

FRATERNITY AMONG THE FRENCH PEASANTRY

Sociability and Voluntary Associations in the Loire Valley, 1815–1914

The individualism of the French peasantry during the nineteenth century has frequently been asserted as one of its most striking characteristics. In this new study, based upon meticulous archival research, Alan Baker demonstrates that such a portrayal distorts the extent to which peasants both continued with traditional, and developed new, forms of collective action. He examines representations of the peasantry and discusses the discourse of fraternity in nineteenth-century France in general before considering specifically the historical development, geographical diffusion and changing functions of fraternal voluntary associations in Loir-et-Cher, straddling the middle Loire valley, between 1815 and 1914. Alan Baker focuses principally upon associations aimed at reducing risk and uncertainty (insurance associations, mutual aid societies, and voluntary fire-fighting corps), and upon associations intended to provide agricultural protection (syndicates and co-operatives). A wide range of new voluntary associations were established in Loir-et-Cher – and indeed throughout rural France – during the nineteenth century. Their historical geography throws new light upon the sociability, upon the changing *mentalités*, of French peasants, and upon the role of fraternal associations in their struggle for survival.

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Sociability and Voluntary Associations
in the Loire Valley, 1815–1914

ALAN R. H. BAKER



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*In memory of Edie and Reg Baker, my parents,
and Clifford Darby, my mentor*

Contents

	<i>List of figures</i>	<i>page xi</i>
	<i>List of photographs</i>	xiv
	<i>Preface</i>	xvii
1	Peasants and peasantry in nineteenth-century France	1
	The rural community	1
	Contemporary portrayals of the peasantry	6
	Current perceptions of the peasantry	15
	Peasant collectivism and risk	27
2	The theory and practice of fraternal association in nineteenth-century France	30
	The discourse of fraternity	30
	The practice of fraternal association	36
	The theorisation of voluntary associations	42
	Towards an historical geography of voluntary associations in France during the nineteenth century	52
3	Loir-et-Cher during the nineteenth century: period, place and people	53
	The department and <i>pays</i> of Loir-et-Cher	54
	Population and settlement patterns	59
	Processes of change	65
	The character of change	85
	Towards an historical geography of voluntary associations in rural Loir-et-Cher during the nineteenth century	96
4	Insurance societies	101
	Agricultural insurance companies	101
	Livestock insurance societies	106

x	<i>Contents</i>	
5	Mutual aid societies	142
	Context	142
	The development and diffusion of mutual aid societies	149
	Characteristics of the earliest mutual aid societies	159
	Characteristics of mutual aid societies 1850–1914	163
6	Fire-fighting corps	192
	The development and spread of fire brigades	194
	The promotion of fire brigades	200
	The structure of fire brigades	208
	The evolution of fire brigades	214
7	Anti-phylloxera syndicates	219
	The diffusion of a disaster	219
	Crisis management by the central authorities	223
	The spread of anti-phylloxera syndicates	230
	Disillusion and dissolution	235
	Politicisation of the peasantry?	238
8	Agricultural associations	240
	Context	240
	The Society of Agriculture and the <i>comices agricoles</i>	242
	Agricultural syndicates	251
	The Syndicat des Agriculteurs de Loir-et-Cher	265
	Threshing associations	272
	Other associations	280
9	Synthesis: conclusions, comparisons and conjectures	282
	<i>La routine paysanne?</i>	282
	Fraternal associations in Loir-et-Cher 1815–1914	284
	<i>L'esprit d'association?</i>	301
	Fraternity among the French peasantry 1815–1914	303
	<i>Notes</i>	321
	<i>Bibliography</i>	338
	<i>Index</i>	361

Figures

3.1	The communes, cantons and <i>arrondissements</i> of the department of Loir-et-Cher	<i>page</i> 55
3.2	The communes and cantons of the <i>arrondissement</i> of Blois	56
3.3	The communes and cantons of the <i>arrondissement</i> of Romorantin	57
3.4	The communes and cantons of the <i>arrondissement</i> of Vendôme	58
3.5	The location, physical geography and <i>pays</i> of Loir-et-Cher	60
3.6	Population densities in Loir-et-Cher, by communes, 1851	61
3.7	Population concentration in Loir-et-Cher, by cantons, 1891	62
3.8	The railway and tramway network of Loir-et-Cher, 1870–1914	68
3.9	Primary schools in Loir-et-Cher, by communes, 1833	73
3.10	Primary school non-attendance by boys and girls in Loir-et-Cher, by cantons, 1839	75
3.11	Primary school non-attendance in Loir-et-Cher, by communes, 1848–49	76
3.12	The growth of conscripts' literacy in Loir-et-Cher, for the department and its <i>arrondissements</i> , 1827–90	79
3.13	Conscripts' literacy in Loir-et-Cher, by cantons, 1827	80
3.14	Conscripts' literacy in Loir-et-Cher, by cantons, 1860	81
3.15	Conscripts' literacy in Loir-et-Cher, by cantons, 1890	82
3.16	Protestants in the <i>arrondissement</i> of Blois, by communes, 1872	92
4.1	Livestock insurance societies in Loir-et-Cher, 1850–1914	108
4.2	Livestock insurance societies in Loir-et-Cher in 1860	109
4.3	Livestock insurance societies in Loir-et-Cher in 1870	110
4.4	Livestock insurance societies in Loir-et-Cher in 1880	111
4.5	Livestock insurance societies in Loir-et-Cher in 1890	112
4.6	Livestock insurance societies in Loir-et-Cher in 1900	113
4.7	Livestock insurance societies in Loir-et-Cher in 1910	114
4.8	Horses and cattle per farm in Loir-et-Cher, by cantons, 1862	115
5.1	Mutual aid societies in Loir-et-Cher, 1840–1914	152

xii *List of figures*

5.2	Mutual aid societies in Loir-et-Cher in 1860	154
5.3	Mutual aid societies in Loir-et-Cher in 1868	156
5.4	Mutual aid societies in Loir-et-Cher in 1890	157
5.5	Mutual aid societies in Loir-et-Cher in 1907	159
6.1	<i>Corps de sapeurs-pompiers</i> in Loir-et-Cher, 1800–1900	196
6.2	<i>Corps de sapeurs-pompiers</i> in Loir-et-Cher in 1835	197
6.3	<i>Corps de sapeurs-pompiers</i> in Loir-et-Cher in 1842	198
6.4	<i>Corps de sapeurs-pompiers</i> in Loir-et-Cher in 1852	199
6.5	<i>Corps de sapeurs-pompiers</i> in Loir-et-Cher in 1865	200
6.6	<i>Corps de sapeurs-pompiers</i> in Loir-et-Cher in 1887	201
6.7	<i>Corps de sapeurs-pompiers</i> in Loir-et-Cher in 1896	202
7.1	Vineyards in Loir-et-Cher in 1878	223
7.2	Phylloxerated communes in Loir-et-Cher, 1876–1895	224
7.3	The spread of phylloxera in Loir-et-Cher, by communes, September 1882–August 1894	225
7.4	Anti-phylloxera syndicates in Loir-et-Cher, 1880–1900	232
7.5	Anti-phylloxera syndicates in Loir-et-Cher, 1880–1915, as a cumulative percentage of all such syndicates and as a cumulative percentage of the number of phylloxerated communes	233
7.6	The spatial spread of anti-phylloxera syndicates in Loir-et-Cher, 1882–1895	234
8.1	Membership of the Society of Agriculture of Loir-et-Cher, 1815	244
8.2	Membership of the Societies of Agriculture for the <i>arrondissements</i> of Blois, Romorantin and Vendôme, 1819	245
8.3	Membership of the Society of Agriculture of Loir-et-Cher, 1846	247
8.4	Membership of the <i>comice agricole</i> for the <i>arrondissement</i> of Blois, 1883	250
8.5	Agricultural syndicates in Loir-et-Cher, 1883–1914	254
8.6	The geographical distribution of agricultural syndicates in Loir-et-Cher, 1883–1914	256
8.7	Membership of the Syndicat des Agriculteurs de Loir-et-Cher, 1886–1914	266
8.8	Goods supplied to its members by the Syndicat des Agriculteurs de Loir-et-Cher, 1883–1914	267
8.9	Membership of the Syndicat des Agriculteurs de Loir-et-Cher, by communes, 1887	269
8.10	Membership of the Syndicat des Agriculteurs de Loir-et-Cher, by communes, 1892	270
8.11	Membership of the Syndicat des Agriculteurs de Loir-et-Cher, by communes, 1910	271
8.12	Agents of the Syndicat des Agriculteurs de Loir-et-Cher, 1910	272
8.13	Machinery depots of the Syndicat des Agriculteurs de Loir-et-Cher, 1910	273

8.14	The historical development of threshing syndicates in Loir-et-Cher, 1880–1914	275
8.15	The geographical distribution of threshing syndicates in Loir-et-Cher, 1880–1914	276
8.16	The routes taken by the teams of two threshing syndicates in Vineuil in the 1880s	278
9.1	The comparative historical development of fire-fighting corps, mutual aid societies, livestock insurance societies, anti-phylloxera syndicates, and agricultural and threshing syndicates in Loir-et-Cher between 1815 and 1914	285
9.2	Communes in Loir-et-Cher with at least one livestock insurance society between 1815 and 1914	288
9.3	Communes in Loir-et-Cher with at least one mutual aid society between 1815 and 1914	289
9.4	Communes in Loir-et-Cher with at least one fire-fighting corps between 1815 and 1914	290
9.5	Communes in Loir-et-Cher with at least one anti-phylloxera syndicate between 1815 and 1914	291
9.6	Communes in Loir-et-Cher with at least one agricultural syndicate or threshing syndicate between 1815 and 1914	292
9.7	The comparative geographical distribution of three sets of fraternal associations in Loir-et-Cher, by cantons, between 1815 and 1914	293

Photographs

3.1	Blois, from the south, across the Loire towards the cathedral	page 59
3.2	Peasant, horse and plough on the edge of the nucleated village of Mulsans, on the Petite Beauce	63
3.3	Ploughing in the Sologne	64
3.4	The railway at Saint-Hilaire-la-Gravelle, on the line between Paris and Tours opened in 1866	69
3.5	The tramway at Bracieux, in the Sologne, on the line between Blois and Lamotte-Beuvron opened in 1888	70
3.6	The tramway at Maves, in the Petite Beauce, on the line between Blois and Ouzouer-le-Marché opened in 1888	71
3.7	The pig market at Romorantin	72
3.8	The boys' school and the <i>mairie</i> of Busloup, in the valley of the Loir	77
3.9	Schoolboys and their school at Suèvres, in the Loire valley	78
3.10	The 'call-up' of conscripts in 1912 at Mondoubleau, in Perche	83
3.11	The military barracks at Blois, to which those selected for conscription were sent from throughout the department	83
3.12	The church at Mulsans, in the Petite Beauce, with its dominating eleventh-century bell-tower	89
3.13	The Protestant chapel on the outskirts of Josnes, in the canton of Mer	93
3.14	The late nineteenth-century <i>mairie</i> and, to its left, post office obscuring from view the early medieval church at Suèvres, in the Val de Loire	95
4.1	A farming family, farmhouse and livestock in the Sologne	116
4.2	A <i>paysanne</i> with her valuable cow, worth in 1900 about half of the annual expenses of a family of five	116
5.1	The fête of the mutual aid society of Salbris, in the Grande Sologne	182
6.1	Farm buildings in the Sologne	193

List of photographs xv

6.2	An officer reviewing a <i>corps de sapeurs-pompiers</i> , and its pump	194
7.1	A <i>vigneron</i> treading grapes in the Sologne	221
7.2	Grape picking in the Sologne	222
8.1	A steam-driven threshing machine at work in the Sologne	274
9.1	A <i>vigneron</i> and his horse at work on the valley side of the Val de Loire, in the commune of Saint-Gervais-la-Forêt, to the south of Blois	319

Preface

In researching and writing this book, I have had generous help from many colleagues and friends in Britain, in France and elsewhere. They are too numerous to be mentioned here individually but I am grateful to every one of them. In addition, I am indebted to the published and unpublished work of many historians, geographers and other scholars, as citations in the notes and bibliography indicate.

I wish especially to acknowledge the professionalism of the staffs of libraries in Cambridge, Paris and Blois who have provided considerable support for my work. I owe particular thanks to the staff of the Archives Départementales de Loir-et-Cher for their advice and assistance during my many visits to that records' office, where I was able to search not only catalogued but also uncatalogued materials. I am also specifically indebted to Mike Young for drawing all of the maps and diagrams and to James Youlden for photographic reproduction of the illustrations.

Drafts of parts of this book have been commented upon critically by colleagues both at local and regional seminars and at national and international conferences, and they have always benefited from such exposure. In addition, I am grateful to the three anonymous readers commissioned by Cambridge University Press to review a draft of this research monograph: revising it in the light of their comments revealed how carefully and constructively they had undertaken their assignments.

Much of the preparatory work for this book has been achieved in Blois and its environs. It has benefited from contact with some of Loir-et-Cher's local and regional historians, notably Maurice Gobillon, André Prudhomme, Jean Vassort and especially Régis Bouis. It has also gained from personal contacts and friendships developed over the years with many residents of the Beauceron commune of Mulsans, notably Jeanne Piedallu and the Guillard family. Living for extended periods each year among some of the descendants of the people whose historical geography is the concern of this book provided insights into French rural life not obtainable from the documentary records upon which it is principally based.

My research visits to France have been supported financially by the University of Cambridge; Emmanuel College, Cambridge; the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, Paris; the British Academy; and the Leverhulme Trust. To each of these I express my thanks. Part of chapter 6 is based upon an article published in the *Journal of Historical Geography*, part of chapter 7 upon an article in the *Würzburger Geographische Arbeiten*, and part of chapter 8 upon an article in the *Agricultural History Review*. I am grateful to the publishers of those journals for permission to draw upon those articles here.

The final stages of production of the book have benefited enormously from the critical advice of Richard Fisher, Deputy Group Director (Social Sciences) at Cambridge University Press, and from the detailed attention given to the copy and proofs by Hilary Hammond. The index has been compiled by Simon Cross. I am very grateful to each of them.

Finally, this book would never have been completed without the constant encouragement of my wife, Sandra, and without the forbearance of my two sons, Andrew and Jeremy. But it would certainly not have even been begun without the earlier support of my parents, Edie and Reg Baker, and without the initial stimulus of my intellectual mentor, Clifford Darby: it is, therefore, dedicated to their memories.

Mulsans, Loir-et-Cher
20 September 1997

1

Peasants and peasantry in nineteenth-century France

The rural community

There are many myths about the French peasantry. They have been both assiduously cultivated and painstakingly up-rooted.¹ More than forty years ago Harvey Goldberg dissected what he termed 'the myth of the happy [French] peasant', that of the idea of an independent, land-owning, stable, contented peasantry living and working in a balanced national economy and rural democracy.² There was also, as Gordon Wright has pointed out, the myth that France's agrarian history really began with the Revolution of 1789 because it completely transformed the country's rural structure; the myth that the peasantry, both before and after the Revolution, constituted a solid and largely undifferentiated bloc with common interests and aspirations; and the myth that the excessive parcellation of the fields of France was a product of the Napoleonic Code which abolished primogeniture in favour of partible inheritance.³ Then there is the myth of France as a peasants' republic:⁴ although the peasantry could have been the masters of France, because in 1848 when universal male suffrage was proclaimed they and their dependants constituted more than half of the country's population and even by 1939 they were still the largest single social grouping, they made little use of their potential political power because they were fighting on other fronts.⁵ There is also, of course, the carefully and selectively nurtured myth of peasant traditionalism and backwardness,⁶ or at least of the peasantry's espousal of conservative attitudes towards property, religion and the family.⁷ A related and equally pervasive idea – that of the emergence of the French peasant during the nineteenth century as a sturdy individualist and of the related decline of the rural community – is the focus of this present study.

If the problem of the rural community lies at the heart of the history of the French peasantry,⁸ then the question of peasant individualism lies at the heart of the rural community itself. The cult of individualism – of *liberté* – might have triumphed with the Revolution of 1789, but the potentially conflicting

2 *Fraternity among the French peasantry*

concept of community – of *fraternité* – had roots in the ancien régime and came into flower well after the Revolution had passed into historical memory.

The rural community towards the end of the ancien régime

By the eighteenth century, there was a great diversity among the French peasantry but a sense of community was constructed locally because of shared experiences.⁹ All peasants were, for example, subjects of the kings of France and so all were tied into a single political system, with its instabilities, and they were all linked into a fragile rural economy, with its environmental hazards and economic uncertainties.¹⁰ Risk and insecurity were the norm, crises not exceptional. Shared perceptions of these external threats contributed towards the creation of an internal sense of community. A commonly shared experience of opposition to ‘outsiders’, for example, the lord, the tax-collector or the money-lender, helped to underscore the ‘insiders’ sense of social cohesion and local community. As Marc Bloch once wrote: ‘It was above all by opposing its enemies that the small collectivity of the countryside acquired a firmer consciousness of itself.’¹¹ Similarly, a shared awareness of the scarcity of resources and of the need for the collective management of some of them provided rural communities with a strong social and economic basis.

The foundations of the rural community were the collective ownership and use of communal goods, in particular collective constraints upon private property (such as prohibiting enclosure and prescribing a crop rotation) for the benefit of the group as a whole, collective rights of usage over forests (for grazing some livestock and for gathering wood) and fields (for pasturing the fallow and for gleaning the stubble), and collective regulation of farming (such as determining which lands were to lie temporarily uncultivated, fixing the dates of harvests, and managing the pasturing of common lands).¹² There were, of course, spatial variations and temporal evolutions in the precise character of such collective regulations and practices, but fundamentally the rural community was characterised by the duties it imposed on all or most of its members and by the constraints it imposed on individual property.¹³ Co-operation, mutual aid and a sense of fraternity bred of practical necessity were embedded in the rural community of the ancien régime. This is not to deny that, as Philip Hoffman has recently emphasised, such communities were also infused with internal social and economic divisions.¹⁴ A community’s consciousness of its interdependence, of its collective unity, no doubt owed something to the all-embracing role of the Church and to the assembly of villagers (*communauté d’habitants*) which determined issues of concern to the community (such as managing public property, like roads and bridges and the church, and appointing public officials, like a shepherd, hayward, schoolmaster, or collectors of tithes). But the rural community at the end of the eighteenth century owed its unity to its economic system more than to its religious

or administrative institutions.¹⁵ The Revolution, with its principled emphasis upon both individualism and fraternity, as well as upon equality, challenged the existing order of the rural community.

The rural community and the Revolution of 1789

The Revolution, while destroying the seigneurial regime and abolishing feudal rights, elevated the principles of liberalism and individualism, asserting the total right to property in both the 1789 and 1793 Declarations of Rights: it established the freedom of an individual to enclose and to farm his property, and it restricted collective rights of use over such property. The private ownership of property came to be regarded as the foundation of post-revolutionary French society, as the basis of social and economic progress, as the key to modernisation. For example, the right to vote in the early nineteenth century was closely linked to property ownership, being restricted not only to men of a certain age but also of a given liability to direct tax on wealth, itself derived principally from property. Hence the myth emerged of a property owning democracy, based upon an individualism which has been seen as giving free play to the development of the capitalist mode of production in the countryside and hastening the disintegration of the rural community.¹⁶

With hindsight, contemporary perceptions of the significance of the land settlement of the French Revolution may be viewed as part of a false consciousness. The current assessment of the situation has been summarised recently by P. M. Jones in his wide-ranging analysis of the peasantry and the French Revolution:

Contemporaries imagined that the sale of church property and the confiscated lands of *émigré* noblemen, plus the clearing of wastes and the division of common land, had brought into being a class of freehold peasant proprietors. That belief became a key component of the nineteenth-century republican myth . . . we now know that peasant land ownership was well-entrenched before 1789. All the Revolution did was to accelerate existing trends, but the transformation was scarcely dramatic because the quantity of property changing hands represented only a small percentage of the total land surface of the country.¹⁷

Moreover, while individual property rights were enshrined in the Rural Code of 1791, so too were collective rights over private property.

The ideology of individualism, of *liberté*, suffused rural France at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries but it was embraced much more by those who were already owners of viably sized farms than it was by the unpropertied and by the owners of small farms who were traditionally dependent upon usage of some lands in common in order to extend their resource base. The concept of collectivism, of *fraternité*, appears to have featured less in discourse although it continued to be of significance in practice. Sections of

4 *Fraternity among the French peasantry*

the peasantry successfully resisted the doctrinaire enthusiasms of bourgeois revolutionaries on the question of collective rights. Unhindered grazing, gleaning and scavenging affected the immediate livelihoods of many more of the rural population than did the attribution of tithes, or the sale of church and *émigré* estates, so that the Rural Code was more a pragmatic compromise than an ideologically grounded, revolutionary statement. As Jones has argued,

it offered landowners a (largely unenforceable) right to enclose, while allowing peasants an (eminently enforceable) right to graze their stock as tradition dictated. In effect, therefore, agrarian *liberté* was postponed indefinitely. All attempts to revise the Rural Code in a direction favourable to landowners stumbled against the political argument: the great majority of peasants relied on collective rights and would not be parted from them without resistance.¹⁸

The theoretical tension between individualism and collectivism found practical expression within rural communities. Although the former might have been dominant ideologically and was intended to mark a discontinuity in rural society, the latter's practical role persisted but it can hardly be claimed that it provided an underlying continuity in the collective consciousness of rural communities. The tension between individual and collective rights was in practice a major source of conflict within rural societies, undermining their cohesion.

There were other ways in which a rural community might either have retained or had reinforced a consciousness of itself. Without doubt, the most important institutionally was the Revolution's administrative reorganisation, creating a hierarchical system which linked the thousands of localities into a single state. The unifying social role traditionally played by the Church was, at least potentially, assumed by the State. Elected municipal councils now ordered and controlled much of the daily life of a community. Because of the range of their powers, the councils contributed to the creation of a sense of local identity, of locality and community, even though the right to stand for election and the right to vote were restricted to adult males with certain qualifications and the mayors of the councils were not elected but appointed by a higher authority. A municipal council was simultaneously both an expression of a self-governing local society and a local agent of central, state authority. Although by no means actively embracing all of the population of a commune, such a council nonetheless served to produce and reproduce a sense of place and of community.¹⁹

Other mechanisms and manifestations of community can also be recognised during the revolutionary period. To a degree, the peasantry were politicised by the Revolution. In each *communauté d'habitants* or *paroisse*, all men aged twenty-five and more who paid some tax, however little, had been given the opportunity to have their grievances recorded in *cahiers de doléances*, in

the process learning a remarkable lesson in nascent democracy.²⁰ Also of potential significance were the local Jacobin clubs which mushroomed in France during the early revolutionary era, attracting patriots determined to defend the gains of the Revolution against a possible aristocratic reaction. They spread from towns and into the countryside, diffusing down the settlement hierarchy so that ultimately, according to Jones, about one in six or seven communes possessed a Jacobin club. Their impact was very uneven regionally as well as socially, and they were fundamentally a bourgeois conception; nonetheless, they became an integral part of the politicisation of many rural communities, but revealing conflicts within those communities rather than necessarily promoting their social cohesion.²¹ Exceptionally, a basic and somewhat vague form of rural communism was advocated by François-Noël Babeuf, a socialist revolutionary, to no great effect at the time but sowing the seeds of a political movement which was to come to fruition in some regions of France during the nineteenth century.²²

The Revolution did, then, go some way towards encouraging a sense of community within rural societies. In particular, it provided the experience of some form of local, municipal self-government. But the countervailing tendencies were probably more powerful: the peasant of 1815 was more likely to have been aware of the growing power of the State and of its use of the local council to exercise its own central control; and he was likely to have been increasingly conscious of the growing internal conflict with the community, of the developing power struggle for the ownership and use of scarce resources, in effect of the evolving class struggle within the countryside, of growing social differentiation. The rural community had by no means completely disintegrated, but it had been seriously undermined and a new sense of individualism – of what Alain Corbin, in a wider social context, has called ‘individuation’ – emerged to contest it.²³

The rural community during the nineteenth century

The nature of the rural community during the nineteenth century remains problematic. Some thirty years ago, Wright warned that ‘a social historian or social scientist would do well to avoid the quicksands of the [French] peasant problem’, given that ‘rural France is almost infinitely diverse, and almost any generalisation about the peasantry becomes partially false as soon as it is formulated’.²⁴ Generalisation about the French rural community in the nineteenth century is certainly fraught with difficulties: to differences from place to place and changes from period to period have to be added complexities arising from the many economic, social and political conflicts both among and within those rural communities. Peter McPhee’s cameo of rural France in the 1840s admirably celebrates such differences while highlighting the shared dimensions of all rural communities.²⁵ One such dimension, the tension

6 *Fraternity among the French peasantry*

between individualism and collectivism, will be the main concern of this book, which focuses upon practical expressions of the principle of *fraternité*. But before addressing that issue directly and empirically through a series of studies of fraternal associations in one region of France, a better general understanding will initially be sought in this chapter of the *mentalités* of the nineteenth-century French peasantry in general as portrayed by some of its contemporaries and as perceived by some of its modern observers. The following chapter will then examine the theoretical discourse within which the concept of fraternity was situated and had to find practical expression.

Perhaps at this point it is necessary to state that the term 'peasantry' is being used here – following many precedents – in a broad rather than a narrow sense, as a general term referring to agriculturally dependent populations within rural French communities rather than to specific, narrowly defined, economic and social groups within them. Of course, such rural communities contained within them 'peasants' whose circumstances differed considerably, for example in terms of the sizes, tenures and family based nature of their farms as well as in their degrees of self-sufficiency or market orientation. Such distinctions will, of course, be recognised when they illuminate the basic problem being addressed. But the term 'peasantry' has such a general usage in the literature that its continued employment here requires little justification.

There exist a number of surveys of the *mentalités* of French rural society during the nineteenth century.²⁶ There is consequently no need to undertake a comprehensive enquiry here. Instead, the focus will be on the contemporary and current portrayals and perceptions of the relative roles of individualism and collectivism as components of peasant *mentalités*.

Contemporary portrayals of the peasantry

Word pictures

The peasantry have left us with very few self-portraits: they existed predominantly within an oral rather than a written culture. But, for varied reasons, they attracted the attention of better-educated non-peasants who produced many descriptions of the peasantry in words, pictures and numbers. While all of those representations do not tell a single and unchanging story, collectively they constructed a generally unfavourable image of the French peasantry during the nineteenth century. It is, it needs to be remembered, an image of an 'Other' created almost entirely by a non-peasant – and sometimes non-French – 'Self'.²⁷ During the opening decades of the nineteenth century, the French peasantry had a 'bad press', being criticised by disciples of the Enlightenment, by agronomists fascinated by the English model of agricultural improvement, and by government officials seeking good harvests as a way of promoting public order.²⁸

Two foreign influential image makers have been Arthur Young and Karl Marx. During his extensive, three-years' tour of France on the eve of the political revolution of 1789, Young observed its countryside as an agronomist fully acquainted with the pace and character of England's agricultural revolution. He was critical of many aspects of French agriculture, including its indifferent and often absentee landlords, the continuance of feudal ties, the persistence of fallow in field rotations and of uncultivated wasteland generally. He decried the absence of an enclosure movement, the predominance of small farms and the partible inheritance practices which produced them, and he was dismayed by the depths of rural poverty and by the extent to which rural populations were controlled by superstition rather than driven by the spirit of improvement. For example, of Brittany he wrote: 'The country has a savage aspect; husbandry not much further advanced, at least in skill, than among the Hurons, which appears incredible amidst enclosures; the people almost as wild as their country . . .' Young's account of his *Travels in France* was first published at Bury St Edmunds in 1792 and then, in a French translation, at Paris in the following year.²⁹ It has become embedded into the historiography of French agricultural history: in 1976 Young was five times cited as an authority in Maurice Agulhon's magisterially edited essays on French rural history between 1789 and 1914, whereas Karl Marx received a single mention.³⁰

'Barbarism within civilisation' was Marx's dismissive description of French peasants.³¹ Duggett has argued that although such an epigram should not be taken too seriously, it is clear that Marx despised French peasants,³² essentially because their individual self-sufficiency was a severe brake upon the development of any sense of community or class. In his 1852 analysis of the class struggle in France during the preceding four years, Marx wrote:

The peasants who farm their own small holdings form the majority of the French population. Throughout the country, they live in almost identical conditions, but enter into very little relationships one with another. Their mode of production isolates them, instead of bringing them into mutual contact. The isolation is intensified by the inadequacy of the means of communication in France, and by the poverty of the peasants. Their farms are so small that there is practically no scope for a division of labour, no opportunity for scientific agriculture. Among the peasantry, therefore, there can be no multiplicity of development, no differentiation of talents, no wealth of social relationships. Each family is almost self-sufficient, producing on its own plot of land the greater part of its requirements, and thus providing itself with the necessaries of life through an interchange with nature rather than by means of intercourse with society. Here is a small plot of land, with a peasant farmer and his family; there is another plot of land, another peasant with wife and children. A score or two of these atoms make up a village, and a few score of villages make up a department. In this way, the great mass of the French nation is formed by the simple addition of like entities, much as a sack of potatoes consists of a lot of potatoes huddled into a sack.³³

8 *Fraternity among the French peasantry*

For Marx, the French peasantry could be seen as a class to the extent that 'millions of families live in economic circumstances which distinguish their mode of life, their interests, and their culture, from those of other classes' but 'insofar as the tie between the peasants is merely one of propinquity, and insofar as the identity of interests has failed to find expression in a community, in a national association, or in political organisation, these peasant families do not form a class'.³⁴ Although Duggett has shown that Marx was ambivalent towards peasants in general rather than, as Mitrany has argued, 'against' them,³⁵ it is clear that for Marx peasants in mid-nineteenth-century France were individuals lacking an awareness of their social and political potential as a community or as a class.

Images of the peasantry as 'barbarians' are also evident in French fiction. During the nineteenth century there are identifiable in novels about the rural world two contrasting representations, one 'romantic' and the other 'realistic', although the difference between them is not as wide as such a binary opposition might at first suggest.³⁶ All of the novels about the rural world were set in particular geographical localities and were concerned with historical actualities; virtually none of their authors had first-hand knowledge or experience of agricultural practices and problems; and almost all of the novels provide a view of a rural world seen from an urban perspective, contributing to a wider discourse about the distinction between 'countryside' and 'town', between peasants and other social classes, in France in the nineteenth century. Novelists were certainly not 'indifferent' to the peasant world.³⁷ Rémy Ponton has shown that pastoral novels like those of George Sand provided an idealised view of the rural world, a picture of a peasant utopia, of a society characterised by wisdom, balance and a purity of sentiments.³⁸ Such simplicity and naiveté in an apparently timeless, apolitical, world constructed a countryside which was, as Sand admitted, 'a perfumed Eden where souls tormented and tossed by the tumult of the world can seek refuge'.³⁹ A fictional tranquil countryside was provided by these novelists as a counterpoint to real, turbulent towns: conservative peasants seemed to be more acceptable as subjects for novels than did radical workers. Such a pastoral vision of the rural world came to be incorporated into primary school reading books during the Third Republic, Ponton argues, because it served to inculcate the values of sobriety, thrift, diligence and fraternity which were vital to the maintenance of republican order.⁴⁰ These values seemed to make the 'imagined' peasantry the foundation of a stable French society.

But there were also other imaginations at work and even George Sand in her memoirs referred to the peasants as 'ces êtres vulgaires' (these unrefined beings) whom she had idealised 'en sens inverse dans leur laideur ou leur bêtise' (contrariwise for their ugliness and their stupidity).⁴¹ The image of a barbarian peasantry was widely held and promoted by urbane authors, many of whom adopted a 'realist' stance towards their subjects. In effect, this meant

painting a 'black' picture of the peasants' way of life, of their continual conflict not only with the forces of nature and with outsiders such as representatives of the State and of the Church, but also among themselves. For example, Stendhal's peasants in *Le rouge et le noir* (1830) were greedy and brutal; Balzac's in *Les paysans* (1844) were materialist, selfish, immoral savages, self-confessed stupid animals; in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1857) they are gullible, subservient to bourgeois officialdom; Maupassant's Normandy peasants in his many short stories were unscrupulous, constantly thirsting for alcohol and hungry for sex; and Zola's peasants in *La terre* (1877) were described specifically by the village schoolmaster as brutes and generally characterised as fighting among themselves for the possession of land, of women and of money.⁴² This bleak picture of the peasantry portrays them as being essentially selfish, avaricious, suspicious, land-hungry individualists with little sense of community, of solidarity or even of social responsibility. Elements of that nineteenth-century picture were still discernible in rural novels of the 1950s and 1960s: they emphasised both the intimate, sexually-charged relationship between farmers and the lands they cultivated, and the independent, even autarchic, nature of a peasant existence characterised by liberty of the individual peasant and the absence of social constraints.⁴³

At the turn of the nineteenth century portrayals of the rural world had been nuanced by novels – such as René Bazin's *La terre qui meurt* (1899) and *La blé qui lève* (1907), Eugène Le Roy's *Jacquou le croquant* (1899), and Emile Guillaumin's autobiographical *La vie d'un simple* (1904) – which emphasised its internal class struggles, highlighting the different perspectives and interests of large landowners, of share-croppers, of tenant farmers, of small proprietors and of landless labourers, as well as the threats of rural depopulation and of urban modernisation upon very different French farming communities. These accounts tended to be more sympathetic to the rural world and one of these authors was the first French peasant novelist. Emile Guillaumin was a share-cropper and autodidact who provided in *La vie d'un simple* an exceptional, insider's view of a peasant world which acts in some respects as a useful corrective to some of the pictures drawn by non-peasant observers.⁴⁴ Guillaumin's country folk were (as Eugen Weber has noted) rough but not savage, truculent but not callous, indeed strangely pacific, perhaps in reaction to Zola's savage brutes in *La terre*.⁴⁵ Guillaumin's peasants were, however, individualists: he himself came to believe in the value of collective action as a non-revolutionary rural reform and in his *Le syndicat de Baugignoux* (1912) he provided an account of the protest movement which he led with the share-croppers of Bourbonnais, a movement which was unsuccessful because – in Guillaumin's view – peasants were considered by others to be and also considered themselves to be socially inferior.⁴⁶ Collective action, it could be argued, foundered on the rock of individualism. Pierre-Jakez Hélias, in his vivid autobiographical account of life in a Breton village in the early years of the twentieth

century, confirms the dominance of individuals and of families, as well of course as the school and the church, on the social stage.⁴⁷

The overall picture portrayed by novels located in different places in France and situated in different periods of the nineteenth century is of a rural society founded upon competition rather than upon co-operation among individuals, of a peasantry grounded both in an environmental and social conflict and in a self-preservationist conservatism. That picture finds affirmation – in both positive and negative terms – in accounts by contemporary commentators and historians. For example, Hannah Lynch, in her account of French life in town and countryside at the end of the nineteenth century, noted the peasants' 'sturdy passion for independence. It is this passion that enables them to scrape, and serve, and suffer privation with dignity and patience. However meagre their resources may be, they are content with their lot, provided the roof they sleep beneath is their own, the land they till their own, the goat, the pig, the poultry theirs to do what they will with . . . the distinctive characteristic of the peasant is an indomitable spirit of independence'.⁴⁸ A similar sentiment was expressed by Mary Duclaux (née Robinson) at about the same time. Having commented sympathetically upon the plight of many small farmers in France, she concluded:

Unfortunately, the peasant is, as a rule, intellectually idle, incapable of combination, suspicious, and impatient of new-fangled ideas; he finds it simpler to sell his goods to the buyer from Paris as his father did before him, than to combine with his neighbours in an agricultural syndicate. The principle of solidarity has scarcely penetrated into rustic parts, but the need of resisting the low prices imposed by the large farms using machine labour will certainly, in time, teach the peasant many things. Let his mind once grasp the idea of a common prosperity – where Tom's good luck is not ensured by the misfortunes of Dick and Harry, but all are implicated in the well being of each – let him forget to suspect and learn to combine; from that day forth his social future and well-being are assured.⁴⁹

The independence of the French peasant – as well as his industry, self-denial and frugality – was similarly stressed by the distinguished English agricultural historian, Rowland Prothero, in his survey of French farming in the early nineteenth century. Prothero also saw the morcellation of farms and the parcellation of fields as militating against peasant co-operation.⁵⁰ Similarly, although H. W. Wolff commented in his paper to the Royal Agricultural Society of England in 1900 that agricultural syndicates had brought a remarkable change to the face of French agriculture during the previous fifteen years or so, in applying the principle of combination to the furtherance of common interests in agriculture, he emphasised that it was 'one thing to make admission [to agricultural syndicates] easy and quite another to induce a sufficient number of the French peasantry to join, many of whom are backward beyond anything that we can conceive, and all of whom are wanting in personal initiative and expect to be pushed to whatever they are to do by some superior person'.⁵¹

From these multiple and sometimes contradictory literary characterisations of French peasants it is now time to turn to related pictorial representations of them.

Paintings

Many paintings of peasants were produced during the nineteenth century as pictorial records and impressions of French rural cultures and they became a part of the wider political discourse on the role of the peasantry within French society.⁵²

Images of the peasantry in paintings were – like those in novels – numerous and sometimes inconsistent but they do provide a resplendent gallery of striking portrayals of the individuals and communities who are the focus of this study. There have been a number of attempts made recently to distil the central themes of French peasant paintings from a vast literature analysing the works of individual artists.⁵³ These will be drawn upon here as providing one set of especially valuable observations of peasant *genres de vie* in general and of the relative roles of individualism and collectivism in particular.

Before selecting a few significant themes in French peasant painting during the nineteenth century, it must be emphasised that a single, monolithic and integrated image of the peasant in such work is neither to be expected nor to be found. Peasants were painted both as specific persons and as general types.⁵⁴ There are, unsurprisingly, some contradictory, opposing constructions to be addressed. To take first a specific example, in the work of Jean-François Millet (1814–75) have been detected different sets of concerns and subjects. Millet's paintings, as considered by Jean-Claude Chamboredon, include both pastoral and realist representations of peasant and rural landscapes, both idyllic scenes in a familiar tradition and realist pictures of peasants in a new form as socialist workers; Millet's paintings also, Chamboredon argues, construct an opposition between an independent peasantry of small owner-occupiers from regions of woodlands and enclosed fields and an agricultural proletariat from open-field regions of large farms. Even so, these dichotomies are collapsed by Chamboredon into a single view of a rural world in which the morality of labour and a fatalistic resignation to one's position in life are the dominant social values: thus he identifies in Millet's paintings of the late 1840s to the early 1870s the portrayal of a new peasant utopia.⁵⁵ More generally, Brettell and Brettell identified a different dichotomy, that between the image of peasants as little more than animals, as people close to nature and without culture, and that which saw peasant culture as authentic, even as the foundation of national civilisation, free from the artifice of urban life. They argued, however, that the former construction of the peasant was more prevalent in literature than in the pictorial arts, while the latter construction found equal expression in both.⁵⁶ That point can, of course, be questioned. Geneviève

Lacambre has pointed out that although the emerging novelty of paintings in the nineteenth century was their portrayal of peasants at work, depicting them with a new grandeur and realism, ultimately the paintings became more romanticised and even nostalgic depictions of regionally specific peasant types.⁵⁷

Paintings of peasants recorded rural cultures historically and geographically. In so doing, they contributed both to the search for a national past and to an acknowledgement of the regional diversity of France. Paintings and lithographs of rural France – of its toilers and tradesmen, of its costumes and its customs, of its landscapes and its light – came to be given titles which identified precisely the locality, region or department represented. As such, paintings were part of a wider study and representation of the folklore and popular traditions of France, part of a quest for a French national identity which recognised cultural regionality, a study which also harnessed to it the new art of photography.⁵⁸

Of that there can be little question. But to portray peasants as possessing their own cultures need not – indeed, did not – mean representing them as free from nature. On the contrary, peasants were frequently pictured as heroic individuals closely linked to nature, wresting their livelihoods from a reluctant earth. Perhaps the epitome of this image is that of Millet's *The Sower* (1850), boldly striding alone across a field, broadcasting the seeds whose product will be the bread of life for future generations.⁵⁹ Millet's famous sower – like so many of his peasants – was a solitary, individual rural worker. But even pictures of groups of peasants could emphasise their isolation from each other. Gustave Courbet's (1819–77) *Peasants of Flagey Returning from the Fair* (1850) depicted a procession of people all of whom (except two socially superior people on horseback) were, in the words of Brettell and Brettell, 'self absorbed and hence isolated from the collective experience chosen by the painter'.⁶⁰ Similarly, Jules Breton's (1827–1906) peasants were depicted as strong individuals, even when they are shown apparently working communally: such was the case, for example, in *The Gleaners* (1854).⁶¹

The powerful connection between peasants and nature, between individuals and their physical environments, was a fundamental thread running through much of realist painting. Agricultural work in all of its variety constitutes a major theme of these works. Labouring men and women are seen engaging with the earth: the paintings stress the physicality of existence, the often painful, certainly continuous, struggle for survival. For example, Millet's paintings of peasant life, such as *The Winnower* (1847–48), *Man Turning over the Soil* (1847–50) and *Man with the Hoe* (1860–62), 'clearly express a deep sympathy for the harsh fate of the great majority of the working population in rural France. Such images show men and women who toil at thankless and back-breaking tasks and remain desperately poor.'⁶² As John Berger has pointed out, Millet identified with his peasants, with their labours, in part

because he knew personally what it was like to be one: his paintings were in part expressions of his own experience. Berger considered that Millet, without a trace of sentimentality, painted the truth about peasants as he knew it, whereas the public – or certain sections of it – foisted their own interpretations upon his pictures and even requisitioned them for false preaching, as in the case of *The Angelus* (1855–7), which came to be widely perceived as portraying a passive couple whereas it contains many indications of potential conflict between them, for while the woman is submissive to religion the man is restless and protesting.⁶³ But Millet's peasants, and indeed the peasants of Vincent van Gogh, were not explicitly the revolutionaries identified often in paintings by Courbet, whose self-confessed commitment to socialism strongly influenced the reception of his work.⁶⁴

Paintings of peasants in part reflected the cultural values of the bourgeoisie, while their iconographies were certainly refracted through bourgeois values. Brettell and Brettell have argued that the fundamental values identifiable in peasant paintings of the nineteenth century are those of work, family, religion and patriotism:

As a kind of Everyman, the peasant served to render absolute these values and further to suggest they were generally human rather than bourgeois . . . In fact, peasants, like their urban counterparts whether bourgeois or proletariat, had no unified system of values, and the fact that such a large percentage of peasant pictures embody one of the four values mentioned above is proof of the ideological importance of those pictures to their audience. The peasant image served to teach 'real' values to the bourgeoisie, while the peasant himself was plagued by many of the same ills – unemployment, malaise, ambition, and alcoholism – as was the bourgeoisie.⁶⁵

In addition to exhibiting those four fundamental values, the peasant is also represented in paintings as inhabiting an apparently timeless, almost unchanging, realm in which the rhythms of his life are determined by the seasonal cycle of agricultural activities. But indications of the peasant's encounter with modernisation are not entirely absent: some pictures represent peasant responses to war and conscription, to class struggle, to the developing market economy, and to mechanisation – but generally doing so within the framework of the normative values of work, family, religion and patriotism.⁶⁶

What, then, of the signs of collectivism or fraternalism in peasant paintings? Contemporary radical critics, when defending Millet and Courbet, claimed that the tradition of peasant naturalism in art was one that stemmed from seventeenth-century Holland and was one that spoke for individualism and for democratic values, rather than for government or religious authority. Painting rural life and landscape was pitted against painting religious and historical subjects.⁶⁷ Raymond Grew was astonished by how few paintings there are depicting a group of peasants acting together. He noted that most of Millet's peasant figures stand alone, their relationship to others unstated even when a second or

third figure is placed in equal isolation within the same frame. There is, admittedly, some but not much ambiguity: 'Millet's gleaners can be seen as working together or in lonely desperation; they bend over the same field much as the survivors of the Medusa cling to the same raft'.⁶⁸ What Millet's gleaners exhibit is the struggle for personal survival, not a spirit of solidarity. His peasant paintings came to be accepted as expressions of the bourgeois morality of labour, of working hard to carve out a place in society by individual labour.⁶⁹ Given that Courbet's realism was allied to his socialism, we might expect his paintings of peasants to have signalled not only what he himself described as their unending misery and destitution as individuals.⁷⁰ John Berger has claimed that within Courbet's paintings one can indeed discover 'a sense of potential Arcadia' and that 'Courbet's socialism was expressed in his work by its quality of uninhibited Fraternity.'⁷¹ Berger's claim here is neither supported nor convincing. Courbet sought only practical, not utopian, solutions to social problems, and he placed a very high value on the freedom of the individual – including that of his own independence as an artist. Courbet painted peasants who were hard-working, proud, dignified and free individuals.⁷²

For Monica Juneja, a distinctive aspect of the iconography of rural life in nineteenth-century France was 'the emergence of the peasant as an individual whose identity is defined by his act of labour'. She argued that many paintings representing the agricultural proletariat were composed of certain basic formal elements: 'a vast, open field, belonging to a large, prosperous farm and populated by numerous individuals often distributed in an almost decorative manner over the expansive format of the canvas'. Juneja argued that the portrayal of agricultural labour on a large scale during the closing decades of the nineteenth century, as in Lhermite's *La paye des moissonneurs* (1882), idealised fraternal ties between employers and workers, reminiscent of a pre-capitalist era – this at a time when a new collective class consciousness was being forged by farm labourers on the anvil of the agricultural crisis.⁷³ Juneja directly considered how artists addressed changing forms of peasant sociability during the second half of the nineteenth century. She concluded:

Paintings chose to focus on forms of social interaction essentially centred on the family – the extended family, especially in pictures of wedding feasts or the single family reunion – or on social activities which united the entire agricultural community, such as collective feasting after the harvest. Only towards the end of the century do we have manifestations of forms of sociability which expressed a new, nationalist spirit – as in Lhermite's *Un quatorze juillet villageois* – for by this time the anti-clerical republican municipalities had attempted to substitute religious processions by civic festivities. Most of these images are rich in symbols of domesticity and consolation, as well as in folkloric details such as traditional costumes, pottery and musical instruments drawn from the abundant repertoire of illustrated literature on the provinces; they ensconce the peasant within the security of the familial or work space, reinforcing ideals of communal solidarity and the permanence of familial bonds.⁷⁴

In short, insofar as paintings portrayed peasant sociability at all they did so in its traditional, rather than in any of its modern, forms.⁷⁵ Brettell and Brettell, in their massive survey of peasant paintings in the nineteenth century, emphasised that many pictures portraying peasant labour showed single figures, or at most two involved in a single task. In this feature, the paintings stem from 'the first and greatest image of peasant labour, Millet's *The Sower* (1850)'. Such images, because of the isolation of the worker, 'possess an emblematic quality'.⁷⁶ Brettell and Brettell pointed out that such paintings reflect what many contemporary commentators considered to be the key problem of peasant politics, 'the possessive and individual spirit of the peasantry. For many nineteenth-century intellectuals, the peasant had no ability to organise, was jealous of everyone else, and was opposed to any form of collective action.'⁷⁷ Paintings show few signs of the politicisation of the peasantry or of their embrace of new forms of fraternalism.

Three broad generalisations can now be emphasised. First, all of these literary and pictorial portrayals of the peasantry both reflected contemporary attitudes and reflexively contributed to the production and reproduction of those attitudes themselves. Topographies, novels and paintings – perhaps, in a society not wholly literate, especially paintings – were themselves an integral part of the political discourse about the peasantry. Second, peasants were represented principally as individuals, or at best as members of a family, rather than as members of wider social groups. Third, these image makers portrayed the peasant world as if it were virtually timeless. They at best neglected, at worst ignored, the transformation – some would say modernisation – of rural France which was going on around them: they portrayed and represented essentially a traditional, a pre-modern, peasantry. The extent to which the influence of these contemporary portrayals has persisted into the modern historiography of the French peasantry now needs to be considered.

Current perceptions of the peasantry

While there has been a considerable and lively debate about the precise pace and detailed character of the development of capitalist agriculture and the 'modernisation' of rural society in France during the nineteenth century, there has been less critical examination of the alleged decline of the rural community. These issues now deserve attention, first in terms of the general debates about the changing character of agriculture and of rural society in France during the nineteenth century, and then in terms of the specific claims which have been made about individualism and collectivism as changing components of peasant *mentalités*. There is neither the space nor the need to map in detail here the whole gamut of agricultural and social changes in rural France during the nineteenth century. All that is necessary is to provide a sketch of

the controversies about them, as the framework within which to consider the specific problem of fraternal associations.

The development of agriculture?

Whether or not France witnessed an 'agricultural revolution' during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has been much debated. The pace, location, character, and underpinning processes of agricultural changes have all been hotly contested.⁷⁸ The long-running controversy has resulted to some extent from the limitations of the statistical evidence upon which it is based, but it has also reflected the difficulty of coming to agreed conclusions for France as a whole in view of the considerable regional and local variations which have to be accommodated within a national picture. Given that to those geographical variations have also to be added both temporal fluctuations and sectoral differences, it would be very surprising indeed – even disturbing – if the nature of agricultural change in France during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had not been a matter of contention. Nonetheless, two broadly differing sets of views – one essentially orthodox, one essentially revisionist – can be identified.

In brief, the long-standing orthodox view has been that the relatively slow development of the French economy as a whole was a consequence in considerable measure of the relatively slow development of the agricultural sector in particular: the Industrial Revolution in France was delayed by the retarded nature of its Agricultural Revolution, specifically by the slow increase in agricultural productivity needed to feed an increasingly industrial and urban population and by the failure of the agricultural sector to release labour and capital to the manufacturing and service sectors of the economy.⁷⁹ Much attention came to be focused upon the rate of diffusion of new crops (especially artificial meadows, but also potatoes), of improvements to livestock and heavier stocking of animals (and hence greater production of organic manure), of the use of chemical fertilisers, and of the mechanisation of farming. There has been considerable debate, even within this orthodox account, about when agricultural productivity in France began significantly to increase, with dates being proposed which vary between the early 1700s and the 1840s.⁸⁰ The most recent, massive and quantitative analysis of agricultural production, productivity and growth in France between 1810 and 1990 by Jean-Claude Toutain has identified a growing regional specialisation and a developing national and international commercialisation of French agriculture. Nonetheless, Toutain argued that, while in terms of agricultural productivity differences among the regions of France diminished between 1840 and 1929 (but were accentuated thereafter), when looking at the national picture one cannot justifiably speak of an Agricultural Revolution in France before 1960.⁸¹ Despite the scale of Toutain's study, the central problem

remains unresolved – in part because Toutain failed to define what for him would constitute such a phenomenon.

There has been more agreement among historians about the failure of French agriculture to submit to the structural reorganisations (principally enclosures and the consolidation of farm holdings) which were such an important part of agricultural improvements in England in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.⁸² The predominance of small, fragmented, labour-intensive but inefficient, conservatively operated family farms producing mainly for subsistence or at best for only local markets has been seen as the fundamental brake on the development of French agriculture. The very substantial and 'backward' peasant sector has been blamed in its turn for a much wider economically retarded performance.⁸³

That pessimistic view of French agriculture in general and of the peasantry in particular has come increasingly to be challenged by revisionist historians and historical geographers.⁸⁴ For example, Philip Hoffman has argued for considerable economic growth in the French countryside between 1450 and 1815 and Paul Bairoch has argued that wheat yields in France between 1800 and 1880 were not significantly different from the European average and that the rate of growth of productivity in French agriculture between 1830 and 1880 was almost twice the European average.⁸⁵ Pautard has also identified the latter period as one both of significant overall national agricultural growth and of a diminution in the regional differences in agricultural productivity, as the more laggard regions narrowed the gap between themselves and the more advanced regions during this period of overall growth.⁸⁶ Until almost mid-century the most agriculturally significant changes were restricted to a few regions, notably to the Paris Basin with its large urban markets, its better-than-average communications and its proximity to centres of agricultural innovation in England and Holland.⁸⁷ But by the 1880s agricultural improvements had come to affect most regions of France. The growth of urban and industrial markets and improved access to them not only by better roads but also by the new railways and developing rural tramways encouraged the commercialisation, and with it the specialisation, of agriculture. The rate of annual growth of agricultural productivity in France between 1830 and 1880 was, it seems, well above the European average, although it then fell back to the average.⁸⁸ Moreover, since the 1850s, some regions of the country had been releasing labour to the growing urban and industrial economy and had, as a consequence, improved their own agricultural productivity through the wider adoption of labour-saving machinery.⁸⁹

Importantly, this revisionist case also includes a more positive view of the peasantry, of small-scale farming, than that embedded within the orthodox narrative. In its most extreme form, this case involves a Marxist rejection of the commonly held assumption that the development of agrarian capitalism required large-scale farming. Instead, it argues that because in France large

landowners were not practising farmers but merely landlords the route to capitalist development lay with small independent producers.⁹⁰ While this is to ignore the role of tenanted farms on the large estates, it does nonetheless reinstate the peasant proprietor as an active agent in the development of capitalist agriculture. In those regions favoured by their proximity or improved accessibility to growing markets, or by soils and physical conditions, small farms became increasingly commercialised and specialised. Smallholdings were especially suited to viticulture, to market gardening, to fruit growing and to livestock production. Thus even peasant farmers, originating within a 'natural' economy, could insert themselves – and did so increasingly – within the growing 'capitalist' economy.⁹¹

The revisionist school also reverses another orthodoxy, by arguing that the slow growth of the French population in general and of its urban-industrial population in particular – in effect, the slow growth of the market for agricultural produce – provided little stimulus to improve farming productivity, either through new methods or through structural change.⁹² It also argues that to the extent that French peasants in some regions stayed on the land rather than migrating into towns and their industries, they did so because the slow growth of the manufacturing and service sectors in those regions created few new employment opportunities for them.⁹³

There are, therefore, as Annie Moulin's survey has emphasised, now grounds for believing that neither French agriculture as a whole nor its peasant sector in particular were as backward as it has so often been argued.⁹⁴ As Ronald Hubscher has recently concluded, in France between 1800 and 1914 both agriculture in general and the peasant world in particular were 'profoundly transformed' under the impact of the developing global economy and society. The changing rural landscapes of France were far removed from the increasingly conventional and unreal portrayal in literature and art of an unchanging, fossilised peasantry, an image grounded in an agrarian mythology and a bucolic vision of life in the fields.⁹⁵

The 'modernisation' of rural society?

A vivid and influential account of the 'modernisation' of rural France during the nineteenth century has been provided by Eugen Weber in his *Peasants into Frenchmen: the Modernisation of Rural France, 1870–1914*, published in 1976.⁹⁶ This is an evocative account which draws upon archives, folklore, ethnography and local historical studies to construct a lively picture of the collapse of traditional peasant culture and the rise of modern rural society. It is a fascinating portrayal, full of anecdotes and surprising details. In many ways Weber's *Peasants into Frenchmen* appears to follow the advice offered by David Pinkney forty years ago that foreign historians of France should not try to match native historians in basic archival research but should instead concen-

trate on synthesis and interpretation, bringing to their work the advantages of their detachment, freshness of perspective and capacity for surprise.⁹⁷

Put simply, Weber's thesis was that well into the nineteenth century most of rural France was comprised of local, at best regional, autarchic peasant economies, diverse and almost unchanging, poor and primitive, with little contact with each other and even less with towns and markets. The village or commune, at most the *pays*, constituted the limits of social intercourse for most peasants, whose knowledge and experience were fundamentally rooted in their immediate locality. This 'traditional' rural society was, Weber claimed, 'modernised' from the 1880s onwards, under the increasingly transformative impact of roads and railways, primary schools, and military service. These processes of change incrementally integrated local, essentially rural, communities into a national, essentially urban, culture. Peasants became Frenchmen. Such a broad-sweeping thesis and the way in which it was presented by Weber command admiration. Many parts of the general thesis resonated with what more cautious, less adventurous scholars knew about particular places or processes within nineteenth-century rural France. For example, his emphasis on the role of population migration in the disintegration of traditional peasant communities has been convincingly confirmed.⁹⁸ Weber's thesis has become probably one of the most influential interpretations of French rural history. It has certainly had a major impact upon nineteenth-century French studies, both in the original and in its French translation.⁹⁹

There have, however, been several and severe criticisms of Weber's thesis, notably those by Ted Margadant, Charles Tilly and Peter McPhee.¹⁰⁰ Collectively, these critics argue that Weber provided a misconceived and misleading impression of French rural society in the nineteenth century. Questions have been raised, for example, about Weber's identification of the timing and of the generality of the changes described, as well as about his explicit use of limited evidence and his implicit use of discredited theory.

Many of the changes which Weber identified as being crucial only from the 1880s were in fact operative in many parts of France much earlier in the nineteenth century and possibly even before then. There was, in Tilly's phrase, 'no solid cake of custom to break'.¹⁰¹ As Margadant put it, a more balanced comparison of rich lowland with poor highland regions would suggest a different periodisation of market development and social change in the French countryside.¹⁰² Indeed, a related major criticism is that Weber ignored both the regional diversity of social, economic and political change and the many regional monographs by geographers and historians which have explicated it. As far as his sources were concerned, Weber relied principally and uncritically upon (often titillating) anecdotal evidence and upon observations of rural society by those bourgeois writers who held pessimistic, derogatory views about the peasantry. He undertook no systematic, rigorous analysis of statistical observations of the history and geography of 'modernisation' (such as

literacy, income, population mobility, or prices) for France as a whole. As far as theory is concerned, Tilly criticised Weber for his use of the concept of 'modernisation'. The problem here is twofold. First, Weber uncritically adopts the Third Republic's own view of the civilising mission of the State, through its control of schools and of military service and its very considerable influence upon communications, and assumes rather than demonstrates that the mission succeeded between 1870 and 1914. Second, Weber implicitly and uncritically adopts the liberal, progressive version of 'modernisation theory'. Tilly argued that 'many of the most concrete changes in the social life of nineteenth-century Europe did not follow the paths required by theories of modernisation'. While Tilly saw nothing wrong in the use of the term 'modernisation' for merely descriptive purposes, he did object to 'the elevation of the idea of modernisation into a model of change – especially a model in which expanded contact with the outside world alters people's mentalities, and altered mentalities produce a break with traditional forms of behaviour'. In Tilly's view 'the magic mentalism' was 'not only wrong but unnecessary', because for him an analysis of 'the interaction of two deeper and wider processes' – the growth of national states and the expansion of capitalism – offered 'a far more adequate basis for the understanding of change in nineteenth-century Europe'.¹⁰³ Similarly, from a revisionist Marxist perspective McPhee has argued that Weber 'grossly exaggerated the extent of an essentially autarchic peasantry', that a more fruitful way of understanding the peasantry is as a transitional element of an agrarian social formation, and that as independent small and middling producers they comprised a progressive element in the countryside.¹⁰⁴ Again, and similarly from a Marxist perspective, Magraw has challenged Weber's whole thesis and suggested that what some might see as 'progress' others might see as internal colonialism or even as cultural genocide.¹⁰⁵

More recently, another major challenge to Weber's thesis has been provided by James Lehning in a study of cultural contact in the department of Loire. Lehning has shown how the very concept of 'peasant' in France was itself a cultural construction whose meaning changed during the course of the nineteenth century. He argued that the early nineteenth-century version of 'peasant' – isolated, religious, ignorant, violent and bordering on savage – 'was no longer useful for French culture' in the second half of the century. The economic, social and political conflicts of late nineteenth-century France required, according to Lehning, a different 'peasant', 'one who, with help from the state, could be peaceful, literate, secularised, a patriotic republican, and the repository of French values against the radical working class'. Lehning concludes that it was not so much a matter of converting peasants into Frenchmen but of (local and regional) peasants becoming French peasants.¹⁰⁶

Embedded within this broad debate about the 'modernisation' of the rural society has been a more specific one of particular relevance to this present

study of fraternalism in the countryside, a debate about the politicisation of France's peasantry. As Edward Berenson pointed out in his admirable critical review of this latter controversy, to some extent its origins lie in the ambivalent attitude which Marx held about French peasants, viewing them principally as isolated from currents within society at large and detached from politics but also recognising the existence of a peasant 'revolutionary', one who was able to 'strike out beyond the condition of his existence'. But the debate conducted by historians over the last four decades has had such a long run in part, Berenson suggested, because the term 'politicisation' has itself been ill-defined and so employed with different meanings. For some 'politicisation' has meant the development of political consciousness, for others engagement in political movements, for still others the adoption of political forms of protest, such as demonstrations, petitioning, and voting.¹⁰⁷ In essence, the debate has been between those – like Maurice Agulhon, Ted Margadant, Raymond Huard and Edward Berenson – who have claimed many of the peasantry had become politicised by mid-century (and especially during the period 1848–51) and those – notably Eugen Weber but also others, like P. M. Jones – who have argued that, while the mid-century saw the adjustment of peasant allegiances from one set of notables to another, a genuine political awakening was not to be witnessed among the peasantry until the 1870s or even 1880s.¹⁰⁸ As with almost any aspect of French history during the nineteenth century, some of the differences are more apparent than real, because some of them are regional – the pace and character of the politicisation of the peasantry varied from place to place, reflecting different economic, social and cultural circumstances. While the debate can be reconciled to some extent in this way, it is not fully resolved because those who have argued for peasant conservatism have challenged the politicisation thesis in general rather than in particular places.

But the timing and the spacing of peasant politicisation are less important for this present study than is its character. There is broader agreement among historians about the processes which promoted a heightened political awareness among the peasantry, taking 'political awareness' here to mean initially an appreciation of the wider structures and conjunctures within which local peasant communities acted, an appreciation which could be followed ultimately by an understanding of the ways in which peasants as agents could interact positively with those structures and conjunctures, could endeavour to exert increasing control over them. The tangibly increasing impact upon peasant communities of the growth of the nation-state and of the spread of a market economy made them gradually more aware of the extent to which their livelihoods were dependent upon circumstances emanating from beyond their own immediate localities. Such processes introduced yet more uncertainties into an already insecure peasant existence. That in turn, it could be argued, would have led peasants gradually to adopt new strategies for managing such

risks, as they would no doubt have been initially perceived before they came to be seen as opportunities. One of the strategies potentially available for managing such risks was increasing engagement with, and even in, the political process, an engagement which could itself take a variety of forms, including voting, seeking election to local councils, and the creation of fraternal associations aiming to defend and, if possible, promote the interests of particular social and/or economic groups.

Debate here has centred around the extent to which such politicisation emerged and evolved spontaneously within rural communities and the extent to which it was exogenously imposed upon them by urban activists and influences. No doubt once again the initial answer must be 'to differing extents at different periods and in different regions', but it should also be possible to develop a more nuanced response which recognises the role of local, regional and national (political) issues in the life of every rural community in France during the nineteenth century. In this context, Tony Judt's study of socialism in Provence is exemplary.¹⁰⁹ Those of the conservative school of thought have argued that rural politics reflected local, not national, concerns: for example, Michael Burns has claimed that even at the end of the century 'rural politics remained greatly influenced by personalities, family ties, local interests and local intimidation'.¹¹⁰ But that has also been true of rural politics in France during the second half of the twentieth century¹¹¹ and it hardly comes as a surprise in the nineteenth century. The blatant importance of local issues and of local personalities in rural politics during the nineteenth century must not blind us to the local significance also of regional and even national issues and personalities. A reading of the minutes of almost any commune council soon reveals the complex interweaving of such issues and personalities: each council was constantly being required to respond to matters raised by the department's administration and by the national government, and in doing so its locally specific responses inevitably inserted its councillors and commune into a wider political network.¹¹² There can be no doubt that national and regional issues resonated locally.¹¹³

This does, however, raise the question of the extent to which peasant politicisation should be seen as merely a pragmatic response to changing circumstances and to an enhanced awareness of the nature of those circumstances and of the means by which they might be managed, and the extent to which it should also or alternatively be seen as a principled commitment to a particular ideology. Of central concern here are the processes by which rural communities and individuals came to adopt particular practices and ideologies. In the literature of the politicisation debate there is a consensus that ideas, especially socialist and republican ideas, were diffused from towns into countryside. The implication is that urban principles were transformed into rural practices.

The collapse of the peasant community and the rise of peasant individualism?

The history of the French rural community after the Revolution has been classically portrayed as one of bitter struggle between two conflicting forms of economy, the 'natural' and the 'capitalist'. More than forty years ago, Albert Soboul argued that 'from the moment that agricultural production was integrated into the capitalist economy, the community was doomed: after more than a century of resistance it disintegrated completely'.¹¹⁴ His powerful thesis was that throughout the nineteenth century the small peasants fought vigorously for their own right to live and for the common rights of usage over fields, heaths and woods which safeguarded that living. He saw the agrarian unrest of 1848–51 as 'the last violent episode, the last paroxysm of the traditional peasantry on the verge of disappearance'. In the course of those struggles, peasants acquired a consciousness of their interests as a class. The appearance of class consciousness among the peasantry was, in Soboul's view, accompanied by the disappearance of the rural community as it became increasingly integrated into the capitalist economy.¹¹⁵ Soboul provided a classic portrayal of 'the decline of the French village community' and the growth of 'unchained individualism'. His view, that 'the rural community was bound to disappear in the course of the great revolution which integrated agricultural production into the capitalist economy', has underpinned much of the discourse on the French peasantry for an entire generation of scholars.¹¹⁶

For example, Harriet Rosenberg, in her study of the French Alpine community of Abriès, has argued that local autonomy and agency were eroded during the nineteenth century with the growth of the State and the spread of capitalism.¹¹⁷ More generally, Theodore Zeldin's panoramic survey of the *mentalités* of French peasants from 1848 onwards concluded that the old community spirit was collapsing, that it was breaking up, that collective controls and traditions of co-operation were gradually abandoned: 'The peasants had long traditions of mutual assistance, and in some regions even of organised co-operation in farming. The nineteenth century was in some ways a gap, a period in which these traditions were suppressed while the peasants struggled for ownership of the land; but towards the end of it there was some revival of co-operation.' Zeldin argued that although some co-operatives were established from the late nineteenth century onwards, 'the peasants rejected any collective discipline'.¹¹⁸

In effect, rural France during the nineteenth century came to be seen as having witnessed the triumph of individualism over collectivism. For example, Yves-Marie Bercé has argued that from the sixteenth century to the eighteenth century a solidaristic, self-interested peasant community responded to external threats by means of riots, rebellions and revolutions. But during the nineteenth century, Bercé argued, the unified interest and solidarity of the community declined and undermined the foundations for peasant revolts.¹¹⁹

Even Maurice Agulhon, in his magisterial survey of *la civilisation paysanne* in France, argued that during the nineteenth century under the impact of modernising influences rural municipalities became less community-minded: he cites by way of example the role of public spaces for collective activities, including the playing of games, pointing to the break in continuity which existed between the *communal* of the eighteenth century and the *stade* of the twentieth century.¹²⁰ The Revolution of 1789 had been based on the premise that modernity and progress had private property ownership and use as a necessary condition, whereas conservatism and routine flowed from collective ownership and use.¹²¹ That premise, according to this school of thought, gradually eroded the rural community during the nineteenth century.

That argument has been extended by those who claim that the peasantry, lacking a sense of community, class or solidarity, were slow to politicise and to organise themselves into associations. For example, Suzanne Berger has argued that in Brittany peasants were 'against politics' even in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and that their social and political milieu militated against voluntary associations. 'The traditional features of peasant life were obstacles to active participation in an organisation: the constraints of an undifferentiated workday, loyalty to the Church, and a network of social relations which extended no further than the village. In addition, there were attitudes of apathy, jealous egalitarianism, and defensive individualism, all of which supported a weak participant role that rural organisations could have transformed only by attacking traditional society at its roots.'¹²² Gordon Wright argued that the peasantry took little active part in politics until the Great Depression of the 1930s and that few of the agricultural associations or syndicates formed before then were organised by peasants themselves, 'most were organised by local crusaders from the landed aristocracy or the bourgeoisie'.¹²³

As has already been emphasised, a very influential account of the French peasantry during the nineteenth century has been that provided some twenty years ago by Eugen Weber – and it is an account which represents peasants fundamentally as individuals rather than as communities or other social groupings.¹²⁴ Weber's panoramic perspective included within its compass autarky but not associations, conscription but not co-operatives, furniture but not fraternities, sewing machines and suicides but not societies or syndicates, and undergarments but not unions. In his portrayal of 'traditional' societies Weber did, of course, have something to say about those activities which involved opportunities for socialisation, such as fairs and markets, baptisms, burials and funerals, religious festivals, and *veillées*. But his massive survey did not recognise, or even suggest, that the 'modernisation' of rural France might have involved the emergence of new social groupings, new forms of sociability, new expressions of fraternity, within and among communities. Weber's primary concern, of course, was with the processes by which peasants were

transformed into Frenchmen, a stance which left little, if any, room for new social groupings intermediate between the individual and the State. He argued, instead, for the supreme importance of what he termed 'local solidarities' at mid-century and their replacement by the end of the century of a consciousness that 'great local questions no longer found their origin or solution in the village, but had to be resolved outside and far from it'. Weber's view was that the seemingly monolithic traditional rural society in France was based on the community, with no break existing between the group and the individual, and only when and as that society 'began to disintegrate could individuals begin to see themselves as separate or separable from the group'. Only then could new rival solidarities – 'like the new-fangled one of class' – develop.¹²⁵ But he had nothing more to say about voluntary associations based upon class or any other perceived collective interest.

A similar emphasis upon the growth of individualism is to be seen in Annie Moulin's more recent survey of peasantry and society in France since 1789. She argued that solidarities and divisions in the period from 1789 to 1815 were based upon the two basic social units of the family and the local community, but that the period from 1815 to 1870 was marked by a 'weakening of the old economic bonds between members of the community, victim, it is clear, of the relentless rise of agrarian individualism'. Communal institutions, she suggested, 'fell into decline' and in some areas, like the Beauce, 'systems of mutual aid between farmers quickly vanished'. But within the period from 1870 to 1914 Moulin also recognises the development – in the face of economic difficulties – of a new collectivist spirit, expressed in part in the creation of 'mutual-insurance societies which offered some security against fire, loss of harvest or animal sickness' and in part in the setting-up of syndicates for the bulk purchase of agricultural supplies. Moulin claimed that most of the initiatives taken to organise such associations came from outside the peasantry itself – in effect, from the rural elite of landowners, doctors and lawyers, supported by local administrations and especially by their professors of agriculture. She also insisted that the roots of the new collectivism were hardly deep among the peasantry, claiming that in 1914 some three-quarters of all peasants played no part in this co-operative and syndicalist movement.¹²⁶ Moulin offered, then, a more ambivalent, but potentially more nuanced, recognition of the relative roles of individualism and collectivism.

Indeed, a more complex interpretation of the transformation of rural society in France during the nineteenth century has gradually been emerging. It has come increasingly to be argued that one can identify a growing sense of community within rural France during the nineteenth century and that there was during its second half even a great flowering of its social and cultural life. To some extent this has been attributed to the growing role of the commune and its council as a locally influential institution and to the developing politicisation of the peasantry. Agulhon, for example, has argued that the law of

1831 played a crucial role in that process, because it lowered significantly the qualifying wealth level of the right to vote and so brought a much larger fraction of the rural population into local democracy and, more importantly, because it required mayors and their deputies – although still nominated by an external authority (the prefect) – to be selected from among the elected councillors, which at least theoretically made it possible for a commune to prevent an unpopular noble from gaining access to local power.¹²⁷ During the course of the century, the municipal council became increasingly active in the ordering of local life, and in so doing provided a focus for the production and reproduction of a sense of community even while the locality was being increasingly integrated into the French nation.¹²⁸ Councils contributed to the general process of economic, social and political transformation which has now been so widely identified in rural France during the 1850s, 1860s and 1870s, a period which some scholars now identify as witnessing ‘the peak of rural civilisation’, with locally and regionally diverse and vibrant economies and cultures responding to, and being transformed by, modernising influences, by the growing range and expanding volume of flows of people, of ideas, of capital, and of commodities.¹²⁹ The growing electoral participation of the peasantry was both a sign and a means of their gradual integration into the French nation-state.¹³⁰

The gamut of social, economic, political and cultural changes which impacted upon the French countryside during the nineteenth century – at a rate and in a combination which varied from period to period as well as from place to place – meant that peasant *mentalités* were likely to change. Old ways of doing and thinking were increasingly challenged, old solidarities and allegiances based largely upon family and community came increasingly under attack. New solidarities – based, for example, upon occupation, class or gender – became possibilities, a new sense of ‘collectivity’ could emerge, even while old solidarities persisted.¹³¹ Peasant *mentalités* might have changed slowly, but there is accumulating evidence to indicate that they did both resist *and* adjust to the forces of change during the nineteenth century. There did develop, for example, explicit class struggles within the countryside, especially in those regions in which a rural proletariat – such as waged farm labourers, vineyard workers, and wood-cutters – were numerous and could be organised into unions.¹³²

In his recent (1996) *tour d’horizon* of France between 1814 and 1914, Robert Tombs has provided a thick interpretation of rural society which is much better balanced than the thin description which has for so long been based upon Eugen Weber’s thesis. In general, Tombs recognised that ‘“the peasant” as a type, whether stigmatised or idealised, was a creation of non-peasants’. In particular, while acknowledging that the nineteenth century saw the development of a sharper individual consciousness, of greater self-awareness, of individuation, and that social identity was derived principally from fami-

lies, Tombs also emphasised the positive role of the small rural communities within which individuals and families 'lived, moved and had their being'. Both the significance of community and the sense of community were, he argued, stronger in regions of large nucleated villages than in those of isolated dispersed farmsteads. 'Communal social activities – festivals, religious confraternities, and during the nineteenth century drinking clubs, political groups and sports clubs – were much more developed in the urban villages. Sociability was sparser in the dispersed habitat.' In addition, Tombs recognised that from the mid-1880s rural France saw the development and spread of agricultural syndicates, partly in response to the growing economic pressures of the period and partly in relation to trade union legislation in 1884 permitting the creation of associations in defence of professional interests. Tombs argued that these syndicates, for buying farming supplies and for processing and selling farming products, were vitally important for the structure of peasant agriculture in the long run: they 'determined the survival and future of peasant agriculture, as well as constituting a new set of institutions within rural society and giving expression to peasant identity'.¹³³

Peasant collectivism and risk

It is not the purpose of this present study to create yet another myth about the French peasantry by making extravagant claims for the role of fraternalism in the French countryside during the nineteenth century. It is, however, based on the premise that the role of fraternalism has been much neglected and merits closer attention. A reconstruction of the historical geography of fraternal associations – of their historical development, geographical distribution and contribution to peasant culture – will be used to examine the fundamental tension between individualism and collectivism in rural France during the nineteenth century. Both co-operation and conflict, both 'socialism' and 'capitalism', both fraternalism and individualism can be expected to have been threads within the rich tapestry of nineteenth-century rural France. The central concern of this study is to trace the hitherto neglected thread of fraternalism running through that fabric, not to remove from it the thread of individualism.

At the same time, this study will consider the extent to which peasant associations may be viewed as one form of dealing with risk. French peasants – like those elsewhere – were accustomed to confronting both man-made and natural hazards, both edicts of governments and acts of God.¹³⁴ John Berger has described the peasantry as 'a class of survivors'.¹³⁵ Against the many threats they faced, both cultural and natural, individual peasants had traditionally sought group protection within the immediate family and the proximate rural community, but also in the more remote Church. The insecurity of life for many in rural France had for long been countered by a peasant

fatalism itself fostered by the Church. The peasant's sense of helplessness in relation to natural disasters, of his subordination to natural forces, was closely bound up with a rural popular religion whose practices were interpreted, in part at least, as providing some assurance and protection against the many adversities which could befall him, his family and his property – and when such protection failed, as inevitably it often did, religion encouraged as an alternative a fatalistic acceptance of those adversities, as acts of God. Gradually during the nineteenth century, and especially from mid-century, the spread of schooling and the growth of a scientific culture undermined the traditional role of popular religion and of its priests, while the insecurity of the peasant lifestyle was itself diminished by economic developments founded in part upon scientific advances. This gradual transformation of rural *mentalités* in nineteenth-century France has come to be widely accepted as an orthodoxy.¹³⁶ But scant attention has been paid to the extent to which, as faith in the protective powers of religion declined, rural dwellers embraced secular forms of defence by establishing or joining associations intended to provide a degree of protective insurance for their property and for their own persons and families. Another concern of this study, therefore, is the extent to which religious assurance came to be replaced by secular insurance as a means of coping with risk and uncertainty in rural France during the nineteenth century.

The nation of France was a cultural construction – but behind the idea of a unified France lay the reality of its diverse regions and its mosaic of localities (*pays*), as G. Bruno's classic school textbook, *Tour de France par deux enfants*, made very clear when it was first published in 1877.¹³⁷ Not a few attempts to launch grand generalisations about France have been wrecked on the rocks of regional and local differences and specificities. Many scholars for many years have been pleading the case for a better understanding of the regional nuances of French national history. While few would agree with C. K. Warner's extreme, clearly unachievable but perhaps merely incautious, claim that we need to study *every* village and region in France from pre-industrial times to the present because 'only this way can we hope to get an accurate catalogue of [peasant] *mentalités*',¹³⁸ there are many who have argued that the problems of economic, social, political and cultural change in France need to be studied from the standpoint of the region rather than – or at least as well as – that of the nation.¹³⁹ There is a very strong tradition within French scholarship of the production of historical regional monographs, such as Georges Dupeux's classic study of the social and political history of Loir-et-Cher between 1848 and 1914, and of geographical regional monographs, such as Roger Dion's classic account of the Val de Loire.¹⁴⁰ Furthermore, with the recent burying of the 'Pinkney thesis' by its own creator, foreign historians (and so too historical geographers) of France are advised no longer to concentrate on broad syntheses based upon detachment but instead to engage in analysis based upon detailed archival research.¹⁴¹

There are, then, both sound reasons and excellent precedents for essaying a regional historical geography of fraternal associations in one French department during the nineteenth century. That of Loir-et-Cher has been selected in part because it lay astride the often recognised frontier between the 'two Frances' and thus can be said to have had contacts in both of them.¹⁴² Without claiming that Loir-et-Cher was wholly representative of either or of both of the 'two Frances', it will be possible to argue that Loir-et-Cher's experience of fraternal associations was of course singular while at the same time having some commonalities with other parts of France. The findings of this analytical regional study will be considered within their national context and some comparative remarks will be offered in a concluding synthesis. Loir-et-Cher was also chosen for study because it was the location of France's first agricultural syndicate, founded before legislation was passed which was to provide the framework for the development of such associations. But before turning to the regional case of Loir-et-Cher, it is necessary to consider the national theoretical discourse within which its fraternal associations were situated.