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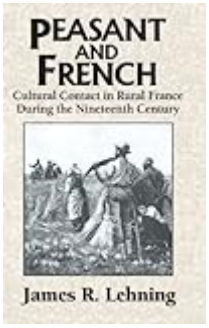

James R. Lehning. *Peasant and French: Cultural Contact in Rural France during the Nineteenth Century.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995. xii + 239 pp. $34.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-46770-4; $85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-46210-5.

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Published on H-France (May, 1996)

James Lehning follows Eugen Weber's dichotomy of two cultures, "French" and "peasant," whose isolation broke down under expanded connections with the external world in the nineteenth century. Civilization fused peasant society into the French nation. In Lehning's formulation, hitherto a generic "Rural culture coexisted with French culture." He includes in his discussion changes in landscape, the transformation of gender roles, the ambiguities of schooling, the influence of religion, and modifications in electoral politics to determine what he categorizes as a "new rural history" (passim).

Enigmatically, Lehning does not mention Theodore Zeldin (*France, 1848-1945*), who apparently inhabits a second parallel universe. Zeldin's France has an extensive variety of provinces, and his "modern France," which emerged in the period 1848-1945, was "essentially bourgeois." Moreover, Zeldin is far less certain than Lehning of what it meant to be "French." According to Zeldin, even the ideals that French people set for themselves, and the image of themselves that they formed, were not clear or distinct. From Zeldin's retitled *History of French Passions*, Lehning might have taken direct issue with Zeldin's description of peasants (I, 131-97), place of politics in life, (I, 365-92), national identity (II, 3-28), provincials (II, 29-85), and education and hope (II, 139-204). Zeldin's exposition of the complex diversity of France's provinces calls into question both a common "peasant culture" and a single "French" identity.

Some may question Lehning's title; the author did not investigate rural "France," but extrapolates his conclusions from a single department in the *Midi*. However, the concept of a "peasant culture" has other critics.

The concept of a peasant identity is expanded by German scholar Werner Conze's very brief article on peasants which traced a long history of classifying peasants. In *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* (I, 407-39), he observed that from the Middle Ages until the eighteenth century intellectuals directly or indirectly derived their depiction of rural society from Aristotle's division between the ruling and serving, the elevated and those working with their hands. A literary tradition sanctioning political isolation and social distaste for the peasants, which lasted into the eighteenth century, rested on a fundamental ambiguity. There was not a single peasant "identity," but two. One was an old outlook derived from Latin agrarian literature and poetry, in particular Virgil, which idealized the landed population. This admiration of peasant virtue lasted through the Middle Ages in a literary tradition which exemplified peasants as healthy, simple, and unspoiled, because they were near to nature. The gushing praise for bucolic virtue alternated with a contrasting depiction of a gawky, coarse, obtuse "common" man.

The Christian tradition divided humanity into the three orders of fighting, teaching, and feeding, and peasants' work was respected as the primary vocation, "*dignitas rusticana*," honored as the beloved son of God ("*agricole qui tam dilect filii dei sunt*"). Frederick the Great admired the peasant as "the class which earned the most respect"; and Conze claims that this attitude carried the seeds of later emancipation. This identity of native peasant purity was the context for Jean-Jacques Rousseau's savage who had lost his nobility because of evil institutions, lost in "*routine et dans sa vie presque automate*." The modern institutions of subservience had degraded him into a slothful, stupid brute.

The disdain and "glorification" of a peasant "identity" have deep roots long before the nineteenth century. Rather than "construct" a countryside, later writers chose among prejudiced literary stereotypes. It is an open question whether the "simple and naive" or "pastoral values" were so much affected by changes in the nineteenth or in the fifteenth century, since we are dealing with intellectuals' fabrications. What does change is the *embourgeoisement* of the peasantry. Lehning's book depicts an invasion of bourgeois values masquerading as "French" or "national." German historian Manfried Riedel (*Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, II, 672-725) stresses the work of the French monarchy. The transforming process began in the Ile de France, whose kings expanded and conquered territory to crush the identity of provinces in order to homogenize them into a single realm. The term *citoyen* which dates from the twelfth century, and *citidan* from the fifteenth century, are synonyms for "bourgeois," an eleventh-century term. For, as Zeldin observed, it was the bourgeois, that is, in France the Parisian (Ile de France) culture which invaded the countryside in Brittany, Alsace, Corsica.

Choosing any date for a change of identification within the French state is arbitrary. The modification from a provincial to a national identity was not linear. Lehning's conclusion fails to consider that people can have multiple identities. Moreover, such identities are in constant flux responding to external events and stimuli. From the royal *intendants* to foreign tourists, Parisians are judging and being judged as cultured by adhering to bourgeois values. But does a French person become less French when speaking a local dialect? Do I become less "American" if I revert to a regional dialect in returning "home"? My own *patois* lives despite my later *embourgeoisement* and my youthful years of elocution lessons. French peasants likewise live in a multitude of regions which are highly differentiated in time and space.

Most puzzling in a department of the Rhone valley is Lehning's failure to mention wine. Rural sociology made a classical distinction between wine-growing, which was originally limited to the slopes, and grain cultivated on the plain. The proximity of a mass urban market and easy water access added a special character to land holding of the region. Lehning follows the example of the German sociologist Wilhelm Riehl in noting the special character of the upland and forested elevation, but peasants in the valley and those on the slopes are highly diverse.

Lehning follows the unfortunate example of Weber in using the emotionally charged term of "French" to describe the invasion of urban culture to the countryside. Undoubtedly some people in western Manitoba or western Kansas, for example, would be annoyed by a denial that they were less "Canadian" or "American" than their *concitoyens* in Toronto or New York, simply because of their way of speaking or their dress. What is an "American," "Canadian," or "French" culture? Cannot several "cultures" exist within national borders? Likewise, the very concept of lumping together the endless variety of landless proletariat, cottagers, share croppers, yeomen into a single "peasant" culture is an intellectual's construct.

But this emphasizes a fundamental question in the book's assumption that peasant identity is transformed into a French identity. Rather than the inlanders, outlanders give names to a "different" humanity. Outsiders appreciate differences, and locals see their unique qualities by contrast with visitors. Even if rustics accept the labels–usually negative–this is not self-generated. Lehning describes the bumpkins' nineteenth-century evolution from brutes to bourgeois. Use of the term "French" needlessly impassions the narrative by yet another insult. The rural population in Manitoba, Kansas, and southern France are not aliens, but merely not urban, or perhaps urbane.

Lehning turns Rousseau on his head, proposing that modern communications brought urban civilization into the countryside. Whereas Rousseau saw civilization brutalizing the nobility of the savage, Lehning sees that the peasant has become a citizen. That is, he took on a human shape, and the beast became a cultured mortal.

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Citation: James Chastain. Review of Lehning, James R., *Peasant and French: Cultural Contact in Rural France during the Nineteenth Century*. H-France, H-Net Reviews. May, 1996.

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