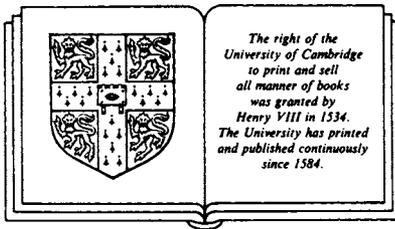

Peasantry and society in France since 1789

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Translated from French by
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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,

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

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.