
REVIEW ARTICLES

The Modernization of Rural France

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For the past three decades French historians have attempted to develop an "histoire totale," a new kind of scholarly product transcending the older French historiography which limited itself to the study of national politics and the culture of the elite. Led by the Annales School and bolstered by training in the social sciences, French historians have tried to analyze society at large, an effort which necessarily has led them into the realms of sociology, economics, demography and ethnography. The pursuit of a total history has also jolted the scholarly spotlight away from Paris and toward the relatively virgin historical territory of the rural provinces. American historians of France, quite naturally affected by this trend in French historiography, have at the same time been influenced by the "new American social history" whose practitioners eschew the study of elites for an inquiry into the lives of common men, history's silent majority. As a result of these two trends, even established American historians with impressive credentials in French political and intellectual history have abandoned their former subjects to contribute to the development of economic, social and cultural history. Having begun with the study of urban lower classes, American historians, like their French colleagues, have now moved on to rural France. Thus, Eugen Weber, the distinguished American historian known for his more traditional analyses of Paris-based political movements, has now produced his own contribution to the social and cultural history of rural France.

Weber's *Peasants into Frenchmen* describes the vast changes that took place in rural France during the latter part of the nineteenth century. Reading French folklore, Weber discovered "a new France in the nineteenth-century countryside, a France where many did not speak French or know the metric system...

where roads were few and markets distant, and where a subsistence economy reflected the most common prudence." (p. xii) Weber's earlier concentration on the city had blinded him to the existence of an underdeveloped, frightfully poor and basically uncivilized countryside which was not integrated "into the modern world and the official culture... of Paris" (p. xii) until the end of the last century. Relying on a diverse array of literary sources that range from well-known police and prefectorial reports to obscure writings of folklorists, priests, teachers, agronomists, and men of letters, Weber portrays the gradual and progressive emergence of a rustic world from its traditional economic and cultural autarky. Isolated from and ignorant of Paris culture, the capitalist marketplace, and national politics, the rural provinces could not enter the modern world until the new secondary roads and rail lines of the late nineteenth century opened them to the penetration of schools, markets, money, goods, and printed matter. Literally conquered by the "forces of modernization" (p. 494) which radiated from Paris and the other urban centres, rural France ultimately fell into step with the requirements of a national culture.

Even if Weber sometimes substitutes colourful and lively prose for solid evidence, *Peasants into Frenchmen* is extremely well written and embodies all the literary qualities of the best historical writing. Illuminating for professional historians, social scientists, ethnologists, and general readers, *Peasants into Frenchmen* depicts in fascinating detail peasant religion, popular festivals, mentalities, dialects, songs, lodging, food, and health habits. Weber manages to avoid romanticizing the "good old country life" by presenting a clear picture of the grinding poverty and bleak misery that characterized rural life in early nineteenth-century France. Although Weber admits to having drawn much of his evidence from the poorest and most backward parts of rural France, it is nonetheless clear that in much of the nineteenth-century French countryside south of a line connecting St-Malo and Geneva, the peasants were miserable. They existed on a meagre diet of stale bread, chestnuts, and "soup" made of water and fat. Pork and fresh vegetables were rare and beef virtually unknown. Wine — when available — was horrid. Peasant dwellings were no better. Often serving as shelter for both humans and animals, the rural houses were unhealthy, smelly, cold and smoke-filled. Standards of cleanliness were primitive and disease common.

Intending his work to be much more than a compendium of nineteenth-century folklore, Weber seeks to explain how "traditional" societies become "modern." Despite the excellence of his research, however, Weber's argument suffers from the imprecision of modernization theory, the theoretical model the author advertises in his subtitle, "The Modernization of Rural France." Moreover, Weber's argument is often based on an uncritical acceptance of the viewpoint of his nineteenth-century informants with whom, one suspects, Weber shares a progressive and evolutionary view of history. Finally, Weber

often uses his secondary sources in an overly selective manner, and in one notable case he seriously misinterprets his data.

One of the harmful effects of the influence of social science on history has been the appropriation on the part of some historians of modernization theory.¹ Whereas historians have customarily attempted — not always convincingly — to explain economic and political change in terms of concrete phenomena such as industrial growth, market expansion, agricultural consolidation and political revolution, many contemporary social and cultural historians try to explain historical change in terms of the vague concept of “modernization.” Weber avoids many of the pitfalls of modernization theory by specifying the agents of change — roads, schools, military service — but he does employ a number of the assumptions embedded in modernization theory: the idea that societies undergo a progressive, unilinear development from “traditional” to “modern”; that “traditional” values and institutions are necessarily obstacles to the growth of new cultural, economic, and political forms, that the transition to “modernity” takes place in the economic, cultural, and political spheres at the same time.

Modernization in Weber's view is achieved mainly through the extension of roads and railroads. It was these two means of communication more than any other factors that lifted the peasant communities out of their economic, cultural and political isolation and into the modern world. Cultural change could occur only after roads and railroads had transformed material circumstances. Since this network of secondary roads and railroad tracks was not in place until after 1880, the peasantry remained cut off from national politics, culture and markets until the end of the nineteenth century. But with the means of communication transformed after 1880, the national culture could then sweep up the countryside in an overpowering embrace. Full national integration, the conquest of country by city, ensued. (pp. 206-7) The roads brought in schools and school teachers, Paris newspapers and politicians, new products, new needs, and new wants.

No one would deny that profound changes took place in the French countryside over the course of the nineteenth century, but one should not exaggerate as Weber does the importance of the means of communication. True, roads and railroads served to extend the internal market and to open up new sources of demand, but at the same time an economic capacity had to exist to meet that demand. Moreover, to speak of roads and rails as “forces of modernization” is to ignore that these means of communication exist as the result of specific

¹ For critical analyses of modernization theory see DEAN C. TIPPS, “Modernization and the Comparative Study of Societies,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 15, pp. 199-229, and JOSEPH R. GUSFIELD, “Tradition and Modernity,” *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 72, pp. 351-62.

decisions made by government and business in response to the economic and political circumstances they perceive.

One of the showpieces of modernization in Weber's view was the elimination by the end of the nineteenth century of peasant patois. The author considers the persistence of patois through most of the last century strong evidence that the peasantry remained culturally backward and isolated from national politics and economic life until the new means of communication helped achieve "modernization." Weber's problems here are not just theoretical. In a serious misinterpretation of his own data, he exaggerates the percentage of Frenchmen for whom French was a foreign language after the mid-century. Weber draws his evidence for the tenacity of patois from an 1863 report by the Ministry of Public Instruction. This survey shows that about one-fourth of France's *communes* were non-French speaking. As for school children aged 7-13, eleven percent spoke no French, and another 37 percent spoke French but could not write it, indicating as Weber puts it, "an indifferent grasp of the tongue." (p. 67) From these statistics, Weber concludes that a quarter of the nation's *population* was non-French speaking, and more significantly that "French was a foreign language for... almost half the children who would reach adulthood in the last quarter of the [nineteenth] century." (p. 67) There are two problems with this interpretation. First, all French communes were not the same size, and the totals in Weber's own appendix show that the non-French speaking communes comprised not a quarter of the nation's population, but one-fifth. Second, French can by no means be considered an alien language for all of the children listed in the 1863 report as "able to speak but unable to write French." (appendix, pp. 498-501) A closer look at Weber's chart indicates that just under half of the students listed as able to speak but not write French came from *wholly French-speaking departments*. For these students, the ability to speak but not write obviously could not mean that French was a foreign language; it is simply meant that the art of writing was still a mystery to them. Restoring this large group of students to their rightful status as native French speakers reduces the proportion of non-native French speakers from Weber's "nearly half" to 30 percent.² Moreover, since many of the students in the "speak but not write" column from the partially French-language departments also must have been native French speakers, the true figure for French as foreign language is most likely closer to 20 percent. Weber's data, therefore, does not support his conclusion that "the Third Republic found a France in which French was a foreign language for half the citizens." (p. 70)

The assumptions of modernization theory are most evident in Weber's

² From the total of 1,490,269 in the "speak but not write" column, we subtract 711,058, the number from wholly French-speaking departments. The result plus 448,320, the number of children who spoke no French, provides the corrected figure for non-native speakers, 1,227,531, or 30 percent of the 4 million students.

discussion of "peasants and politics." (chapter 15) Since Weber views the political, economic and cultural change associated with "modernization" as developing smoothly and progressively, he rejects the notion that the peasants could have been politicized — that is learn to participate in democratic politics and internalize a republican ideology — before their integration into the national culture by roads, rails, and schools and before their full involvement in the national market economy: "... evolution toward [political] modernity... comes into being after the 1870's. It came as part of the integration of these [rural] areas into France." (p. 241) In making this argument, Weber had to challenge the view, supported by a growing body of literature,³ that the poor, illiterate peasantry of southern France was politicized during the Second Republic despite the persistence of local peasant culture and archaic means of communication. In Weber's view, peasants could not have been politicized during the period 1848-51 because so many still spoke patois and were illiterate.

If the peasantry indeed had not been politicized, what is the explanation of the massive peasant vote for the democrat-socialist Left in May 1849? And why, then, was there widespread peasant resistance to Louis-Napoleon's coup d'Etat in December 1851? Using statements from less-than-objective government officials and drawing too selectively from secondary sources, Weber attempts to show that the peasant vote for the Left was based not on a commitment to a democratic ideology, but rather on their traditional hatred of the rich and on the age-old country-town antagonism. Moreover, he considers the insurrection of 1851 an old-fashioned *jacquerie* without serious political content.

Citing Alain Corbin's excellent thesis on the Limousin,⁴ Weber argues that the peasants of this backward region were not interested in the new democratic and socialist ideologies spread by urban propagandists in the 1840's, and that peasant political action immediately after February 1848 reflected not a recent politicization, but rather "an older, deeper peasant revolutionary tradition." (Weber, p. 248) Corbin does make these two points, but Weber neglects what Corbin goes on to say: as democrat-socialist propaganda efforts intensified in late 1848 and as the peasants recognized the importance of their newly-gained universal suffrage, their violence subsided. The peasants began to listen to the republicans who were trying to reach them, and in May 1849 they voted massively for the "democ-socs," marking what Corbin calls "la naissance d'une tradition de gauche" in this rural region.⁵

Not only did the peasantry begin to accept the rules of a modern democratic system, but according to Corbin they also began to shed their long-standing

³ For a survey of this literature see PHILIPPE VIGIER, "Un quart de siècle de recherches historiques sur la Province," *Annales Historiques de la Révolution Française*, 1975, pp. 622-45. See also Maurice Agulhon, *1848 ou l'apprentissage de la République*, Paris, 1973.

⁴ ALAIN CORBIN, *Archaisme et modernité en Limousin au XIXe siècle*, Paris, 1975.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 825-29.

hostility to the townsmen. The following incident related by Corbin demonstrates the fallacy of Weber's attempt to explain peasant political behaviour in terms of a traditional town-country antagonism: angered by a local proprietor who fenced in a parcel of land the rurals were accustomed to using, the peasants went into the town to ask the "democ-soc" leaders what they should do about this outrage. In the past, the peasants simply would have knocked down the fences, but in 1849, influenced by republican organization and politics, they followed the *urban* leaders' advice to remain calm.⁶

To bolster his case against the politicization of the peasantry, Weber uses reports from the General Prosecutors to show that the peasants voted for the democrat-socialists not out of democratic conviction, but rather in the hopes of fulfilling a traditional desire to pillage the rich. Yet is there any reason why we should believe the statement of the Prosecutor at Limoges that the peasants supported the Left simply because the "democ-socs" offered them "le partage des biens des bourgeois?" (p. 246) This statement tells us more about the fears of a terror-stricken member of the Party of Order than about the mentality of the peasants, for the democrat-socialists always took great pains to assure the peasants of their unflinching belief in the inviolability of private property — a belief the peasantry largely shared.

Weber's attempt to explain away the peasant insurrection of December 1851 is no more convincing. Most peasants had no idea what they were fighting about says Weber, and many joined the insurrection either because the rest of their village did, or in the belief that they were defending Louis-Napoleon. As evidence, Weber cites the testimony — again taken at face value — of a handful of peasants on trial for rebellion. This testimony cannot be taken literally. Called before the military tribunals, many peasants played dumb, wisely realizing that in the absence of firm evidence against them, they would be better off admitting nothing. Naturally they claimed their secret societies were not political and that they marched not to restore the Republic, but to protect the President. The testimony of a single peasant who could only utter, "I'm from Poujols," when asked why he joined the insurrection, hardly suffices — even if accurate — as an indication of why the thousands of other peasants rebelled. Weber's portrayal of peasant insurrectionaries in the Drôme as barbarians who "came down out of the mountains as poor, wild mountaineers have done throughout history, to pillage the bourgeoisie," (p. 12) resembles more the lurid prose of the nineteenth-century reactionaries who constructed an *ex-post facto* justification of the coup d'Etat than it does historical reality.⁷

⁶ CORBIN, p. 829.

⁷ For a more measured account see PHILIPPE VIGIER, *La Seconde République dans région alpine*, Paris 1963, II, pp. 312-13. MAURICE AGULHON, "La Résistance au coup d'Etat en Provence," *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*, 1974, pp. 18-26 provides a penetrating analysis of the role of ideology in the interpretation of the resistance in Dec. 1851.

As for Weber's statement that "it is very doubtful that any countryman stirred to defend the Republic or the Constitution, or to oppose Louis Napoleon's coup," (p. 252) one need only glance at the recent literature⁸ to realize that most of the rebels indeed did fight to restore a violated Constitution and to resurrect a cherished — if somewhat mythical — *Republique democratique et sociale*.

Why is Weber blind to the peasant politicization — albeit incomplete — that took place during the Second Republic? Modernization theory does not permit him to recognize that elements of "tradition" and elements of "modernity" are not mutually exclusive, that new political ideas could have been transmitted through archaic channels of communication — colportage, public reading, word of mouth — and expressed in ancient ritual — the *charivari* and the *farandole*. The local democrat-socialist activists were able to reach the peasantry in large part because they knew how to use the channels of communication that already existed in the rural popular culture. Thus *colporteurs* began to carry republican newspapers, socialist almanacs, revolutionary songs, and political drawings; republican artisans and café owners began to read newspapers and propaganda tracts to illiterate peasants gathered in their habitual meeting places. Neither the Bonapartists nor the democrat-socialists could wait until the peasants were "ready" to be interested in national issues. After February 1848 the peasantry formed the bulk of the French electorate, and the political activists, in an attempt to gain rural support, brought national politics into the village. The democrat-socialists proposed state-guaranteed insurance and low-interest loans, progressive taxation, free and obligatory public education, and full civil liberties — a radical platform that demanded democratic opportunity and practical reforms for an economically-squeezed peasantry. Flooded with propaganda and called repeatedly to vote on local as well as national concerns, the French peasantry experienced a precocious political apprenticeship.⁹ When the Third Republic dawned — more than a decade before the roads, rails and schools of the 1880's brought national integration — much of the poor peasantry of southern France was already republican. Weber's neat theory of modernization cannot hope to explain the complexities of the nineteenth-century rural France that he describes in such fascinating detail.

⁸ AGULHON, 1848, pp. 178-94 and *La République au Village*, Paris 1971, pp. 436-67. VIGIER, *Region Alpine*, II, pp. 320-37. C. MARCILHACY, "Les Caractères de la crise sociale et politique de 1846 à 1852," *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*, 1959, pp. 49-59.

⁹ AGULHON, 1848.

