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HISTORIOGRAPHICAL REVIEWS

RECENT WORK ON FRENCH RURAL HISTORY

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ABSTRACT. *The purpose of this review is to take stock as the historiography of rural France pauses for breath following the headlong expansion of the post-Second World War decades. It examines some of the themes that continue to exert an attraction on scholars, and also some of the most recent attempts to challenge and reformulate the research agendas inherited from the Annales historians. The works discussed below raise questions concerning growth and stagnation in the rural economy, the basic characteristics of the rural community, and the role of quantification in rural history.*

The heyday of French rural history – that is to say the production of knowledge about the countryside and its inhabitants – can be located in the post-Second World War decades (1950–80). With the benefit of hindsight the epoch known as the *Trente Glorieuses* during which the vital and visible evidence of a distinctive 'rural world' dwindled almost to nothing, also occasioned the most sustained investigation – and celebration – of that world ever to have been mounted by historians. The production of massively documented regional history theses in a continuation of the tradition bequeathed by the geographer Paul Vidal de la Blache drove the process forwards. In fact, it would scarcely be an exaggeration to suggest that rural, even agrarian, agendas provided the framework for most of the historical, geographical, anthropological, and ethnographic output during these decades. Fittingly, this labour culminated in a concerted effort to lay out the findings of research in synthetic form. In 1970 the first instalment of a four-volume *Histoire économique et sociale de la France*[1] appeared, and hard on its heels followed an *Histoire de la France rurale*,[2] also in four volumes. Then, as the decade was ending, Fernand Braudel – the last surviving link to the pioneer generation of French rural historian-geographers – began work on his own highly personal synthesis. Halted by the author's death in 1985, only two volumes of the projected four-part study of *L'identité de la France*[3] were ever to see the light of day.

I

After 1980 there followed a period of quiescence, then. Yet even prior to Braudel's death, the determinism of space and structure that had framed research into France's rural past was losing its powers of attraction. Loss of confidence in the old certainties led to talk of a

[1] C. E. Labrousse and F. Braudel, eds., *Histoire économique et sociale de la France* (4 vols., Paris, 1970–6).
[2] G. Duby and A. Wallon, eds., *Histoire de la France rurale* (4 vols., Paris, 1975–6).
[3] F. Braudel, *L'identité de la France*, I: *Espace et histoire*; II: *Les hommes et les choses* (Paris, 1986); trans. as *The identity of France*, I: *History and environment*; II: *People and production* (London, 1988–90).

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crisis of rural (meaning agrarian) history. But if French rural history was in 'crisis' by the early 1990s, it is hard to find any absolute measure of the phenomenon; and hard, also, to concur with the view that a re-assessment of research priorities and interests was necessarily a bad thing. If the flow of ground-breaking monographs devoted to the medieval and early modern periods (fourteenth to eighteenth centuries) has diminished somewhat since 1980, or thereabouts, the archaeological sciences continue to inform and renew our understanding of classical and early medieval rural societies. As for the rural history of nineteenth- and twentieth-century France, it has never been dependent on the 'agrarian' research agenda fleshed out by the Annales historians in the 1930s and 1940s. Historians of the nineteenth-century countryside and its inhabitants tend to seek out links (to urbanization, to industrialization, to state formation) as a matter of routine.

Nevertheless, it is a fact that rural historians, like any other group of newly arrived specialists, initially set about demarcating their territory in order to differentiate it from that of other students of the past to a degree that now appears excessive. Rural history seemed to demand the existence of a definable 'rural world' and its building block a definable 'rural community', just as peasant studies demanded the existence of a category of country dwellers who could be defined as 'peasants'. The questioning of these 'givens', which has greatly increased over the last decade, helps to explain at least the perception of 'crisis' among those scholars whose primary object of study is the French countryside. As early as 1983 the editors of the journal *Etudes Rurales*[4] sought to respond to such interrogatory pressures by widening their focus to include topics and themes of research extending beyond the specifically 'rural'. More recently – in 1993 – researchers with a common interest in rural societies banded together in order to establish a professional body whose remit was to 're-launch the history of the countryside', but 'within a wider comparative context'.[5] The signs are unmistakable. Rural history is not dead and buried along with its founders: Gaston Roupnel, Marc Bloch, Lucien Febvre, Georges Lefebvre, and Fernand Braudel. Yet if it is to progress beyond the heroic epoch of the *Trente Glorieuses*, there will be a need for enhanced inter-disciplinary co-operation and effort, and root-and-branch interrogation of the themes prioritized by the master practitioners.

II

These preliminary remarks are necessary, if only as navigational aids to readers seeking to get to grips with the most recent work on the French countryside. For rural historians (and no doubt specialists in cognate disciplines) are currently poised awkwardly between old and new research agendas. Much of their output is backward looking, in the sense that it addresses issues and debates that Marc Bloch would have recognized, and in a spirit that he would have endorsed. After all, Bloch famously set out to uncover the basic or 'original' characteristics of pre-industrial agrarian civilization (typological analysis of settlement patterns, field systems, land holding, lordship, the customary underpinnings of rural life and labour, etc.).[6] This is not necessarily a criticism: the majority of rural historians still acknowledge a debt to Marc Bloch, albeit one fused with the preoccupations of the historical demographers whose research findings brought considerable reinforcement to the traditional picture of rural society in the 1960s. But Bloch's research agenda offers little to

[4] See editorial foreword to *Etudes Rurales*, 92 (1983), pp. 105–7.
[5] See editorial foreword to *Histoire et Sociétés Rurales*, 1 (1994), p. 8.
[6] M. Bloch, *Les caractères originaux de l'Histoire rurale française* (Paris, 1931).

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students of modern (post-1789) peasantries, and a number of voices are now raised to suggest that it inhibits our capacity to understand the functioning of medieval and early modern rural societies as well. Critics armed with the 'rational choice' nostrums of economics and political science object to the semi-static portrayal of the rural community that the Annales historians, following Bloch, made their own. They query, too, the notion that the institution functioned according to a subsistence ethic in which the needs of the individual were always subordinated to the general good; like Alan Macfarlane[7] writing about late medieval English village life, they deplore the tendency to emphasize insularity at the expense of porosity and mobility, whether mental or physical. Finally, they are suspicious of arguments predicated on the existence of a template agrarian 'civilization' that scholars such as Bloch and Roupnel appear to have imbibed from the antecedent generation of Durkheim-inspired social investigators and Vidalian geographers.

When Jean-Marc Moriceau and Ghislain Brunel founded the Association d'Histoire des Sociétés Rurales in 1993 they could not have known that the historiography of rural France was in the process of getting a second wind rather than gasping for breath. To be sure, the brightest doctoral students were no longer choosing rural history as a matter of course, but the situation offered less cause for concern when viewed from outside France. A younger generation of North American economic historians was starting to examine the central postulates of agrarian history as shaped by Bloch, while the *microstoria* practised by a number of Italian scholars seemed to promise a means of renewing rural history from within. In any case the channelling of research is not a random process, and the new Association moved swiftly to establish a house journal – *Histoire et Sociétés Rurales*.[8] This lavish and substantial publication has been appearing twice a year since 1994, and it is fast replacing the *Annales Histoire, Sciences Sociales* (founded by Bloch and Febvre in 1929) as the obligatory forum for all who are interested in the countryside. However, it was the decision to prescribe the comparative study of rural society in France and Britain during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as a component of the French state's *Agrégation* and *CAPES* programmes during the years 1998–2000 that has done more than any other single intervention to re-focus interest in rural history.

As with all public examinations, the main demand from candidates has been for works of synthesis as an aid to preparation. It remains to be seen whether the curricular imperative will trigger a fresh round of scholarly research. The last great regional *thèse* was Jean-Michel Boehler's [9] colossal study of rural Alsace published in 1994, and no more are in the offing for the time being. Nevertheless, the sudden and urgent need for course manuals exposed to public view a hidden army of talented researchers in the field of rural history. Within a very short space of time about half a dozen works of synthesis were commissioned and published. They vary in quality, inevitably, with the coverage devoted to English, Scottish, and Irish themes usually proving the most precarious dimension. The single-authored volumes by Jean-Pierre Poussou[10] and by Jean-Michel Chevet[11] can be

[7] A. Macfarlane, *Reconstructing historical communities* (Cambridge, 1977).

[8] *Histoire et Sociétés Rurales*, semesterly, 1 (1994) and continuing, ed. J.-M. Moriceau, Maison de la Recherche en Sciences Humaines, Université de Caen, 14032-Caen, France.

[9] J.-M. Boehler, *Une société rurale en milieu rhénan: la paysannerie de la plaine d'Alsace, 1648–1789* (3 vols., Strasbourg, 1994).

[10] J.-P. Poussou, *La terre et les paysans en France et en Grande-Bretagne au XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles* (n. p., 1999).

[11] J.-M. Chevet, *La terre et les paysans en France et en Grande-Bretagne: du début du XVIIe siècle à la fin du XVIIIe siècle* (2 vols., Paris, 1998–9).

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recommended, though. Both authors draw upon a considerable understanding of British as well as French agrarian history during the early modern period. Chevet's offering is tightly constructed around the productivity debate (see below) and is invaluable chiefly for its insistence on the need for cross-regional rather than cross-national comparisons, whereas Poussou's much larger book ranges further and wider. Readers will find therein the obligatory typology of landscapes and field systems, but they will also find an extended analysis of the institutional and mental structure shaping rural life on either side of the Channel. The proximity of the *Agrégation* and *CAPES* examinations also stimulated activity among those with only an oblique interest in Bloch-style agrarian history. In 1999 the Société des Etudes Robespierristes brought out a slim volume rather deceptively entitled *Les caractères originaux de l'histoire rurale de la révolution française*. Claimed by its editors to represent the 'missing chapter' of Bloch's great work, it is, in fact, a comradely compilation of eleven articles previously published in the *Annales Historiques de la Révolution Française* rather than new work.[12] Nevertheless, it is useful to have reproduced in an accessible format Georges Lefebvre's seminal article[13] vindicating the concept of an 'autonomous' peasant revolution. First published in 1933, just a couple of years after Bloch's own synthesis, it has enjoyed equivalent esteem among students of modern and contemporary rural societies.

Without this pedagogic stimulus, it is true that the shelves of booksellers would have looked rather bare. Dismayed at the near total ignorance of the rural way of life that he detected among his students, Gabriel Audisio[14] published a repair manual in 1993. To judge from the rapid appearance of a second edition, it was sorely needed. But for all its readability, Audisio's book is a chronicle of recall focused on artefacts, practices, and techniques rather than structures. Although encompassing four centuries, little attempt is made to capture change over time and place, and none at all to link the peasant way of life to other narratives. In a bifurcated market, readability and erudition do not combine well apparently. Anne Zink's minute analysis of the institutional structuring of rural communities in south-western France is a case in point.[15] It scores high in terms of scholarship, yet is frustratingly difficult to read in a meaningful way. But if the reader persists the rewards are high, for Zink asks big questions of the kind that preoccupied Bloch and Braudel. More important, she comes close to unravelling the elusive threads of rural diversity. Scholars inclined to regard the notion of agrarian civilizations as an unsustainable product of the romantic imagination should take note. Zink's book emerged unobtrusively from a provincial university press in 1997, whereas Jean-Marc Moriceau and Gilles Postel-Vinay's jointly authored micro-study of a dynasty of tenant farmers and their farms which appeared in 1992 was widely anticipated within the scholarly community.[16] Although very different in scale from Zink's roaming monograph, it too has a handle on some very large questions. In a rather subdued decade, these books easily pass muster as the most luminous examples of scholarship in agrarian history.

[12] F. Gauthier and C. Wolikow, eds., *Les caractères originaux de l'histoire rurale de la révolution française* (Paris, 1999).

[13] See G. Lefebvre, 'La révolution française et les paysans', in Gauthier and Wolikow, eds., *Les caractères originaux*, pp. 1–32.

[14] G. Audisio, *Les français d'hier*, II: *Des paysans, XVe–XIXe siècle* (Paris, 1993; 2nd edn, 1998).

[15] A. Zink, *Clochers et troupeaux: les communautés rurales des landes et du sud-ouest avant la révolution* (Bordeaux, 1997).

[16] J.-M. Moriceau and G. Postel-Vinay, *Ferme, entreprise, famille: grande exploitation et changement agricoles: les Chartier, XVIIe–XIXe siècles* (Paris, 1992).

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III

If we analyse the content and preoccupations of the books referred to above, the causes of the discomfiture currently being experienced by rural historians start to become apparent, however. Much of the literature continues to gravitate around well-worn issues and debates: population and subsistence, crops and cropping patterns, grain yields and agricultural productivity, tenure and land holding, seigneurialism and surplus extraction. It is possible to detect, moreover, a palpable sense of dissatisfaction that for all the totalizing ambition of Annales-inspired historiography and the over-ambitious quantification that accompanied it (Toutain's production curves;[17] Le Roy Ladurie and Goy's tithe series[18]), we still do not have clear answers to some pretty basic questions. How should we characterize the rural community? Who owned the land and in what proportions at the end of the seventeenth century, and again at the end of the *ancien régime*? How was it exploited? Studies of tenant farming are quite numerous, but research into sharecropping has scarcely reached the stage where even the simplest generalizations can be advanced. What roles did markets (for land, for produce, for labour, for credit) play in the evolution of rural society? Was there a productivity gain in the course of the eighteenth century? Did population growth drive agricultural growth or vice versa?

The subject that continues to spill the most ink is the neo-Malthusian interpretation of the early modern French countryside commonly referred to as the 'histoire immobile' thesis in evocation of the title of the inaugural lecture delivered to the Collège de France in 1973 by Professor Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie. This can only be because the import of the phrase in question has been expanded beyond all reason to encapsulate a damning verdict on the capacity of country dwellers to take charge of their own reproduction and development. Yet as Chevet[19] points out, Le Roy Ladurie[20] never intended his arresting image to be construed in this sense. In its original formulation 'histoire immobile' expressed a judgement on the relationship between food supply and population change, not a sweeping generalization about the social structure of rural France. And in any case, the eighteenth century was specifically excluded from Le Roy Ladurie's line of sight. Nevertheless, the current trend within the literature is to emphasize movement at the expense of stasis, and to reprove those (usually unnamed)[21] historians and ethnographers who are said to cling to a stagnationist vision of France's rural past. The truth of the matter probably lies somewhere in between. Nobody has yet demonstrated that the country possessed an integrated internal economy, whether in the eighteenth or earlier centuries, and sooner or later all investigators stumble against the fact of rural diversity. A regional case for movement and

[17] See J.-C. Toutain, 'Le produit de l'agriculture française de 1700 à 1958: II, la croissance', in *Cahiers de l'Institut de science économique appliquée*, supplement to 115 (1961), pp. 1–287.

[18] See J. Goy and E. Le Roy Ladurie, *Les fluctuations du produit de la dîme: conjoncture décimale et domaniale de la fin du moyen âge au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris and The Hague, 1972). For an English-language introduction to this subject, Goy and Le Roy Ladurie, *Tithe and agrarian history from the fourteenth to the nineteenth century: an essay in comparative history* (Cambridge, 1982).

[19] Chevet, *La terre et les paysans*, II, p. 126.

[20] See E. Le Roy Ladurie, 'l'histoire immobile', in E. Le Roy Ladurie, *Le territoire de l'historien* (2 vols., Paris, 1973–8); trans. as 'history that stands still', in E. Le Roy Ladurie, *The mind and method of the historian* (Brighton, 1981), pp. 1–27.

[21] See, for instance, the remarks of G. Postel-Vinay, *La terre et l'argent: l'agriculture et le crédit en France du XVIIIe au début du XXe siècle* (Paris, 1998), pp. 14–15, and J.-L. Mayaud, *La petite exploitation rurale triomphante: France, XIXe siècle* (Paris, 1999), p. 70.

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market sensitivity can be made, but so, too, can a case for stagnation and, at intervals, even agricultural regression.

What then of growth? Here the debate among specialists has scarcely shifted in more than thirty years, and turns around the vexed question of the eighteenth-century agricultural 'revolution'. Despite attempts to exclude it from the discussion, the shadow of the English experience hangs heavily in this area (witness the theme chosen for the *Agrégation/CAPES* in Modern History). So, too, the 'histoire immobile' thesis: can it really be argued that average grain yields remained broadly stable for more than five centuries?[22] But if the key question has not changed much, the quality of the answers brought to bear on it has certainly improved over the years. There is now wide agreement among researchers that the production of foodstuffs by volume increased markedly over the course of the eighteenth century – by between 20 and 40 per cent. However, the significance of this finding is somewhat diminished by the evidence of historical demographers who calculate that the population of France increased by roughly the same margin in the equivalent time frame.

What of productivity? Moriceau and Postel-Vinay's close-focus study of the Chartier land holding at Le Plessis-Gassot[23] failed to disclose unambiguous evidence of significantly improving bread grain yields – probably because yields were already very high in the Île-de-France. Nevertheless, a signal increase in agricultural production is surely to be correlated to a productivity gain unless it can be demonstrated that cropping surfaces expanded dramatically in the course of the century. Chevet,[24] whose research is rooted in the Paris grain belt, is in no doubt that a significant productivity gain *was* achieved (thanks mainly to the planting of fodder crops, it seems). He therefore comes closest to espousing the notion of an eighteenth-century agricultural 'revolution'. Others are less sanguine and prefer to describe the growth achieved as an accumulation of small steps. Jean-Pierre Poussou,[25] indeed, is not alone in cautioning that well-attested signs of movement in the 'pays de grande culture' still leave between a half and two-thirds of the kingdom outside the equation.

IV

Confidence in the capacity of quantitative approaches to provide clear-cut answers to the conundrums of French rural history has ebbed in recent years. The founding issue of the journal *Histoire et Sociétés Rurales* carried a sceptical article to this effect by Gérard Béaur[26] in 1994, although the new Association insisted that it would not be hostile to the use of quantitative methods in appropriate contexts. Thus far, only the productivity debate has shown itself to be susceptible of this kind of treatment, however. Following in the wake of Toutain's attempt in the 1950s to replicate the trajectory of agricultural production and the tithe surveys organized by Goy and Le Roy Ladurie in the late 1960s, Phil Hoffman[27] has brought a more sensitive measure – known as Total Factor Productivity – to bear on the

[22] See M. Morineau, 'Y a-t-il eu une révolution agricole en France au XVIIIe siècle', *Revue Historique*, 239 (1968), pp. 299–326; ibid., *Les faux-semblants d'un démarrage économique: agriculture et démographie en France au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1971).

[23] Moriceau and Postel-Vinay, *Ferme, entreprise, famille*, pp. 210–14.

[24] Chevet, *La terre et les paysans*, II, pp. 38, 83–103.

[25] Poussou, *La terre et les paysans*, p. 283.

[26] See G. Béaur, 'l'histoire de l'économie rurale à l'époque moderne ou les désarrois du quantitativisme', *Histoire et Sociétés Rurales*, 1 (1994), pp. 67–97.

[27] P. T. Hoffman, *Growth in a traditional society: the French countryside, 1450–1815* (Princeton, NJ, 1996).

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issue. Unlike some of his econometrically minded predecessors, Hoffman uses the trained eye of the historian to question the sources and shows himself to be perfectly conversant with their potential shortcomings. He mounts a strong argument to demonstrate that early modern rural society was not incapable of self-generated growth. But it is an incomplete and ultimately inconclusive argument for the reason that the regions likely to contain the more stagnant rural economies remain resolutely beyond the reach of TFP or any other mode of quantitative analysis. Gilles Postel-Vinay's refreshing new book on rural credit networks prompts a rather similar remark.[28] Quantification – if it is to deliver fresh insights – requires comparable sources that are susceptible to statistical treatment. Notarized credit data may fulfil these criteria, but how many country dwellers chose to go before a public notary in order to formalize a transaction whose terms may not have been monetary in the first place? It is true, of course, that even notarized loans and rental contracts pose tricky problems of interpretation. The tax officials of both pre-Revolutionary and post-Napoleonic France were reluctant to take them at face value, and historians would be well advised to show similar caution.

V

In the new scenario of self-sustaining, if patchy and intermittent, growth, the depiction of the rural community has necessarily been subject to revision. Whereas Bloch and his contemporaries regarded the collectivist underpinnings of the rural community as a characteristic so 'basic' as scarcely to warrant formal analysis, the 'rational choice' approach sees only individual country dwellers gathered together in villages where they engaged in an unending negotiation – not to say competition – for resources. The reflex of 'community', where documented, can usually be exposed as camouflage for the interests of the more powerful members of this society. It follows, therefore, that the late eighteenth-century clash between individualism and the defenders of the edifice of collective rights, which Bloch and others have explored in great detail, evinces 'more drama than substance'.[29] The phrase belongs to George Grantham who has penned the most succinct and critical reappraisal of Bloch's *œuvre* to have been published to date. Yet his questioning of the enforceable character of collective use 'rights' (the driving of stock on to private as well as communal pasture and stubble) seems oddly misplaced. It rests on an incomplete knowledge of regional agrarian systems, and on a less than thorough understanding of what passed for law in old-regime France. No doubt wealthy individuals did derive disproportionate benefit from the Thompsonian edifice of 'customs in common,'[30] but peasant communities in Lorraine, for instance, were not mistaken in their belief that they possessed an enforceable right of *vaine pâture* on the land of others. Jean-Michel Boehler confirms as much for Alsace, as well; he finds that 'use rights counted for as much as property titles'.[31] Sadly there exists no synthetic study of the rural community in its regulatory dimension, but at least we do now have a full-scale and up-to-date account of how the existence of common land impacted upon the lives of country dwellers.

[28] Postel-Vinay, *La terre et l'argent: l'agriculture et le crédit en France*.

[29] G. Grantham, 'The basic characteristics of Marc Bloch's "caractères originaux": an essay on French rural history', *H-Rural Review Essay*, 29 May 1996, p. 7. Grantham actually writes 'more drama than subsistence', which I take to be a typological error.

[30] See E. P. Thompson, *Customs in Common* (London, 1991), pp. 1, 4, 6, 97 and passim.

[31] Cited in P.-Y. Beaurepaire and C. Giry-Deloison, *La terre et les paysans: France–Grande Bretagne, XVIIe–XVIIIe siècles* (Paris, 1999). See also Boehler, *Une société rurale en milieu rhénan*, I, pp. 839–42.

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Even-handed and empirical in tone, Nadine Vivier[32] quickly dispels some of the more romantic notions that have been attached to collective possession, yet she leaves the reader in no doubt as to the central importance of such assets whose extent actually increased in the latter decades of the nineteenth century, and continues to increase to this day.

It used to be argued that the partition of common land promoted by the Revolutionary legislatures of the early 1790s, together with the confiscation and sale of church and *émigré* estates, was responsible for that tenacious image of France as a country of owner-occupied small holdings and peasant poly-culture. We now know better. Only a tiny proportion of the commons were divided into freehold plots, while Bernard Bodinier and Eric Teyssier[33] have established that the marketing of *biens nationaux* affected no more than 10 per cent of the soil surface on the average. Nevertheless, a case can certainly be made to support the view that the Revolution loosened up rural society and encouraged market participation. Indeed, Liana Vardi[34] has shown that proto-industrialization was achieving exactly this result in selected districts well before the institutional collapse of the ancien régime.[35] Jean-Luc Mayaud's latest offering, *La petite exploitation rurale triomphante: France, XIXe siècle*, drives home this lesson – to excess.[36] On completing a reading of the book one is left pondering why 'petite propriété' and the part-time peasants who sought to derive a living from it were ever included in the 'histoire immobile' equation in the first place. This, of course, is the author's intention: to supply a re-reading of the nineteenth-century history of rural France. On the evidence adduced, the dynamism of small holdings seems well attested, but as with so many exercises in all-encompassing revisionism, the counter-examples (Brittany, the Limousin, the south-west) are rarely mentioned. Nevertheless, Mayaud is surely right to emphasize that rural society was not monolithically agricultural, whether in the nineteenth or earlier centuries. To use a phrase made popular by social historians, the economy of the peasant with insufficient land was an 'economy of makeshifts', although whether this turned him into a budding rural entrepreneur or a potential victim of structural change (the collapse of viticulture following the phylloxera insect attack could be instanced) is another matter. Mayaud's reminder of the long-standing relationship between industrialization, rurality, and agriculture – in France – is well taken, though. If Marc Bloch's overview of the physical and social landscapes of rural France is ever up-dated, the phenomenon of the 'worker-peasant' deserves to be listed among the 'original characteristics' of the countryside.

VI

In an essay penned in honour of Ernest Labrousse, Pierre Goubert once spoke of 'twenty contrasting peasantries'[37] in eighteenth-century France. He went on to deplore the mode

[32] N. Vivier, *Propriété collective et identité communale: les biens communaux en France, 1750–1914* (Paris, 1998).

[33] B. Bodinier and E. Teyssier, '*L'événement le plus important de la révolution': la vente des biens nationaux (1789–1867) en France et dans les territoires annexés* (Paris, 2000).

[34] L. Vardi, *The land and the loom: peasants and profit in northern France, 1680–1800* (Durham and London, 1993).

[35] On institutional blockages, see J.-L. Rosenthal, *The fruits of revolution: property rights, litigation, and French agriculture, 1700–1860* (Cambridge, 1992).

[36] Mayaud, *La petite exploitation rurale triomphante.*

[37] P. Goubert, 'Sociétés rurales françaises au XVIIIe siècle: vingt paysanneries contrastées, quelques problèmes', in *Conjoncture économique, structures sociales: hommage à Ernest Labrousse* (Paris and The Hague, 1974), pp. 375–87.

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of argument that snatches at facts drawn from the length and breadth of the kingdom: examples can be found to prove anything, he pointed out. Herein lies our problem. France was (and still is) an agriculturally diverse country. In the medieval and early modern periods it dwarfed England (the usual comparator) in terms of size, in terms of population and, more important, in terms of its land-locked interior. Generalizing the accumulated knowledge of this rural past becomes an arduous task, therefore. Synthesizers and quantifiers will always prove vulnerable on one count or another, yet it ill behoves fellow practitioners to protest too loudly. The problem of micro-variability is very nearly insoluble, as Lucien Febvre and Fernand Braudel long ago acknowledged.[38] Perhaps the methodology of micro-history will come to the rescue, but this technique has yet to be applied in any sustained fashion to the history of rural France. Whether it can help us to recover the big picture remains to be seen.

[38] See L. Febvre, 'Que la France se nomme diversité: à propos de quelques études jurassiennes', *Annales: Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations*, 3 (1946), pp. 271–4; Braudel, *L'identité de la France*, I, p. 29 and n. 12.

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