

## CHAPTER ONE

### *Introduction*

This book treats not the *grands notables* of André Tudesq, but the village notables of nineteenth century France — priests, mayors, and schoolmasters (especially of the Third Republic). It tells who they were, where they came from, what they thought, what influence they had in local society, how they competed with each other for village hegemony or enhanced status, and what problems they endured. It is about a world that is no more, already in transition toward modernity, or at least the kind of modernity we have so far experienced. On the positive side such notables are seen as local guides and as “easers” of transition; on the negative, as repressive “lids” on the would-be emancipated and sometimes creators themselves of unnecessary disorder in rural areas.

Obviously such a study lies under the huge shadow now cast upon all research in nineteenth century French social history by Eugen Weber's *Peasants into Frenchmen* (1976). Specialists in this field know the book well. Weber's book was an original attempt to show that much of rural France before 1870 was not really “France” at all, as historians have traditionally understood that concept; but rather a congeries of isolated villages unconnected to the national scene, bearing their own patois, folklore, and artisan industries; and concentrating on purely local concerns. Weber has shown how peasants became “Frenchmen” under the Third Republic through agencies like the schools and not least through a dramatic rise in the standard of living.

Such a short summary, intended for nonspecialists, does not begin to indicate how revolutionary *Peasants into Frenchmen* has been in our field. At a variety of points, my own book either sustains or qualifies Weber's conclusions, or else takes off from some of his copious data. As the woods used to crackle with birds and game, so our footnotes must now — there is no avoiding it — be full of Weber.

How do I go beyond him? I think I do so by attributing more of an ac-

tive role to rural notables than he does and by stressing the in-betweenness of their function in rural society. The ambivalence of their position can be gleaned from the thicket of Weber's own details, but he does not really highlight the theme. Yet throughout his book we see such notables fulfilling functions that often contradict each other. One function may aid the village or the preservation of its idiosyncracies, another may serve to enhance centralization and hasten the destruction of local norms. Here we find one priest who speaks the local dialect, uses it in church, protects it, is proud of it; and there another who knows only French, or who cares to use only that language. We find a mayor who can josh with pals in the "home" language—the language of the *pays*, of soul, if you will, but who can also speak French to outsiders and read the city newspaper and communicate with important authorities above him. Even with teachers of the pre-1914 Third Republic, it is important to note that these were not solely black-coated missionaries, intent on colonizing the countryside, but rather people who were generally drawn from the *pays* or from nearby and who cared deeply for their area, all the while purveying outside knowledge and values that helped erode its traditions. In brief, all three notables discussed were both agents of the retrograde and agents of change.

For those interested in what we might call the second Weber thesis, this notion of ambivalence or in-betweenness is an important qualifier. It permits us to see *no* village of the nineteenth century as a perfectly cutoff entity, perfectly virginal, untouched by national trends. Because of the existence of these in-betweeners or mediators, certain reciprocal transitions had to be made. The point could be proven without a great deal of evidence: the Church itself used liturgy and catechisms that were relatively standardized. As for another Weberian matter of some importance—the putative lack of national patriotism before 1880 at the local level—I find that mayors especially could rouse such patriotism to a far greater degree than Weber will grant and that peasants were well aware of the new nationalist or outside influences. Yet these mayors are *also* seen defending local rights and traditions—often concentrated upon rival notables and local topics of petty proportions.

Because of that pettiness this subject is one the French sometimes brush away with one characteristic statement—"Ah oui, tout ça c'est le Clochemerle de la France. . ." (Gabriel Chevallier's novel *Clochemerle* (1933) is a saucy send-up of French village life.) This is not always the most serious or dignified kind of history one can do. The weird pretensions of our black-coated guides were already being questioned in the nineteenth century, particularly the role of priests, but most certainly without all the irony moderns now bring to the subject. We, after all, live in an era when just about all the fictive veils have been lifted, when almost all imagery has

been looted of its magical effect upon the imagination, when the ideas themselves that made the clothes now no longer exist except as shells.

One side of us can see the mayor in his municipal sash giving a certain coherence to his village, a certain legitimacy—I make the point many times below. But then one sees the Clochemerian aspect—the senseless *taquinerie* between priests and mayors or schoolmasters and priests, the showiness and vain pretensions of people far removed from the Schneiders or Thiers, and one wonders whether he is not making an ocean out of a puddle. One of my students, in a seminar that concentrated on Weber's book, told me that his picture of rural mayors came from certain American movies about the liberation of France. Some all-American type, grimy from battle, would be met with his troops at the village by a little fellow loaded down with medals as though he were *not* just the mayor of a tiny town but had single-handedly won World War II. Here, then, is the droll side of this subject, the one that could provoke any Groucho-like propensities an historian might possess. My chapter on struggles between mayors and priests should especially impress upon the reader the essential pettiness of some activities in which these local figures engaged.

The serious side, though, is never far behind—the influence they had, the values they dispensed, their importance in any view of French rural history. We now know the great lineaments of the world that made them possible. Even if we stop short of Weber, failing to credit every bleakness he attributes to much of rural France before, say, 1870, we still must call this a largely dependent world, a world deprived of mass media, mobility, or the economic independence that would also have permitted independence from the local “guides,” the local notables who had their position because of the nature of rural society as a whole. There were, after all, many forms of dependence: the caprices of weather, the killing routines in the fields or at the artisan's bench, the iron certitudes of oral wisdom; the sumptuary molds; the superstitions. Isolation, geographical ignorance, and linguistic atomization also contributed to the problem. The rural Frenchman was bound by a fear of strangers and a fear of officials; by the narrowness of daily diet (actual and mental) and by the country smells that kept him in his station; by illnesses and illiteracy. Prohibitions and constraints came from many quarters: there was the “lid” of the family, with its imposed orthodoxies and silences; the inferior status of women; the necessity of immersing oneself in a trade; political immaturity; and the lack of varied opportunity—all to some degree bound together, some changing here, some there. Whether one agrees with Weber's argument in whole, or even in small part, one understands the *necessary* relationship of local notables to the character of nineteenth century rural France as a whole, before modern media and conveniences made them obsolete.

It is of course necessary to distinguish among the many classes of rural people. Joan Scott's glassmakers were frequently born in the country; did they simply shed their rural habits by working at Carmaux? Even in the country, attitudes had to be different among *fermiers*, *laboureurs*, *manoeuvriers*, sharecroppers, and day laborers, although Paul Bois argues for their "moral homogeneity." Winegrowers had an independent outlook all their own. Then there were rural areas which had significant links to the city, such as the Stéphanais, where peasants supplemented incomes by weaving for urban merchants. These links to the city became stronger as the century went on. Fairs in all regions threw country people into contact with city people. In some areas peasants migrated seasonally to become masons or miners, then returned to their villages.<sup>1</sup>

For all that, one *can* make generalizations on the state of rural France in the nineteenth century—or on those who submitted to the reign of the notables. Lack of leisure is crucial. For the average rural person, whether a skilled artisan or a common day laborer, there was little time to break loose, except on designated days, and even then it was difficult to "loafe and invite the soul." The concept of spare time weighed upon a minority only. And it is obviously leisure that permits release from bonds and the questioning of ossified categories. It is also a knowledge of history that does so, and this most peasants, at least, did not possess. The peasant view of history is usually that it always was and always will be as it is now. Things will stay the same. Even though one might look at designated authorities and grow anticlerical or detest this or that mayor, rarely did one go to the root of an institution.

Peasants, it has been variously pointed out, are generally resigned creatures. Weber, among many others, has amassed detail on this attitude for nineteenth century France, and comparative detail from other countries highlights the point. In travel memoirs of nineteenth century Russia, for example, the same resignation, only more pronounced, is detected in serfs—if a horse breaks his leg it is the fault of house spirits or the Witch of the West; if a man dies, if a fire destroys a village, it is God's will.

Leisure, then, generates the values that might have overcome the reign of the notables. So does the diffusion of ideas and ideals, especially with the growth of mass media. As Weber teaches so well, the ordinary rural person lacked even a language of revolt. The forms remain intact until one gazes in the mirror and asks, "Who am I?" and—more important—"What can I be?" Such a right was reserved for the Rastignacs of the better classes, blessed with abstract consciousness. Language alone could generate true critical values; and rural dialects, as we know from Claude Duneton and others, were too concrete to permit rivalry with the normative monopoly enjoyed by notables. (The same concreteness of modern

Hebrew, says Arthur Koestler, hampers it as a viable language of modernity.)

Within this nineteenth century set of givens, *animal laborans* just hadn't much time for talk itself. His wisdom was better kept proverbial—hand-me-down wisdom from that seemingly immemorial past of family and community. It was E. M. Forster, I believe, who noted that he could not tell what he thought until he said it. The repression of speech, a product of custom and of necessity, favored the notables.

Forms of sexual repression are also noted below in the chapter on "The Lid," which notables kept fastened over such eruptive spirits as people did possess. One cannot simply blame the nineteenth century and its custodians of morality for such an ethos. Even for the better classes there were certain restraints that need no mention here. But it is true that sexuality (or uninhibited amusements) and liberation do go together.

What also gave the notables importance was the fact that they incarnated specialism—not so much of knowledge, but of status. They had a social image, and this, in a world of concrete signs, of externals, was crucial. It meant that they possessed what we might call "ritual monopoly," and that they had no great competition for hegemony except among themselves. Not only did they supervise the norms, they personified the values, which were then reciprocally reinforced by people who admired the local, the real, the legitimate. It worked both ways.

Notables were members of the Napoleonic hierarchies and received added legitimacy from that fact. They were situated on the ladder of the Interior ministry-perfect-subprefect, or the ministry of Cults-archbishop-bishop-curé-lane, or in the hierarchy of the *académie*.<sup>2</sup> Because of their connections with these superiors they brought at least something of an urbane context to the villages, and Weber certainly underestimates peasants when he divorces them completely from such urbane contexts. Correctly, he represents prefects or bishops as superior in social origins. But I have seen perhaps a thousand letters written by peasants to these officials, either taxing the local notable with some defect or praising his virtue. Peasants were never quite as ignorant of the outside or upper world as Weber supposes. They knew whence notables derived some of their legitimacy; and like any child who sees a parent writhe beneath his or her own parents' authority, they could spot the flaws in the armor and the obvious sources of hesitation.

Some of this book has to do, then, with these hierarchies and relationships. Notables lived in two worlds, two parallel existences, and it would be impossible for me to discuss them only in the village milieu. For that matter, it is impossible to discuss the village itself only in the village context.

The social origins of notables are also a source of the ambivalence of

their positions. To be brief, a good many notables were of fresh issue, either from the peasantry itself, or from something pretty close. It would not be unfair to characterize some of them as half-peasants themselves. And this begs the question already broached. When in fact does a peasant stop being a peasant? When someone builds a road to his town? When he begins to read the newspaper for himself? I am not quarreling with Weber's basic viewpoint on this matter, or the delineation of a major sea change in attitudes; what I am suggesting, however, is the ancillary notion of residual peasantry, something one can hold onto even in the city. *A plus forte raison*, nineteenth century village notables often retained more than a little of the peasant background. Most were certainly not bourgeois. I discuss the point most fully with regard to Third Republic teachers, but it might be even more applicable to mayors. Mayors were one of the boys, yet they could usually read, and some travelled to the regional capitals. They were important *traits d'unions* but well anchored in one place too.

Now it may be that I am projecting some of my own ambivalence upon the subject; yet I also see this as an aid to comprehension. Too often we see the past in one way or another. For example, to say that the rural nineteenth century was illiberal and puritanical (by our standards) is partly true: but is it the whole story? It's half the story at best. Local notables I discuss were in many instances repressive, authoritarian, full of indecent puffery. But what I also try to get at is the pleasures of service, to others, the positive joy men have had in hierarchy, disciplines, and signs of legitimate power, or even semilegitimate power. *There is M. le Maire; there is M. le curé*, even with his authority questioned.

In our period of what we might call "The Whole Earth School" of French historiography, such ambivalent biases as historians have are not often presented. Perhaps it is right that we conceal our ideological cards, and what lies behind our motivations; but what I detect today is a curious nostalgia for Crane Brinton's little things, for the little people of history and the restrictions they endured. We curse those restrictions, but like moths attracted to a lamp, we seem overly fascinated with them. It may be that now, after all the restrictions seem to have been erased, we actually find ourselves paradoxically more repressed than public acknowledgment can decently permit. Or perhaps some who do feel liberated may suspect that the new freedom is not precisely what it was cracked up to be. By traditional criteria, we are almost all emancipated in the West today. Yet there may be an unstated nostalgia for hierarchy, and even — this is purely a guess — for illiteracy.

Of course the notables were themselves hampered by moral norms and I devote a good deal of space to this subject, for it illustrates larger *mentalités*. They had to respect the very limits they themselves gave to ordinary life. In Roger Thabault's world as shown in his excellent village

study<sup>3</sup>, all people endow the simplest matters with meaning and relationship to their life: Amusements are not vague, but part of an ordered world. The casualty of such a world is of course the sensitive, disorderly romantic like Mme Bovary; quite rightly, she rebels against such a world. For her, and the genius Flaubert, notables were self-important bores, and we cannot say that Flaubert was wrong from his point of view.

But a man like Thabault knew village life better than Flaubert did (for all his powers of observation); and where Flaubert snickers artistically at the *lumières* of country cognoscenti, Thabault sees the real worth in each gain that came to the countryside, and understands the religion of progress and the solemnities of the backwater embodied by notables. The grave installation of a telegraph office by M. le Maire can stand as one of the most emotional pages in his *Mon Village*.

As for me, I suppose I find most poignant the final period about 1880-1914, crucial for both Weber and Thabault, who see it as the period of real loosening in the countryside. That it was. The postman now walks to work and holds a newspaper and has opinions and wants his son to get a scholarship and go on to secondary school. The prospects seem infinite.

Elsewhere, I have signalled this as a period of shaky equilibrium, which even its own inhabitants could not understand as such.<sup>4</sup> I suggested it as a frail moment in French history. To me it is rather like a butterfly slowly sucking himself down out of the cocoon, ennobling himself in the tension wrought between the old constriction and the infinite horizons he finds outside. This I think Weber, for all his wisdom, fails to highlight. It is the beginning of the end of the notables, but they are still there. There is both hierarchy and progress, things look fine ahead, but M. le Maire and M. le Curé, not to mention the *instituteur*, are still here behind.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps the evening work bees (*veillées*) are dying out, but there is a local brass band, and local pride coexists with the larger view of an ever-developing France, and the easier life. Stations in life, uniforms, beards, black coats, sashes, cassocks: these things still do have their importance. The notables are part of an older world, and yet in some cases part of the new.

Call this then a historian's own confession of preliminary ambivalence. Perhaps it will help explain why I see the era of local notables, and their very positions, in such an ambiguous light. But these notables of course had their own differences, and the following pages show that. And they can be set within chronological limits: most of the chapters do end with the *fin-de-siècle* perspective.

Finally, after all these philosophical justifications, perhaps more important here are the portraits themselves, showing just who these local figures were. Their *mentalités*, their financial positions, their origins, their daily difficulties are significant in themselves, for they shed light on all rural history in the period.