Winners or losers? Enthusiastic supporters, aloof sceptics, or counter-revolutionaries? Peter Jones looks at the role of France's peasantry before and after 1789.

THE PEASANTS' REVOLT?

No contemporary observer of ancien régime France expressed the ills of that society with more clarity than the English writer Arthur Young. The account of his forays across the Channel, published in 1794, contains unforgettable descriptions of the impending crisis. An unsuccessful farmer in his own right, Young excelled instead as a publicist and commentator on matters agricultural. The diary record of his journeys throughout the kingdom in 1787, 1788 and 1789 is peppered with acid judgements on the state of French husbandry and forthright asides on the condition of the peasantry. If the Travels were scarcely the product of 'a mind free from prejudice', as the preface suggests, they nonetheless reveal a mind keenly aware of the magnitude of the events being transacted and of the role that country dwellers were to play in the unfolding drama. Young's chance encounter with a poor woman while travelling along the road to Metz just two days before the taking of the Bastille is often cited as emblematic of the tensions in the countryside:

Walking up a long hill, to ease my mare, I was joined by a poor woman, who complained of the times, and that it was a sad country; demanding her reasons, she said her husband had but a morsel of land, one cow, and a poor little horse, yet they had a francler (42 lb) of wheat and three chickens, to pay as a quit-rent to one Seigneur, and four franclers of oats, one chicken and 1s. to pay to another, besides very heavy taille and other taxes.

And she continued:

It was said, at present, that something was to be done by some great folks for such poor ones, but she did not know who nor how, but God send us better, car les taillées et les droits nous écrasent.

To understand the plight of that poor woman and millions of similar households, we need to go back to the middle decades of the eighteenth century. From the 1750's the population of France began to grow at an accelerating rate; by 1789 it had reached some 28 millions representing an increase of 33 per cent across the century. While such a growth rate was scarcely dramatic by European standards, it precipitated phenomena in the countryside which had not been witnessed for a generation and more: land hunger, heightened conflict over the commons and common rights and the consequent polarisation of the rural community. Population growth swelled the ranks of the landless proletariat as farm holdings were subdivided to the point of oblivion. The resultant plots then fell prey to local landlords who 'engrossed' them: the poor peasant whose economic independence had never been assured, thus found himself reduced to the status of agricultural labourer. No one reliant on day wages could hope to prosper in these conditions, for the economic climate favoured those with access to land on which to grow crops. Between 1726-41 and 1771-89 the cost of living rose by 45 per cent, whereas nominal wages only increased by 22 per cent during the same period. In effect, therefore, the purchasing power of wage earners declined by a quarter.

Even peasants who managed to keep control of the land found much to complain about. Sharecroppers grumbled that landlords were increasing their 'take' while steadfastly refusing security of tenure; tenant farmers — who usually did enjoy security of tenure — bemoaned the passing of the fat years of the 1760's when agricultural prices had risen faster than rents; and all peasant producers of whatever station displayed a growing hostility to the apparatus of seigneurialism. The vehemence of Arthur Young's rustic travelling companion on this issue is entirely typical, yet it presents historians with something of a puzzle for it is by no means certain that the burden of feudal dues was growing in the years before the Revolution. What is certain is that sensitivity to seigneurial harvest levies (champart, terrage, etc.), not to mention the tithe and state taxes, increased dramatically during
the final, difficult years of the ancien régime. For the well-to-do peasant farmer of the northern plains, dues were little more than an irritant which slightly diminished the amount of agricultural surplus which he would take to market, but for the ‘poor woman’ who, with her husband, was raising seven children on a morsel of land they could make the difference between independence and the workhouse.

Marginal households reliant upon an ‘economy of makeshifts’ formed by far the most numerous segment of the peasantry on the eve of the Revolution. The least disaster, be it domestic or climatic, could upset their position in the countryside. These were the households most vulnerable to a bad harvest and, together with the rural proletariat, the households most severely affected by the drive for agricultural modernisation. From the middle decades of the century an obsession with ‘physiocracy’ gripped governing circles. The physiocrat writers preached the need to unfetter the resources of the land and their doctrines quickly won converts among royal bureaucrats and large landowners. The Crown saw in the new ideas a means of increasing the taxable resources of the nation, whereas an elite of wealthy proprietors hoped to make a killing from the export of grain produced on their estates. Most peasants took little in the way of surplus to market, however, and were quite unable to participate in the process of modernisation as envisaged by the physiocrats. Instead, they clung to the old methods of agricultural production which laid heavy emphasis on open-field tillage, fixed crop rotations, communal pasturing of stock and an array of ‘collective rights’ such as gleaning, woodcutting and stubble grazing. Nevertheless, a succession of royal edicts issued between 1769 and 1781 pressed forward the policy of agricultural restructuring, with the result that many villagers, in the east of France particularly, suffered a real diminution in their customary rights over field and fallow.

The depth of rural disenchantment can be measured in the cahiers des doléances. These documents, compiled in the early months of 1789, provide a veritable Domesday survey of the ancien régime recorded in the hour of its eclipse. Therein we find a fascinating account of the hopes and anxieties of the peasantry, but one which still awaits a scholar to do it justice. Between thirty and forty thousand parishes assembled to note down their ‘grievances’ and it is perhaps fortunate that not all of their deliberations have survived. Even so, the task of producing an overall picture from such an unwieldy mass of source material has defeated the most technically minded members of the historical profession. Working impressionistically, however, we can detect three themes: widespread hostility to seigneurialism, mounting exasperation at the inroads of physiocrat-inspired ‘agrarian individualism’, and despondent comment on the final, economic crisis of the ancien régime.

The downward spiral of peasant incomes can be traced back to the drought of the spring of 1785 which burnt out the pastures and forced many households to slaughter their stock. This mortgaged the future, for animal manure was used to prepare the soil for each year’s sowing. Serious outbreaks of cattle pest further jeopardised cereal yields. Then, in 1788, the weather scored a direct hit on an already much weakened agricultural economy. A wet summer irreparably spoiled standing crops and it was followed by a brutally cold and icy winter which destroyed the autumn sowings, as well as damaging vine, olive and chestnut plantations. The year 1789 began with France in the grip of iron frosts and with town and country dwellers experiencing misery unequalled in popular memory.

It is important to emphasise that 1789 would have been a year of civil
commotion and distress irrespective of the events being played out in Paris and Versailles. As Georges Lefebvre pointed out in his study of The Great Fear (London, 1973), the peasantry did not wait to hear the news of the taking of the Bastille before rising in revolt. The first serious disturbances occurred in the Franche-Comté towards the end of 1788, prompting the local news-sheet to report that ‘agitation has spread from the towns to the countryside’. By February 1789 uprisings were affecting parts of the Dauphiné and by March the peasantry of Provence were on a mobile footing. Thereafter, unrest and collective insubordination snowballed with alarming rapidity to affect the whole of the kingdom in some degree. Symptomatic of this atmosphere of alarm were the rippling currents of fear which traversed the countryside during the summer, but the fear experienced by seigneurs and landowners was no less acute. On July 21st, the Marquis de Ferrières despatched an urgent letter to his wife with instructions to prepare the castle ditches so that they could be flooded if necessary. A week later he wrote to countermand these orders, obviously worried that they might provide a pretext for an assault on his property.

For all the boiling tensions, serious outbreaks of agrarian violence only developed in a handful of regions, however. In the east (Franche-Comté; Alsace), in the south east (Dauphiné; Provence), in the Maconnais, in the Hainaut-Cambresis, in Lower Normandy and in parts of the south west large numbers of châteaux were besieged or invaded, and occasionally razed by fire. Nearly always the principal object of these raids was to destroy the feudal system. Seigneurs, or their overseers, were forced to hand over feudal rent rolls; they were intimidated into repaying fines levied upon villagers by manorial courts, and the tangible symbols of seigneurial authority (armorial bearings, weather-cocks, gibbets, private church pews etc), were everywhere dislodged and smashed up by gleeful gangs of marauding peasants.

But the insurgents expressed their hostility to the whole trend of government economic policy since the 1760s as well. Overnight, the physiocrat-inspired edicts became a dead letter in the countryside. Peasants invaded the commons, broke down enclosures and resumed their customary rights in field and forest. Improving landlords, like seigneurs, were singled out for attack. Often, of course, they were one and the same: as the jacquerie in the Maconnais gathered momentum, the monks of Cluny tried to pre-empt a wholesale assault on their properties by conceding grazing rights in their meadows and scavenging in their forests.

The deputies of the National Assembly could do little to arrest this process: the agrarian ancien régime was simply collapsing from within. Instead, they tried to play for time which ultimately made matters worse. On August 11th a famous decree solemnly announced that the seigneurial régime was abolished forthwith and it was speedily circulated around the provinces in an effort to curb the crescendo of lawlessness. Momentarily it succeeded and violence in the countryside subsided. But the so-called ‘sacrifices’ of the night of August 4th proved a monstrous fraud, for the deputies swiftly repented their generosity vis-à-vis the peasantry. In a matter of months it became apparent that the seigneurial régime had not been abolished forthwith after all. The tithe continued in force until the harvest of 1791, whereas feudal dues remained in being indefinitely unless they were extinguished by payment of between twenty and twenty-five times their annual value.

What strikes the historian about the actions of country dwellers during the opening years of the Revolution is their unanimity. Despite a wide, and probably widening gulf between rich and poor peasants, the focus of their hostility scarcely wavered: the destruction of what they perceived as feudalism. Not until that battle was finally won – in the summer of 1792 – did other issues rise to the surface. And it was only then that the monolithic character of the peasant revolution began to break up.

The next item to head the agenda of rural grievances was the partition of common land and the deputies wrestled with this question for nearly a year before a solution was legislated in June 1793. At stake were rival conceptions of the function of common pastures. Were they a valuable resource to be exploited in the drive for national efficiency, or were they rather the ‘patrimony of the poor’, a kind of safety-net maintained in place for the benefit of the most vulnerable members of the rural community? Neither vision was pursued with any degree of consistency and legislators were not helped by the seigneur who spoke with several voices on this subject. Well-to-do farmers showed a readiness to divide up the commons if it meant that they received the lion’s share; failing that, they preferred to swamp them with their flocks. As for the poor, they petitioned for partition in districts where land hunger was acute. Elsewhere, they turned a deaf ear to the theorists of agricultural modernisation and continued to exploit their commons as in times past.

In reality, though, peasant enthusiasm for the Revolution was ebbing...
fast. Once the rumble of the laden wagons of the tithe proctor and seigneurial steward had died away, many country dwellers withdrew from the political arena altogether. This desertion by the *satisfaits* destroyed the ‘popular front’ which had sustained the Revolution since the early days of 1789. Instead, sectional interests came to the fore: tenant farmers demanded longer leases; plot farmers campaigned to halt the encroachment of smallholdings; sharecroppers begged for protection from rapacious landlords, while agricultural labourers dreamed of some kind of Agrarian Law which would endow each poor household with an allotment of land. In short, the peasant revolution fragmented into mutually conflicting parties, each of which sought to push its interests to the top of the political agenda. The government responded with a mixture of palliatives and masterly inactivity. Laws requiring the parcelling of national property (*biens nationaux*) were placed on the statute book, but the poor were still expected to buy at auction in competition with townspeople and village bigwigs. When radically-minded deputies called for a ceiling to be placed on the size of privately-owned farms, they were heard with ill-concealed impatience by the majority of their parliamentary colleagues. Sharecroppers’ grievances received equally short shrift. The Montagnard-dominated Convention did not altogether lose sight of the social objectives of Jacobinism, but it was preoccupied above all else with considerations of national efficiency. The war effort positively demanded that root and branch agrarian reform be put off for the foreseeable future.

If the *satisfaits* played no further part in the Revolution after 1792, it is undeniable that a fraction of the peasantry never adjusted to conditions under the new regime. Thanks to recent research, we now know that the counter-Revolution had a peasant base. No doubt the clergy, petty nobles and emissaries of the Princes helped to precipitate the proto-revolutionary revolts that broke out in the west and parts of the south in 1793, but ordinary country dwellers bore arms against the Republic, too. In the Vendean armies, for example, some 63 per cent of the combatants seem to have been recruited from peasant strata. However, it is important to keep in mind the dominant experience of country dwellers in the 1790s. According to one historian, the counter-Revolution constituted ‘the most extensive, persistent and durable peasant movement of the Revolution’ (D.M.G. Sutherland, *France 1789-1815* (1985), but this is to exaggerate the strength of anti-Republican feeling beyond all measure. Most peasants initially enrolled in the van of revolution, whether physically or in an emotional sense. True, the Civil Constitution of the Clergy drove a wedge between the Revolution and the rural community, and the liquidation of the seigneurial regime during the summer of 1792 removed the main spur to peasant activism. But an attitude of detachment from events should not be confused with a posture of hostility. Even at the height of the Terror, most country dwellers knew what they owed to the Revolution and were not going to sabotage it.

Georges Lefebvre once remarked that it is easier to calculate the losses sustained by the peasantry as a result of the Revolution than their gains. Yet this seems an unduly pessimistic assessment. To be sure, the events of 1789 and subsequent years did not cure the late *ancien régime* agrarian crisis. The poor remained poor, largely because they remained landless. Even if the *biens nationaux* had been distributed on a strictly egalitarian basis, it is unlikely that such a hand-out would have made a durable impact on property structures. However, there is a grain of truth in the myth that the Revolution gave the soil of France to the peasants. It shook the land market out of millennial torpor, and what country dwellers failed to buy at auction in the 1790s, their descendants often managed to secure at one remove. More important, in the shorter term, were slightly better conditions for agricultural labourers. Those who managed to survive the dearths of the opening years of the Revolution and the terrible famine of 1795, experienced a real improvement in purchasing power; the first such improvement in several generations. Tenant farmers took the rough with the smooth: many were dismayed to find landlords adding
the value of abolished tithes and dues to their leases. Nevertheless, they benefited from the declining burden of direct taxation from 1791 like everyone else, and they made a killing in 1795-96 when galloping inflation allowed them to redeem debts and leases with worthless paper money. If they had bought bien national (as many had), tenants emerged as net gainers from the Revolution. Only the sharecroppers had real cause for complaint. Denied security of tenure by parliamentarians reluctant to intervene in matters of contract, deprived of the proceeds accruing from the abolition of dues and the tithe, and lacking the financial muscle to buy national property at auction, they ended up paying the price of the Revolution while pocketing few, if any, of the benefits.

The image of 'good King Louis' curbing aristocratic excess was one that helped buttress counter-revolutionary feelings among the peasantry when reform turned to terror.

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