

## 6. The Peasant Question: Grounding the Rural Offensive

---

Syndicalism's goal was to weld all workers into conscious revolutionaries. As demonstrated in the preceding chapter, leaders of the movement came to realize that the revolution must include women. Those involved in directing the CGT were able to abandon centuries of antifeminist attitudes and move toward recognizing women as equally exploited comrades. The increase of women's union activity and the labor reforms legislated with the help of syndicalist pressures indicate a modest success in moving toward syndicalism's revolutionary goal.

Modest too were syndicalist gains in enlisting the support of a more numerous and equally important segment of French society, the peasantry. Practical reality dictated that unionism's revolutionary progress depended upon the growth of its numbers. But the large peasant population presented very real dangers to the industrial workers. Peasant sons continued to flock to the cities, swelling the labor force and driving wages down. Those youths who remained on the land provided the recruits for the army, which increasingly came to be used against striking workers. In addition, greater peasant profits meant higher living costs and lower real wages for the urban workers who depended upon farmers for their daily bread. Yet, without their being able to draw freely on the farmers' storehouses, syndicalists knew that the general strike, hence the revolution, was doomed from the start. Achieving détente with the peasantry was an important syndicalist goal.

But this union could only be realized after hurtling numerous obstacles. There was the problem of the peasantry itself, whose parochialism and conservatism threatened any lasting accord developing between town and country. Peasant suspicions were exacerbated by syndicalism's underlying Marxist caste and its insistence that the revolution would result in the transition from a system of private property to one of collective ownership. Such an eventuality was rejected by the large property holders as well as by the bulk of poor farmers grubbing out a meager living on their



tiny parcel of land. Also problematical was the fact that the movement's antielectoral stance prevented syndicalists from competing effectively in the political arena with groups of the right and left who were also vying for the peasants' allegiance. The conclusion to be drawn from this study is that in the years before the war, the syndicalist rural offensive was able to make only minimal and sporadic gains in the countryside.(1) The peasant question remained essentially a paradox for political and economic socialists alike. It was only on the issue of antimilitarism that syndicalists were truly able to bridge the gap existing between industrial workers and the rural population.

### "LA GRANDE ASSEMBLEE DES RURAUX"

That such a bridge was necessary was clearly recognized by syndicalist leaders because of the agrarian nature of France. Further, the lessons of the past had not been wasted on the left, who knew that the large peasant bloc had been instrumental in bringing about the defeat of the Commune. In 1871 the Communards had sought to educate the rural worker to the fact that the differences between town and country were fictitious. In a circulated appeal to the peasantry, the Parisians pointed out that each group of workers labored long and hard to survive; each was in "the thrall of poverty"; city workers and country workers both wanted to enjoy the fruits of their labor. But the Communards' demand of "The Land for the Peasant, the Tool for the Worker, Work for All" was not strong enough to overcome the entrenched suspicion harbored by provincials against the capital. The peasantry cast its support with what it believed to be the legitimate Versailles government.(2)

Working-class spokesmen also knew that the Third Republic continued to endure at the sufferance of the large country element. "The republic will be a peasants' republic or it will cease to exist," declared Jules Ferry in 1884.(3) The pattern of small ownership set during the Middle Ages was accelerated by the French Revolution, which saw the breakup of large estates and the abolition of primogeniture.(4) Morcellation of land ensured that the peasantry would not develop into anything representing a solid bloc. Their only common aspiration was to own land or increase their holdings; the only common ideal was that which extolled agrarian origins and peasant virtues.

What evolved in France was not a single peasant society, as Georges Dupeux notes, but rather "a mosaic of agricultural zones whose level of economic development differed--as did the degree of social and political development."(5) Seemingly occupying the top of the socioeconomic scale were the one out of two peasant families who owned their own land. Below these were the métayers, or sharecroppers, who constituted about one-fifth of the



landless agrarian population in the 1880's. Laboueurs were those who owned some land and a plough, and rented other acreage. Domestiques de ferme were laborers permanently hired by a specific farmer or housed on a single estate. They received a small wage and the use of sufficient land on which to raise their own food supply. Below these were the journaliers, the landless, often migratory day laborers.

Within this agrarian world, status was not necessarily assigned on the basis of land ownership. Laboueurs working the larger leaseholds tended to be more efficient and more prosperous than the smallholder. Often they came to constitute a kind of peasant bourgeoisie. Smallholders often preferred to spend their capital to increase their landholdings rather than to invest in machinery. In such instances, métayers had an advantage over these small proprietors who preferred to sacrifice productivity for ownership. Journaliers were regarded as being on the bottom of the economic ladder because they owned no land and worked for wages. But many of the peasants who did own land, or even rented out some of their holdings to others, were themselves forced, either occasionally or regularly, to work for others in order to augment their incomes.(6) Clearly, the fashioning of a socioeconomic yardstick to assess the peasant "class" was an impossible task. This fact caused great consternation among the socialists and revolutionary syndicalists.

The lack of social or economic homogeneity was a deterrent in welding together a conscious political bloc. Critics often complained that the peasants were apathetic, grasping, materialistic clods. Marx had said their social proclivities made them akin to a sack of potatoes. Friedrich Engels was disgusted by the fact that they were narrow-minded, politically blind, ignorant "of everything that lies outside the village," in short, of "unmanageable stupidity." (7) Isolation and illiteracy worked against the development of a political consensus. Approximately one-third of the peasant population in 1886 could neither read nor write.(8) A primitive transportation network heightened provincialism.(9) Insularity helped perpetuate a suspicion, not only of urban politicians, but of people from other villages.(10) Local leaders could and did manipulate peasant votes. The parochialism of the country also served to make party labels and philosophies useless. Left-wing parishes, for instance, supported candidates from the right if they were "hometown boys." Or conservative areas voted left in order to spite a candidate from a neighboring village.(11) Generally, local issues took precedence over national ones. The author of a guidebook stated in 1873 that to the man in the country, the government was something "given to mischief-making, hard on little people, that demands taxes, prevents contraband, and dwells in Paris." (12)

Despite the peasantry's general disregard for the political state, politicians of the Third Republic were persistent in seeking the peasants' support. The Republic's



electoral laws and the population distribution gave the peasants great electoral strength. Half of the political districts for the Chamber of Deputies was predominantly rural. Chosen by departmental electoral colleges dominated by village-based electors, the Senate came to be called "La grande assemblée des ruraux." (13) In response to the economic plight of its rural constituencies, parliament passed numerous agricultural relief laws, the capstone of which was the tariff legislation of 1892, the Méline tariff, which included agriculture in its protective cloak. (14) After the passage of the 1884 law legalizing associations, radicals sought to buttress the Republic further by organizing a network of peasant cooperatives throughout the country, strengthened by parliamentary subsidies. These groups were organized on the national level into the Fédération Nationale de la Mutualité et de la Coopération Agricoles (FNMCA). (15)

#### OVERTURES FROM THE RIGHT

Government blandishments of the peasantry were a definite obstacle to syndicalist efforts to organize the rural worker. Equally formidable was the evolution of a "syndicalisme des ducs," organized under the aegis of large landowners imbued with the doctrines of Social Catholicism. The motives of the right were both high-minded and practical: on the one hand, to preserve the integrity of the peasantry; on the other, to insulate the rural elements against the twin viruses of republicanism and socialism. (16)

As noted in the preceding chapter, these rightist-sponsored organizations were formidable competitors with syndicalism for the allegiance of the rural population of both sexes. Also as noted, their success was not accidental. Rather, it was because the leaders of the movement spoke to the total needs of the rural worker. These groups formed cooperatives to buy machinery and fertilizer, offered agricultural instruction, and assisted farmers in selling their crops. The unions established insurance, retirement, and mutual credit organizations. They also provided "moral services." As instruments of pacification and progress, the unions' task was to bring about social preservation and integration in the face of republican and socialist-threatened chaos. The Revolution had destroyed the older corporate structure. Republicanism, a product of the Revolution, was aimed at bringing all existing institutions under state domination. The Republic was an enemy of the Church, and the nation's secularism promoted thuggery. (17) Republicanism had fostered individualism, which in turn had encouraged capitalism. This economic system, declared Hyacinthe de Gailhard-Bancel, deputy-president of the Syndicats Agricoles, was an "idolatry of the golden calf." Further, capitalism had contributed to the growth of the city at the expense of the farm. Cities drained away the most precious rural resource,



the sons and daughters, who fled the fields seeking the regular work and higher wages offered by industry. The attraction for material security was the reason for socialism's strength. But the socialists' promise of state assistance, warned de Gailhard-Bancel, was only "an allurement to attract the simple and the naive, and to earn for socialism a fabled legend." (18)

The peasant's patrie was in danger. The nation's salvation lay in the encouragement of peasant virtue and the preservation of agriculture, "the greatest moral, material, and social force in the country," according to de Gailhard-Bancel. The country furnished the largest number of soldiers, and the most robust. The rural population produced the raw materials for industry, he noted, and provided consumers for its products. The country also produced people of noble virtue: fiercely devoted to the love of freedom and to their homes, their natal village, their patois, their fields, and their cross. (19) Those country virtues must be spread throughout the land. (20) Catholic syndicalists urged the organization of agrarian unions in which all members of the farming community would be joined. (21) The program espoused by the Travailleur de la Terre, a rightist farm journal, was typical. Farmers and peasants must seek "to combat egoism and parochial ideas," it declared. Only through syndicalist efforts could the rural elements then serve as intermediaries between the public authority and the commercial interests. (22) In place of the anarchy of individualism and capitalism would be the "patrimonial syndicalism" of the farm unions. In place of godless republicanism and socialism would be the agrarian unions, the aim of which was the preservation of social peace. "God gives the victory to armed men who will fight," declared President Delelande at the Seventh National Congress of Farm Unions in 1909. Men of the fields must join together in union and remain "faithful to the emblem of fire that decorated the buckle of Jeanne." (23)

The program of agrarian unionism carried out by both Republicans and ducs was based on their desire to preserve the agrarian structure of small-property holders as it existed in France. For Radicals, this group of small independent farmers constituted a precious source of votes. To large landowners, the continuation of smallholders, as Gordon Wright has noted, provided both "a shelter against collectivism" and "a built-in supply of supplementary labor in many areas." To the right, these unions were useful organizations for combating class warfare by reinforcing the peasantry's traditional conservatism. (24) Further, as Elie Coulet noted in his 1898 doctoral dissertation, large landowners received the major material benefits from the unions because they were able to receive "better deals" for selling their products or borrowing money. (25) Radicals and conservatives, united by self-interest, supported the continuation of smallholdings. Their stance harmonized perfectly with the aspirations of the small peasant proprietors, whose numbers were increasing, according to



official statistics published in 1882 and 1892.(26) Firmly in the mainstream on the peasant question, the right represented a formidable opponent to political and economic socialists alike.

#### THE PARADOX OF CONCENTRATION FOR SOCIALISM

Equally important to the formulation by the left of a successful peasant program was the socialists' need to deal with the implications revealed by the statistics. Data indicating the multiplication of smallholdings were in sharp contrast to socialist theory. Based on the analysis of Marx, socialists had held that concentration in industry and agriculture was a necessary precondition to the socialist revolution. The smallholder was doomed to suffer the same fate as the rest of the petty bourgeoisie, Marx asserted, for the industrial revolution also provided the machinery to bring about agricultural concentration. Where the peasant continued to exist, Marx pointed out, it was only because he was owner, capitalist, and worker combined. He could sell his products at the actual cost of production, thereby surrendering both rent and profit and living only on the "wages" he paid himself. Although the peasant survived "by superhuman labor and subhuman life," that existence was tenuous. Marx apparently shed no tears of sympathy for the smallholder's impending demise, for the system of petty ownership, he declared, was "the most primitive and irrational form of exploitation." Such a system was bound to produce "a class of barbarians," living "outside of society, subject to all the imperfections of primitive social forms and to all the evil and all the misery of a civilized country." (27) History decreed that this anomaly would be ground out of existence. "It is not necessary that we abolish it," Marx declared in the Manifesto. "The development of industry has already abolished it and every day abolishes it more." The revolution would see the expropriation of all private property, land included. In place of private exploitation, there would be collective cultivation of the soil "in accordance with a common plan" by means of "industrial armies." With agriculture and manufacturing industries combined, concluded Marx, the antagonism between town and country would come to an end. (28)

Throughout the 1860's and 1870's, socialists generally favored Marx's dicta on collectivism and nationalization of the soil. The Marxist position supporting expropriation of private landholdings won an early victory in the IWA against the Proudhonists, who asserted that the preservation of smallholdings was necessary to personal freedom. (29) In the early congresses of the French left, the commitment to Marxian orthodoxy on the subject of the peasantry was also used to separate Marxist sheep from anarchist goats. The Guesdist-dominated 1879 Marseille congress declared support for the expropriation of peasant property. (30) In a pamphlet



published before 1880, Guesde insisted on the superiority of large cultivation and of the eventual victory of large property over smallholdings. Delegates to the Socialist Workers' Congress in 1880 upheld their earlier position on private property. While there could be no emancipation without the workers being in possession of raw materials and the instruments of their labor, the resolution declared, individual ownership was incompatible with the actual state of industrial and agrarian progress, and would only continue economic inequality. The sole remedy, delegates concluded, was collective rather than individual ownership of the means of production.(31) Insofar as the Guesdists were concerned, the peasant was destined to suffer and disappear. Any attempt to mitigate his sufferings was futile, according to Guesde. Reforms gained would remain only as dead letters in a capitalist regime.(32)

By 1884 Guesde's position on reforms in general and on the peasantry specifically had considerably softened. Ironically, the change was largely the result of having to confront the dilemma posed by the rigorous application of Marx's pronouncements, particularly since they were now a minority within the French left. In their first congress in 1884, the PO committed itself to Marxist teachings on carrying the class war into the political arena. But strict adherence to orthodoxy on the peasant question seemed to fly in the face of Marxist pronouncements on the need to win elections. Confronted with a choice between two apparent extremes, delegates opted for engaging in electoral battles rather than waging war on peasant property. On the peasant question, the Guesdists adopted an equivocal, hence politically expedient, stand. The resolution called for gradual collectivization of land and a program of agrarian reform. The reform measures included the call for expropriation of large-property holders, an issue always dear to peasant hearts, the suppression of the land tax, and free distribution of fertilizer and seed.(33)

Between the Roubaix congress and 1892, Guesdists ignored the peasant question, concentrating their energies instead on attempting to control the labor organizations and directing the FNS. By 1892, however, a series of events converged to bring the issue of the peasantry again into focus. Publication of the 1892 statistics confirmed what had been suggested in the previous data of 1882: that Marx had erred in his prediction concerning the demise of the smallholder. Because the PO was a party grounded on Marxist ideology, it was incumbent upon the Guesdists to rescue Marx in the face of allegedly damning evidence that seemed to refute the scientific nature of Marxist socialism.

Equally threatening to the continued survival of the Marxist party were the numerous socialist groups contending with the Guesdists for supremacy. The rival FBT, formed in 1892, and the bourses were particularly vocal in championing the needs of the peasantry. There were a number of reasons to explain the peasant orientation of the bourses. Many of their members were anarchists of the Bakuninist persuasion,



who had assimilated their mentor's teachings on the revolutionary tendencies inherent in the peasantry.(34) The organization's interest in the agricultural population was also strongly reflective of Fernand Pelloutier's concern for the agrarian worker after he returned from a sojourn in Brittany in 1891.(35) The rural orientation of the bourses was also the logical outcome of their organizational structure. Constituted on the basis of geography rather than on profession, the bourses naturally grouped together industrial and agrarian workers. Further, those bourses located in heavily rural areas had an overtly agrarian caste.(36) An additional threat, outside of the anarchist-shaded FBT, was the newly organized POSR, which was aggressively involved in the campaign to bring peasants to socialism.

The losing battle for union control appears to have heightened the Guesdists' commitment to seek victory in the political arena. Socialists had captured many towns and a few important industrial centers in the municipal elections of 1892.(37) A general election was slated for 1893. The possibility of electoral success on a national scale and the waning influence with the unions dictated a change in tactics--one that would not ignore the industrial workers, but would also court the political favors of the peasantry. Suffering as they were from twenty years of depression, the farmers would welcome some recognition of their problems and would warm to the socialists' commitment to work for rural reform.

#### SOCIALIST POPULISM: A ROUTE TO ELECTORAL VICTORY

A few days after the Marseille congress of the FS closed, the PO held its convention in the same city. Delegates received the agrarian program drafted by Guesde and Lafargue, which appeared to have multiple aims. It was designed to take the wind from the sails of organizations such as the FBT and the POSR, and from socialists like Jean Jaurès, who had long campaigned on a platform of agrarian reform.(38) The program was also aimed at garnering peasant support at the polls the following year. A decent showing in the elections would discredit the anarchist elements within the FS, the FBT, and the POSR, and bring the unions safely into the sphere of political domination. The emphasis on electoral activity rather than on class warfare against private property would also help to overcome the problem posed by following Marxism too literally. The agrarian program submitted at Marseille constituted an important weapon in the battle against the syndicalists.

The inspiration for the party's program, noted Lafargue in the preamble to the resolution, was the realization that centralization in the agrarian domain was not occurring to the same degree as in the industrial realm. French farmers remained in possession of the soil. The artisans' loss of ownership of the means of production had caused that group's



decline into the ranks of the proletariat. The anarchists might wish to see misery intensified as the precondition for social transformation, Lafargue stated pointedly, but the Socialist Party--the workers' party--was dedicated to the reconciliation, not the separation, of the producer from his work. The agrarian worker had the same right to the party's protection as did the industrial proletariat, Lafargue explained. Therefore, the party, acting in the peasants' name, was calling for a program of reform to assist métayers, journaliers, and small proprietors during the capitalist phase. The resolution introduced demands for a minimum wage, retirement benefits supported by a tax on the revenues of large proprietors, the creation of cooperatives for buying fertilizers and selling farm products, and indemnities to sharecroppers and farmers for the surplus value of their property. Other items of the program called for prohibition against the alienation of common lands, communal purchase of farm machinery, and the leasing of communal lands to landless families.(39)

At the next party congress, held at Nantes in 1894, the agrarian program introduced at Marseille, and now including a provision supporting smallholdings, was formally adopted. The state of things characterized by peasant proprietorship was only temporary, the resolution warned. Workers would be free "only when they are in possession of the means of production," which could be realized solely "under a collective or social form." But the smallholders could rest easy, at least for the time being. Noted Lafargue:

The small field is the tool of the peasant as the plane is to the carpenter and the scalpel is to the surgeon. The peasant, carpenter, and surgeon exploit no one with their instruments of labor; thus [they should] not fear seeing [these instruments] taken away by a socialist revolution, whose mission is to expropriate the expropriators who have taken the land from the laborers and the machines from the workers.

Only against the large capitalist proprietor, the enemy of the peasant, the resolution declared, would the party direct its efforts.(40)

The publication of the POF's agrarian program brought angry recriminations against the Guesdists by those who charged that French socialism was abandoning Marx, if not by commission, at least by omission. In the vanguard of criticism was Friedrich Engels, who publicly disavowed the French party's stand. Protecting the property of the peasant was not safeguarding his liberty, said Engels, only the special form of his servitude. French socialists, he claimed, were futilely trying to maintain a state of things destined to disappear.(41)

In answer to the charge that the socialists had forgotten their Marx, Guesde declared that the critics had apparently overlooked another of Marx's dictates: that the



earth shall not be given to one to the detriment of the other. It was the duty of the Socialist Party to put workers in possession of the instruments of production, which in the peasant's case, were his fields.(42) The party's program was not a deviation from orthodoxy, Lafargue insisted in 1893. Socialists had merely asserted that the party would do nothing to accelerate the ruin of the peasantry during the transitional phase.(43)

Socialism's resolution of the peasant question was aimed at bringing the peasantry to socialism. Although it might sustain the existence of smallholders, concluded Jaurès in 1877, socialist support of agrarian reform would not prevent the revolution from occurring. Rather, reforms would help instill in the peasantry "the socialist spirit," which in turn would prepare them for "a more ulterior and more profound transformation." (44) Marx's prognosis of capitalist concentration was not in error, Jaurès was still insisting in 1897. Increasing morcellation was only consigning more peasants to the misery induced by intensive cultivation. Peasant independence was being destroyed by mortgages and taxes, he noted. Increasingly the small proprietor was being dominated by large industrial property: sugar refineries, giant milling companies, and the powerful middlemen who controlled the Paris markets. By a fashion more complex than formerly believed, the agricultural domain was passing to collectivism. The revolution was inevitable. Reforms gained by the socialists would assist the peasantry during the harsh process of social transformation.(45)

In their attempt to walk a tightrope between wooing the vote of the peasant smallholder on the one hand, and remaining true to Marx's original pronouncements on the other, the French political socialists developed a position on the peasant question having at its core the recognition that the party must serve as the vehicle for raising the class consciousness of the peasant population. The slow pace of capitalist expansion into the agrarian realm had left the peasants' insularity relatively untouched. The only means by which the peasants' social isolation might be overcome was through party-sponsored reforms. These reform measures might sustain the peasantry in its private ownership, but only temporarily. Ultimately the forces of historical necessity and inevitability would hold sway. Agrarian property, like industrial property, would then move from individual to collective ownership, and from individual to collective exploitation. The political socialists' response to the peasant question was a successful one. It squared nicely with Marx; placed the blame for rural disorder where it belonged--with the capitalists; and emphasized the humanitarian aspects of the Socialist Party in wanting to mitigate the peasants' plight.

The adoption of the agrarian program, like the change in the party's name to the POF, was carefully designed by the Guesdists to gain control of the left. The tactic failed. The Nantes congress witnessed the official rupture between the economic and political wings of the French left,



but the split paved the way for the eventual unification of the socialist factions in 1905. The peasant proved to be a vehicle by which unity could be achieved, Marxist philosophy clarified, and the strength of the Socialist Party and its electoral representation in parliament increased. More important, at least insofar as this study is concerned, is the fact that the political socialists' adoption of a program aimed at gaining peasant support became an important force in defining for revolutionary syndicalists the parameters for their subsequent discussion of the peasant question.

#### THE LIBERTARIANS' RESPONSE

The difficulty of grounding the rural offensive on a solid ideological base was most immediately apparent among the libertarians. Anarchists were the first to concern themselves with the peasant question, and the problems they encountered were the same ultimately faced by the syndicalist organizations. Early anarchist tracts demonstrated a clear ambivalence in attitude toward the peasantry. The lack of consensus within anarchist populism was largely because the doctrine was based on the mixture of ideas drawn from Bakunin, Kropotkin, and Proudhon. On the one hand, the content of the anarchist message revealed the traditional contempt held by the city sophisticate for the simple-minded boor, steeped in superstition and unable to lift a finger to alter his condition. Conversely, other libertarians expressed a genuine concern for peasants who deserved a better life and who also had the power to change the course of the social revolution. More important was the question of who would be the carriers of the revolution. Some libertarians agreed with Bakunin that the peasantry was a revolutionary "elect." Others believed that the country was only tinder to be ignited by a spark from the urban proletariat. The antithetical visions of the anarchists are best exemplified by the pronouncements of two among their rank: Peter Kropotkin and Elisée Réclus.

In his Conquest of Bread, Kropotkin agreed that peasants were deeply exploited. But he also characterized the peasantry as "ignorant tools of reaction" with the power to starve the revolutionary strongholds into submission. Technological developments, however, were increasing the workers' capacity to carry out the revolution irrespective of the peasants' moral or material support. Advances made in chemistry meant that greater crop yields could be gained on smaller plots. The development of steam power allowed for the construction of vast networks of temperature-controlled greenhouses. In these "kitchen gardens under glass," [Kropotkin's emphasis] the worker could grow all the food he needed without enormous expenditures of human energy and with virtually no need for expertise in farming. "Happy crowds of workers" would spend part of their labor growing their own food. They would



regard this time as "hours of recreation . . . spent in beautiful gardens." Armed with the means to provide for his own material existence, the worker could anticipate the day when anarchist communes would be declared in towns and cities. Soon the peasants, inspired by the workers' solidarity, would join with their urban comrades and "march together in the conquest of the high joys of knowledge and artistic creation." (46)

For Kropotkin, the revolution would be initiated by the proletariat. For Elisée Réclus, it must emanate from the land. To the peasant, Réclus declared, nothing was more sacred than his labor and the cultivation of the soil he loved. His land was a bastion against the forces of industrialism and urbanization that had thrown millions into the category of wage slavery and spawned a leviathan state. Now "soi-disant travailleurs" from the city were preaching a new order based on expropriation and collectivization. But the peasant would be little better under this system, Réclus avowed, than was the serf on the feudal manor. The future offered by these étatistes was a society based on a hideous egalitarianism wherein horses, machines, and men would be treated equally. The farm would be "run like a factory, where the machine governs all." "They will take the fields and harvests from you," Réclus warned, and "harness you to some iron machine, smoking and strident, and enveloped in carbon smoke, you will have to balance your arms on a piston 16,000 or 12,000 times a day. That's what they call agriculture."

To avoid such a destiny, said Réclus, the peasant must guard his land, for it belongs to him, his wife, and his beloved children. He must then associate with his companions on the land, join commune to commune, and affiliate with the disinherited of the city. In solidarity they would be an invincible army of liberty against the forces of the state. (47)

Réclus' theories, based on the Proudhonian acceptance of the possession of private property as a necessary hedge against capitalists and the state, were less widely held among the anarchists than one would expect. In fact, the majority of libertarians preached the hard message of expropriation. In an 1896 article in Le Libertaire, Antoine Antignac warned his peasant "brothers in misery and ignorance" that what they called private property was a sham. "The land is not for those who cultivate it," he declared. What anarchists wanted was a common culture, mechanized to increase production, so there would be riches for all. (48)

For anarchists, the peasants' attachment to private property was the product of an obsolete mentality and a hangover from feudalism, sustained by medieval clerics and lords and encouraged by present-day liberals and now, socialists. The mission of anarchism was to rescue the rural population from its intellectual backwardness and bring the peasants into the anarchist dawn of individual liberty and freedom from the forces of government and



private property.

Because peasants were raised outside the social and political centers of the city, noted anarchist Fernand-Paul in Le Libertaire, they continued to cling to their land like "crabs on a rock." A modern feudalism existed in the countryside, resting heavily on the peasant, whose brain, "encrusted with prejudices and mystic beliefs," opened slowly to enlightened ideas. Peasants were "divided by the jealousy which is the sentiment of property and by envy, which is merely the instinct of theft," noted Fernand-Paul. This captivity, encouraged and cultivated by the priest and the seigneur, produced a lethargy that killed in the peasant any desire for a good life and gave him the idea that urban workers were nothing more than brigands coming to expropriate his goods. Peasants must become aware that their small parcels could not be cultivated efficiently; that marginal farming produced only starvation rations.

Anarchists possessing "a larger vision," Fernand-Paul declared, must help peasants realize that only when the land was placed in common and cultivated collectively would the earth yield sufficient fruits for all. Anarchists must also assure the peasant that he had nothing to fear in a libertarian society that existed without laws or government. (49)

Libertarians played upon the theme that the peasant lived under a modern form of serfdom from which he was unable to wrench free. He had become "a resigned slave," noted a contributor to Le Libertaire in 1896. How long would it take, the writer asked, before this landless peasant, "this good and devoted Jacques" would gain consciousness of his exploitation and lift himself "from the nothingness where [he] remains inert." (50)

The feudal lords of yesterday, who had kept the peasant in ignorance, had been replaced by modern-day liberals and socialists. In the years 1904-1905 anarchist Georges Paul penned several articles in Le Libertaire using economic analysis to prove this charge. Nonpossessors were being duped by the bourgeois political parties. Uneducated and unconscious, the landless peasants acted by reason of a priori ideas against their own interests. Liberal economists argued that the possession of private property stimulated the farmer to work harder to increase his family's well-being. That notion was a myth. The peasant, unable to work any harder, only piled up debts, usually to village usurers, who charged high interest because of the scarcity of capital in the countryside.

With the introduction of machinery, unemployment increased. Poverty diminished the buying power of the consumer, which in turn redounded on the farmer, who then had to cut back his production. Democratic palliatives were useless against this entrenched problem, asserted Paul. So too were the blandishments of the socialist opportunists. Because of electoral considerations, socialists no longer spoke of nationalization. Instead they offered "vague reforms to lure peasants into believing in the chimera of



the renaissance of property, and to the city worker the hope of a slice of the bourgeois government's cake." These were false promises. Only the end of a system of private property and the establishment of a society in which free people worked for a common prosperity would serve to liberate city and country worker alike from the vicious circle in which they were currently ensnared, Paul concluded.(51)

For anarchists, the definition of the peasant question rested largely on the supposition that farmers possessed an innate will to violence that had been anesthetized by clerics, landlords, and politicians. Anarchist tactics were aimed at enunciating the division of property holdings between the large landowners on the one hand, and the landless or pettyholders on the other. By playing on the theme of the have's versus the have-not's, anarchists hoped to ignite within the peasantry the determination to overthrow the forces exploiting them. Because the object of their propaganda was the group who possessed little or nothing, anarchists, like socialists, could preach the joys of collective ownership. For revolutionary syndicalists, the issue was far more complex.

#### NOTES

1. In his study of the radicalization of the countryside, Philippe Gratton confirms these conclusions, further noting that syndicalism made its greatest strides in those areas where agricultural production was taking on the characteristics of industrial production--such as among those working in the vineyards of the Midi. Les luttes des classes dans les campagnes (Paris, 1971), p. 404.

2. "Appeal of the Paris Commune to the Peasantry in 1871," reported in Neil Hunter, Peasantry and Crisis in France (London, 1938), pp. 282-285.

3. Jules Ferry, quoted in Gordon Wright, Rural Revolution in France: The Peasantry in the Twentieth Century (Stanford, 1964), p. 13.

4. Michel Augé-Laribé, among others, lays the cause of morcellation on the Revolution. In 1923, he says, there were still numerous large holdings in England of 50,000 to 500,000 hectares. In France at the same date, less than a dozen owned property of more than 1,000 hectares. About 100,000 proprietors owned 50 to 500 hectares; 700,000 middle proprietors owned 10 to 40 hectares, and 4 1/2 million Frenchmen owned 10 hectares. Le paysan français après la guerre (Paris, 1923), p. 16. Gordon Wright, on the other hand, claims that it is a "myth" that the French peasantry became landowners as a result of the Revolution. Rural Revolution in France, p. 3. So too does Folke Dovring, who calls it "an historical mistake" to state that the



Revolution even abolished feudalism. He says this mistake is due to the fact that "the makers of the revolution, who belonged to an age when the confusion was frequent between legal terminology and social reality" failed to make the proper distinctions. Land and Labor in Europe in the 20(th) Century: A Comparative Survey of Recent Agrarian History (The Hague, 1960), p. 139. The myth of the effect of the Revolution on land ownership patterns was prevalent throughout the nineteenth century. Delegate to the Second International, Dupire, warned that peasants in France were opposed to collectivism. "Deprived so long of his liberty under feudalism" was why the peasant in France was so attached to private property. Quoted in Alexandre Klein, Les théories agraires du collectivisme (Paris, 1906), p. 27. Of course, it is tremendously difficult to present a true statistical picture of the French agrarian situation, as Wright explains. The statistics are rife with inconsistencies. Categories change from one survey to the next, often without adequate explanation. In his introduction, Wright declares, "almost any generalization about the peasantry becomes partially false as soon as it is formulated," and he urges social scientists to "avoid the quicksands of the peasant problem." Rural Revolution in France, pp. 13, 211, and p. v of preface for quote.

5. Georges Dupeux, French Society 1789-1970, Peter Wait, trans. (London, 1976), p. 118.

6. Ibid., pp. 111-112. For background on peasant life during the period cited, see Georges F. Renard and G. Weulersse, Life and Work in Modern Europe, Fifteenth to Eighteenth Centuries, Margaret Richards, trans. (New York, 1968). Eugen Weber talks about the kind of peasant hierarchy existing during this period, noting that in some districts, vast distinctions were made between those who owned the land and those who rented. Those on the upper echelon of the hierarchy would have considered it "a derogation to marry outside their 'caste'" Peasants Into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France 1870-1914 (Stanford, 1976), p. 245.

7. Engels in Wright, Rural Revolution in France, pp. 10-11.

8. Ibid., p. 10.

9. Weber, Peasants into Frenchmen, p. 269.

10. Gordon Wright discusses this suspicion caused by insularity. He relates that the mayor of a rural commune whose population had drastically declined over the preceding seventy years responded to the suggestion that his commune fuse together with an adjoining one, the chief town of which was two miles distant; the mayor's reply was "We want nothing to do with foreigners!" This occurred in 1950.



Rural Revolution in France, p. 15.

11. Weber, Peasants into Frenchmen, p. 261.

12. Ibid., p. 243.

13. Wright points out that there were 20,000 communes with a population of fewer than 1,500 during the Third Republic. Each commune had one senatorial elector, while Paris, with its population of 3 million by 1914, had only 30. Rural Revolution in France, p. 213 for statistics; p. 14 for quote.

14. Ibid., pp. 15-18.

15. Ibid., pp. 19-21. See also Yves Tavernier, Le syndicalisme paysan, FNSEA, CNJA (Paris, 1969).

16. See Chapter 5 of this work. For a discussion of the meetings to 1913 of one of these groups see André Courtin, Les congrès nationaux des syndicats agricoles (Paris, 1920).

17. H[yacinthe] de Gailhard-Bancel, Quinze années d'action syndicale (Paris, 1900), pp. 2, 18, 43-48. Adrien Toussaint reports that unions sponsored the collective sale of wheat in 1902. In 1900, he records, over 1,000 unions were associated with the UCSAF, L'union centrale des syndicats agricoles (Paris, 1920), p. 59. President Delelande in his speech before the VII(e) congrès nationale des syndicats agricoles at Nancy in 1909 declared that their organizations, unlike the industrial syndicalist-sponsored unions, which aimed at class war, were designed to bring "order against anarchy" and "social peace" between proprietors and workers (Paris, [1909]), pp. 38-39. De Gailhard-Bancel noted an example of the secular lawlessness abroad in the land by citing an incident that occurred in the commune of Gigor (Crest) in 1887. There, six or seven of the local "bums" harassed over one hundred faithful unionists, returning from assisting at mass, by interrupting their hymn-singing procession with cries of "Long live the Republic," and "Stop playing music in the streets." Quinze années, p. 245.

18. Ibid., pp. 106, 163.

19. Ibid., pp. 76, 241.

20. President Delelande's message before the 1911 meeting of the Union des Syndicats; reported in Toussaint, L'union centrale des syndicats agricoles, pp. 6-8.

21. These farm unions were vertical organizations of all those engaged in farming in a particular community, from the large landowners to the day workers. The argument given



for mixed unions was that they were meant to bring about harmony between capital and labor, but many charged that the unions were really organized to benefit the large landowner rather than the small. Nevertheless, delegate Cheysson at the 1904 Congrès National de Syndicats Agricoles said that mixed unions were never easily accepted because many proprietors refused to believe their workers capable of discussing wages. Reported in R. E. Matillon, Les syndicats ouvriers dans l'agriculture (Paris, 1903), pp. 308-309.

22. Travailleur de la Terre, 15 Oct. 1905.

23. Delelande at the VII congrès [Nancy, 1909], p. 46.

24. Wright, Rural Revolution in France, p. 22. Apparently the goal of keeping the smallholder alive as a hedge against collectivism was not masked. Le Trésor de Rocque, president of the UCSAF, de Rocquigny, and Robert de la Sizeranne--all leaders of the right-wing movements--had publicly declared that small private property represented a "solid" and "impregnable" bastion of social conservatism. Reported in Michel Augé-Laribé, La grande ou petite propriété (Paris, 1902), p. 143.

25. Elie Coulet, Le mouvement syndicale et coopératif dans l'agriculture (Paris, 1898).

26. See *ibid.*, p. 62 for statistics.

27. Capital, III, ii, pp. 404, 411; quoted by Augé-Laribé, Grande ou petite, pp. 118, 125. See for the evolution of Marx's theories on the agrarian question Edouard Esarra, Nationalisation du sol et socialisme (Etude d'histoire des doctrines économiques) (Paris, 1904).

28. The Communist Manifesto, reproduced in Marx and Engels: Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy, Lewis S. Feuer, ed. (Garden City, 1959), p. 28. Later Engels declared that socialists must explain to the peasant that his situation was hopeless and that capitalism would overtake his small property "as a train overtakes a wheelbarrow." Quoted in Klein, Les théories agraires p. 112.

29. *Ibid.*, pp. 14, 18, 129-140. See also Aimé Berthod P.-J. Proudhon et la propriété, un socialisme pour les paysans (Paris, 1910).

30. Klein, Les théories agraires, p. 30.

31. Augé-Laribé, Grande ou petite, pp. 126-127.

32. Frederick F. Ridley, Revolutionary Syndicalism in France (Cambridge, Mass., 1970), pp. 53-54.



33. Noted in Klein, Les théories agraires pp. 32-33. See also Gratton, Les luttes des classes, pp. 34-45 for Guesdists' response.

34. Amédée Dunois reported that the propaganda campaign in the countryside was begun by anarchists in 1890. Victor Griffuelhes and Léon Jouhaux, eds., Encyclopédie du mouvement syndicaliste, (Paris, 1912), p. 32. Philippe Gratton notes that until 1900 the bourses were the real initiators of syndicalism in the countryside. "Mouvement et physionomie des grèves agricoles en France de 1890 à 1935," Le Mouvement Social 71 (Apr.-June 1970): 3-38, p. 32.

35. Jacques Julliard, Fernand Pelloutier et les origines du syndicalisme d'action directe (Paris, 1971), pp. 45-46. Julliard says that Pelloutier agreed with Bakunin that the worker was not the "elect" and wanted to have a closer liaison between industrial and rural elements. Pelloutier noted that the FBT sponsored the establishment of bourses in Narbonne, Carcassonne, and Montpellier in order to wage an offensive against the rightist unions. Farmers owning more than ten hectares were excluded from membership. Fernand Pelloutier, Histoire des bourses du travail (Paris, 1902), pp. 206, 213. The FBT declared itself dedicated "To understanding and propagating the actions of the bourses du travail in industrial and rural centers." Sylvain Humbert, Le mouvement syndical (Paris, 1912), p. 32.

36. R. E. Matillon notes that the first rural workers to become militants were those who were the earliest affected by industrialization. During the 1890's, when the use of oil fuel reduced the demand for charcoal by one-third, the woodcutters struck. By the end of the decade, the woodcutters had gained a great deal of influence in these rural bourses. But as the survivors of the industry began to receive higher wages, militancy declined. Then the bourses began including farmworkers in their membership campaigns. See Les syndicats ouvriers, pp. 9-10, 22-24, 46-47.

37. The new "rural tactics" adopted by French socialists in 1892, notes Klein, were clearly aimed at the 1893 elections, Les théories agraires, p. 36. Elie Coulet notes that in preparation for their 1892 congress, the socialists sent circulars to all rural communes inquiring into their needs. This information would provide them with the basis for their agrarian program and for forming agrarian unions under the aegis of the party. Le mouvement syndical et coopératif, p. 68. See also Augé-Laribé, Grande ou petite, p. 128.

38. In 1877 Jaurès declared that the only way to develop social consciousness in the peasantry was for militants to work for improvement of rural conditions.



Klein, Les théories agraires, pp. 110-111.

39. Reported in *ibid.*, pp. 42-43. See also Jean Bourdeau, L'évolution du socialisme (Paris, 1901) for further discussion on the socialist party in France and the peasant question.

40. Discussed in Augé-Laribé, Grande ou petite, p. 128.

41. Engels quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 130-132. Engels used numerous occasions to rail against the heretical stand taken by the French. In 1894 he adamantly declared in Neue Zeit that "We cannot tolerate in our party, groups of capitalist interests." By definition that meant small or large landowners and those who raised animals. In 1894 Engels further declared: "Our French friends are the only ones in the socialist world trying to eternalize, not only the small proprietor, but the farmer who exploits foreign labor." Quoted in Georges Péliissonnier, Etude sur le socialisme agricole en France (Dijon, 1902), pp. 65, 71.

42. Guesde in Bourdeau, L'évolution du socialisme, p. 315. It is interesting to note the change in Guesde's thinking from his previous rigidly Marxist stand by comparing the 1892 statement with one he had made in 1879. Then he had declared that "the soil could not belong to some people to the detriment of others." The subtle nuances between these two statements represent radically opposite poles of thought. The 1879 statement appears in David Mittrany, Marx Against the Peasant: A Study in Social Dogmatism (Chapel Hill, 1957) p. 19.

43. Lafargue in Bourdeau, L'évolution du socialisme, pp. 316-317.

44. Jaurès in Klein, Les théories agraires, pp. 110-111.

45. Jaurès in Augé-Laribé, Grande ou petite, pp. 139-140.

46. Peter Kropotkin, The Conquest of Bread (New York, 1972), pp. 210-229 for his chapter on agriculture, and pp. 226-229 for quotes.

47. Elisée Réclus, A mon frère, le paysan (Saint-Josseten-Noode, n.d.), pp. 49, 53, 55-56 for quotes and pertinent data. His italics.

48. Le Libertaire, 6 June 1896.

49. *Ibid.*, 11 Jan. 1903.

50. *Ibid.*, 15 Feb. 1896.



51. Ibid., 10 July 1904, 3 Sept. 1904, 5 Nov. 1905.

#### PERSONS CITED

Paul, Georges (?-?), militant, anarchist and secretary of the Ivry-sur-Seine bourse. In 1908 he was an unsuccessful candidate for undersecretary of the CGT. He was involved for a time in editing a working-class newspaper. After 1909 he developed a hostility to the direction the CGT was taking. He eventually moved to the extreme right and became a royalist.