countryside, whether through the extension of markets, improved transportation, state building and the spread of political participation, secularization, or the intrusion of primary education. Differences of opinion exist over when this happened, but few doubt that at some point those living in the French countryside were touched by events, institutions, and culture

3 Pierre Barral, “Note historique sur l’emploi du terme ‘paysan,’” *Etudes Rurales* 21 (1966), 72–80; Susan Carol Rogers, “Good To Think: The ‘Peasant’ in Contemporary France,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 60 (1987), 56–63; and this volume, Ch. 2.

4 See, among others, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Les Paysans de Languedoc* (Paris: S.E.V.P.E.N., 1966); Pierre Goubert, *Beauvais et les beauvaisis de 1600 à 1730* (Paris: S.E.V.P.E.N., 1960); and Pierre de Saint-Jacob, *Les Paysans de la Bourgogne du Nord au dernier siècle de l’ancien régime* (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1960).

5 See Judith Devlin, *The Superstitious Mind: French Peasants and the Supernatural in the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1987).

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from outside of their villages.<sup>6</sup> Rural French history, then, is a progress of integration of country dwellers into the French nation: local loyalties, customs, and languages were broken down and replaced by a national culture. The story of this contamination of the countryside can be told several ways, but it is almost always done in cataclysmic terms. For some, especially those with a primarily national point of view, it was a relatively benign process, a comedy with a happy ending. For others, however, it has the tragic aura of cultural destruction.<sup>7</sup>

A guiding assumption of this book is that these ways of describing country dwellers make up a French discourse about the countryside that placed those who lived there in specific positions with regard to the rest of France. The category of “peasant” has made and continues to make country dwellers a distinct part of the French nation. Contemporaries knew that “peasants” were different, and their history revolves around the process by which they lost their Burgundian, Breton, Norman, Provençal, or other (peasant) identities and were made French. While the story can be told from different perspectives, all versions rest on categories that imply essential differences between two civilizations, while effacing differences within each category. Peasants were not French because they were peasants; French were not peasants because they were French.

This French discourse about the countryside has been an instrument by which one culture creates its own version, in its own terms, of another.<sup>8</sup> It is a process similar to the ones in which Western European scholars

6 See for example David Pinkney, *Decisive Years in France, 1840–1847* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986); Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1975); P. M. Jones, *Politics and Rural Society: The Southern Massif Central c. 1750–1880* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Maurice Agulhon, *La République au village* (Paris: Plon, 1970); Edward Berenson, *Populist Religion and Left-Wing Politics in France, 1830–1852* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984). For critiques of this view, see Charles Tilly, “Did the Cake of Custom Break?” in John M. Merriman, ed., *Consciousness and Class Experience in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1979), 17–44; and Peter McPhee, *The Politics of Rural Life* (Oxford University Press [Clarendon Press], 1992).

7 See Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen*, for a general argument, and many community studies for specific examples, such as: Laurence Wylie, *Village in the Vaucluse* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974); Pierre-Jakez Hélias, *Le Cheval d’orgueil* (Paris: Fayard, 1967); and Rogers, “Good to Think,” 58–59.

8 Peasants joined other groups in this. See, for example, Susanna Barrows, *Distorting Mirrors: Visions of the Crowd in Late 19th-Century France* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1981); Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), esp. ch. 5; William B. Cohen, *The French Encounter with Africans: White Response to Blacks, 1530–1880* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980); and Tony Judt, *Past Imperfect: French Intellectuals, 1944–1956* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), 187–204.

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created an “Orient” of their own imagination,<sup>9</sup> the Renaissance viewed the indigenous peoples of the Western Hemisphere as without a culture of their own,<sup>10</sup> and British views of bonded laborers or *kamias* in colonial India placed those individuals within a (British) discourse about individual rights.<sup>11</sup> Marie-Noelle Bourguet has begun the work of analyzing French history from this perspective by showing how the administrative reports of early nineteenth-century French prefects also created a particular version of the peasant.<sup>12</sup> In each case, various texts crystallize and develop discourses that identify the subjects of the discourse. Scholarly studies, literary works, and administrative reports describe Oriental peoples, indigenous Americans, South Asian laborers, and French peasants in a way that creates their identity. These discourses also served to organize power relations and make them appear natural: the Middle East came under the control of the European colonial powers; Prospero, by his culture, controlled Caliban; Spanish soldiers held sway over those who greeted them on the beaches of Mexico; *kamias* came under the “protection” of the British colonial administration; and Napoleonic prefects administered French peasants. But while in each case the apparent aim of the discourse was to separate the subject from the dominant group, both parties were inextricably linked to each other, since each was necessary to define the other.

The power of these discourses lies in their ability to attribute ahistorical and essential qualities to the discourses themselves and to the others that they describe.<sup>13</sup> If we are to retell the story of the men and women who lived in the French countryside as they came into contact with French civilization, we must first question the categories of “peasant” and “French” that serve this discourse. Rather than erecting barriers between the two categories, denying their interrelationship, and making rural history a process of moving counters from one to the other, we need to see

9 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1978), esp. ch. 1; and idem, “Orientalism Reconsidered” in Francis Barker et al., eds., *Literature, Politics and Theory* (London: Methuen, 1986), 210–229.

10 Stephen J. Greenblatt, “Learning to Curse: Aspects of Linguistic Colonialism in the Sixteenth Century,” in idem, *Learning to Curse: Essays in Early Modern Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 16–39.

11 Gyan Prakash, *Bonded Histories: Genealogies of Labor Servitude in Colonial India* (Cambridge University Press, 1990).

12 Marie-Noelle Bourguet, “Race et folklore: l’image officielle de la France en 1800,” *Annales E.S.C.* 31 (1977), 802–823; and idem, *Déchiffrer la France: la Statistique départementale à l’époque napoléonienne* (Paris: Archives contemporaines, 1988).

13 See Michel Foucault, *L’Ordre du discours*, published in English as *The Discourse on Language in The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. by Rupert Swyer (New York: Pantheon, 1972); and Richard Terdiman, *Discourse/Counter-Discourse: The Theory and Practice of Symbolic Resistance in Nineteenth-Century France* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985).

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how these categories interacted with each other over time. That is, we must recognize these categories as constructed and historical, not essential and timeless. Our intention should not be to find when and how peasants became French, but to discover the ways in which they served to define what being French meant, and the ways in which French culture defined what being a peasant meant.<sup>14</sup>

Rather than being about peasants as defined by the French discourse about the countryside, therefore, this book is about the relations between French and rural cultures, the ways in which French discourse about the countryside has controlled that relationship, and the part played by those who lived in the countryside. It is, then, a history of cultural contact, a history that focuses on the changing constructions over time of the category I will refer to as “peasant,” the point of tension between French and rural versions of what is going on in the countryside. The ethnohistorian Greg Dening has described a history of cultural contact as one seeking to understand the processes by which cultural artifacts are “transferred and transformed from one cultural system to another.” The advantage of this definition of the task is to emphasize that cultural artifacts do not have inherent meanings, but rather acquire their meanings as parts of cultural systems. For Dening, “cross-cultural perception is about understanding words, perceiving gestures with the meaning with which they were offered.”<sup>15</sup> My assumption, while similar, is that the roles, rituals, symbols, and material artifacts that Dening speaks of are both offered and received with multiple meanings, differing from person to person and time to time, and that there is a history in these shifting meanings.

But how are we to discover and write this history? Histories of the countryside have themselves contributed to the creation of the category “peasant” by presenting universalized, transparent accounts of what happened in the past, whose part in the discourse is not articulated. But the very existence of sources for a history of the French countryside is not the result of random accidents of creation, destruction, and preservation of documents. On the contrary, the most prevalent sources were created by agents of the powerful French state or by other representatives of French culture, at particular times, for particular reasons, and these sources are therefore as much about French visions of the countryside as they are about that place itself. The state generated and archived the most “systematic” sources in its various censuses and *enquêtes*. The bourgeoisie created and saved versions of the countryside and its residents that made

14 Caroline Ford, *Creating the Nation in Provincial France* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993); Peter Sahlins, *Boundaries: The Making of France and Spain in the Pyrenees* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 1989).

15 Greg Dening, *Islands and Beaches: Discourse on a Silent Land: Marquesas, 1774–1880* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1980), 44.

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“peasant” and “folklore” synonymous. Painters whose works were and still are displayed in museums portrayed country dwellers who resembled bourgeois.<sup>16</sup> That we have sources for a history of the countryside, then, owes little to those who lived there, and a great deal to those who held positions of authority over the countryside. The sources we have are, in fact, not so much about the countryside as they are about the category in French culture called “peasant.” Obviously narratives can be pieced together from such primary sources, but these necessarily are part histories shaped not only by what can be read in the sources but also by conventional notions of what a history of “peasants” looks like, the models of the historical discipline that utilize archives and categories such as “French” and “peasant” as if they were transparent.<sup>17</sup>

With these concerns in mind, what follows may be described as a series of “little narratives” that move toward totalization but are framed within an attempt to recognize their conceptual and factual limits. These little narratives are held together by the metaphor of a cultural landscape, a field marked by specific locations in which the contacts between rural culture and French culture took place. Chapter 2 outlines the various and contradictory ways in which representatives of French culture have placed country dwellers in the developing French nation since the Revolution of 1789. My emphasis in this chapter is on the countryside and its inhabitants as they appeared in novels, histories, and visual media, but these forms only stand for a much wider range of cultural representations. These images do not form a seamless pattern, for it proved difficult

16 On inquiries into the countryside, see Bourquet, “Race et folklore,” and idem, *Déchiffrer la France*. On folklore, see Charles Rearick, *Beyond the Enlightenment: Historians and Folklore in Nineteenth-Century France* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1974); and Michael R. Marrus, “Folklore as an Ethnographic Source: A ‘Mise au Point,’” in Jacques Beauroy, Marc Bertrand, and Edward T. Gargan, eds., *The Wolf and the Lamb: Popular Culture in France* (Saratoga, Calif.: Anma Libri 1977), 109–125. On artistic versions of peasants, see Richard Brettell and Caroline Brettell, *Painters and Peasants in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Rizzoli, 1983). For similar comments about the sources of labor history, see William M. Reddy, *The Rise of Market Culture* (Cambridge University Press, 1984), 15–16.

17 For works influenced by these concerns, see David Warren Sabean, *Power in the Blood: Popular Culture and Village Discourse in Early Modern Germany* (Cambridge University Press, 1984); Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*; Dorinne K. Kondo, *Crafting Selves: Power, Gender, and Discourses of Identity in a Japanese Workplace* (University of Chicago Press, 1990); Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*, trans. by Richard Howard (New York: Harper & Row, 1984); Richard Price, *First-Time: The Historical Vision of an Afro-American People* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983); and idem, *Alabi’s World* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1990). For a materialist critique of these influences on historical writing, see Bryan D. Palmer, *Descent into Discourse: The Reification of Language and the Writing of Social History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990).

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to reconcile the claims made for the French nation and its culture, on the one hand, with those made for the countryside on the other. Chapter 3 moves to a specific locale, the department of the Loire in southeastern France, and gives a baseline account of the landscape of rural civilization there in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. By describing the physical organization of the countryside, the economic, social, and demographic structures of the population, and the village community, this chapter develops the contours of the metaphors in which rural identities in that period were externalized, both by the French discourse about the countryside and by the actions of the country dwellers themselves. Succeeding chapters take up specific aspects of the movement and alteration of different sites on this terrain, as the French discourse reshaped the landscape, and as the men and women of the Loire countryside transformed their identities. Chapter 4 presents the experience of economic, social, and demographic change in the second half of the nineteenth century. A fundamental geographic division in the department begins to appear in these activities, as the center and East adopted new agricultural techniques, patterns of family formation, and sociability, while older patterns persisted in the western mountains. There were reasons that made sense within the context of rural families for the adoption of these different types of behaviors. As important, however, is that the evolving French discourse about the countryside enclosed these different regions in its descriptions of economic development, reproduction, and family behavior. Elaborated in scientific, administrative, and moral terms, these included some elements of the changes but were unable to describe others. These descriptions illuminate a subtle shift in the positioning of “peasants” in French culture. One part of the department, the western and southwestern mountains, was defined as traditional and stagnant, while those regions adopting new techniques and behaviors came under the rubric of “progressive.” Chapter 5 addresses the ways in which gendered differences were imprinted in particular cultural spaces and roles, and the relative inflexibility of these differences as time passed. For women, our attention is drawn to the farm and family, the principal sites in which they played the roles of housewife, mother, daughter, spinster, and widow. But also apparent is the ability of men to move more freely across the physical and cultural landscape, as they acted not only in the family and on the farm, but also in the village community and beyond. This gendering is perhaps the most visible location in which rural and French cultures found common ground. The final chapters explore three preeminent sites of cultural contact between “peasant” and “French,” the school, the Church, and the new system of electoral politics. In each of these areas, there is a shifting of the landscape as older places, such as the parish church, move to the background, while new ones, such as the pri-

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mary school, gain prominence. In these areas as well, we can see the way in which the French concept of “peasant” limited and positioned country dwellers with regard to the French nation and its culture.

In telling these stories I run the risk of drowning in traditional historiographical concerns, such as grain prices. But the reader must keep in mind that we are involved in reading rural history against the grain in two ways. In focusing on the interaction between French creation of the countryside and the actions of the people who lived there, I seek to avoid simply recapitulating “peasant history.” But we must look for the identities of people in sources that, as a product of French rather than rural culture, construct a category, “peasant,” that seemed natural to the creators of those sources.

## II

We will view the contact between “peasant” and “French” cultures in a particular place, the department of the Loire in southeastern France. To establish this geographic locale of the story, a description, tailored to our needs, is a first requirement of this account. The department itself is a construction of the French nation at its most self-conscious, formed in 1793 when the *Représentants en mission* of the Convention provisionally divided the department of Rhône-et-Loire into two separate departments, the Rhône and the Loire. This latter department, the western half of the old *généralité* of Lyon, was shaped as a rough rectangle, standing on its short side. It formed a geographic unit, bounded on three sides by mountains, with the Loire river running down its center. Only in the north was the department open to its neighbor; there, the Plaine du Roannais opened out into the Saône-et-Loire.<sup>18</sup>

For the *conventionnels* and most subsequent observers, the new department was dominated by its three principal cities. In the south, the industrial city of Saint-Etienne was the hub of a nascent industrial center that extended some twenty kilometers along a valley. In the north the principal city was Roanne, notable early in the century as a port on the river Loire, and later a center of cotton textile production. The middle part of the department was under the sway of Montbrison, an administrative

18 On the formation of the department and the revolutionary period in general, see E. Brossard, *Histoire du département de la Loire pendant la Révolution française, 1789–1799* (Paris: H. Champion, 1904–1907); and Colin Lucas, *The Structure of the Terror* (Oxford University Press, 1973). Much general information on the department can be found in Joseph Duplessy, *Annuaire du département de la Loire* (Montbrison: Cheminal, 1818), from which many later *Annuaire*s copied. The linguistic characteristics of the department are described in Pierre Gardette, “Carte linguistique du Forez,” *Bulletin de la Diana* (1943), 269–281.



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town that had been the seat of the province of Forez under the ancien régime, became the capital of the new department, and was the home of an administrative and landowning bourgeoisie. Each of these cities headed an arrondissement of the new department, administrative units that corresponded, very roughly, to the economic regions of the principal cities.

Beyond these three administrative cities and a few other market towns, however, the department was rural, and against the uniformity of the administrative description we might place descriptions of topographical and linguistic diversity. There were a number of different regions formed by distinct geographical features. The south was marked by mountains and valleys. The Monts du Pilat ran along the southern border of the department. To their north lay first the valley around Saint-Etienne and then a hilly region that only gradually gave way, near a town called Saint-Galmier, to the narrow Plaine du Forez in the center. To the southwest of the Plaine was a plateau known as the Haut-Forez, and to its east and west rose mountains: the Monts du Lyonnais (known as the Monts du Matin) to the east; the Monts du Forez (or Monts du Soir) to the west. About two-thirds up the department's length, the northern edge of the Plaine was broken by a low range of hills, the *Seuill de Neulize*. North of these was the Plaine du Roannais, open to the north but bounded on the east by the Monts du Beaujolais and on the west by the Monts de la Madeleine. The Loire was therefore a department of varied geographical features, marked by mountains, plains, and hills.

It was also a department of linguistic contrasts. North of the *Seuill de Neulize*, northern French was spoken, and a Parisian would have had little difficulty understanding the inhabitants. South of this dividing line, however, the patois was a combination of northern French and southern dialect that increasingly led into an area in the southwest, in the Monts du Pilat and the Haut-Forez, where the patois was distinctively Provençal. The Loire lay astride the cultural division of France, therefore, between North and South, and both language and culture reflected this division.

## III

The Loire was not, for all of its characteristics that easily slide into pastoral descriptions of peaceful countrysides, a distinctive place in the French nation of the the past several centuries; it was, simply put, a part of the landscape, physical and cultural, of that community under construction called France. In this setting, during the period between the Second Republic and the First World War, and especially in the first decades of the Third Republic, the country dwellers of the Loire experienced changes in their way of life that frequently made them appear to be participants in urban French "civilization." Many of them married at an

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earlier age, had fewer children, and lived in smaller households with fewer kin than their parents or grandparents. They learned to read and write, stopped listening to their parish priests, and even began to vote for republicans. There was nothing “local” about this; they were, of course, joined by many other country people throughout France.

There is no doubt that in this process many of the most powerful resources lay in the hands of French civilization. The most important institutions in the lives of the “peasants” in the Loire were arranged on the side of French, not rural culture: the Church, priests, schools, schoolteachers, police, the state. While French country dwellers have certainly been unruly at times, I know of few instances of open resistance to these institutions in the nineteenth-century Loire. But even in acknowledging that country dwellers were the weaker of the parties in the continual negotiation of their identities, we must not assume as a static given the hegemony of French culture, or overlook the ability of rural people to converse in numerous ways within the discourses of French civilization.<sup>19</sup> By their own means, in a continuous process, country dwellers in the Loire negotiated the meaning of the category in which France placed them. Because “peasant” was a part of French culture, these negotiations forced changes in the identity of the French nation. In paying attention to this conversation, we may hear not only a new history of country dwellers and the places they lived, but also gain a better understanding of France.

19 See, for various perspectives on this approach: Susan Carol Rogers, *Shaping Modern Times in Rural France* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991); Suzanne Desan, “Redefining Revolutionary Liberty: The Rhetoric of Religious Revival during the French Revolution,” *Journal of Modern History* 60 (1988), 1–27; Ford, *Creating the Nation*; Sahlins, *Boundaries*; Harriet G. Rosenberg, *A Negotiated World: Three Centuries of Change in a French Alpine Community* (University of Toronto Press, 1988); Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, eds., *Selected Subaltern Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll* (New York: Random House, 1972); James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1985); and idem, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1990).