Terre and Terroir

Visions of the Peasant and Rural France

Senior Thesis

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Introduction

In the shade at the edge of the pasture, the farmer is preparing his donkey, Saxo, for the
day’s work. He gently holds the animal’s head and speaks soothingly into his ear while he
secures the bridle, making sure that the straps are not too tight. The farmer’s wife places the yolk
of wood and leather around Saxo’s powerful neck, and she guides him from the pasture to an
overgrown field at the far end of the property, with her husband following behind. There, the
farmer and his wife hitch Saxo to a metal apparatus, a plow with three blades in the shape of
arrow-heads, and all three begin the task of preparing the wild field for planting. They work
seamlessly as a team. The farmer guides his donkey up and down the rows, and his wife steers
the plow with her feet in its iron stirrups. With every pass, they cut a swath through the
wilderness of weeds, leaving a series of furrowed rows behind them. After every dozen passes or
so, the farmer and his wife switch positions, giving Saxo a chance to catch his breath. Before
long, the job is done; the wild field has been tamed and cultivated for the planting season, so the
farmer and his wife unhitch the donkey and take him back to the pasture to munch on clover until
his service is required again.

The place is Yonne, Bourgogne, deep in the French countryside. The year is 2012—a fact
evidenced by the make of the cars that occasionally drift down the road in the distance, trailing
dust behind them—but this scene could just as well have taken place in 1912, or 1812, or at
almost any time in France’s rural past. There is something timeless about the art of cultivation;
for nearly as long as men have lived off of the land, they have worked it alongside their animals.
Frederic and Sophie Canler, current owners of the Ferme de Rosny, still honor this rural tradition
by using animal, instead of machine, labor, and by refusing to use unnatural chemicals on their
produce or anywhere on their property. In short, they work their land and grow their crops just as countless French peasants have done since the beginning of recorded history.

In the summer of 2012, it was my great pleasure to meet Fred and Sophie and to experience life in rural France. During my time at the Ferme de Rosny, I was able to witness countless moments like the plowing scene which I have just described, and I was constantly amazed by the timeless quality of the work on the farm. In nearly every way, the Canler family lives a modern life. They drive a vehicle built in the last decade, dress in contemporary clothes, and own modern appliances. Yet, the Canlers choose to work their land in a way that roots them in over a thousand years of agricultural history. This experience was the beginning of my interest in the peasant as a symbol in French history and culture.

As a native English speaker, the word “peasant” was not yet part of my vernacular when I arrived in the French countryside, because, like many words, it does not translate into English with its full connotation. While the English word peasant is little used and somewhat anachronistic, the French word paysan remains extremely important in contemporary France. It has its root in the word for country, pays, connecting the French peasant to ideas of nationhood. The idea that truly belonging to a country means belonging to its rural or agricultural communities is distilled into the very language. The paysan is a figure intrinsically tied to and representative of the diverse rural territories that make up France. Coming from a culture which places little cultural value on the term peasant and does not invest it with symbolic meaning, I arrived at an understanding of the French peasant slowly, over months of travel through the countryside.

Before coming to the Ferme de Rosny and meeting Fred and Sophie Canler, my experience of French rural life began in L’Oise, Picardie, 250 kilometers north of Yonne. There I
found a flat, lush landscape made up of emerald green fields that seemed to go on forever until they melted into a verdant haze against the sky. There I found a country of barley and sugar-beets, dotted with poppies and refreshed by the summer rains. When I traveled south to Yonne in Bourgogne, however, I found myself in a golden, hilly countryside of wheat and sunflowers. There, the rains came less often and, instead of the cloudy skies of the North, I experienced afternoons filled with sunlight that shone incandescently on the wheat fields. Finally, I took a train all the way to the southern coast, to Var in the region of Provence-Alpes-Côte d’Azur. There, on the shores of the Mediterranean, the sun beat down without respite and the great, bright sky was unbroken by clouds. There, water was more precious than gold and there was not a drop to waste. The southern landscape was hot and dry, but exquisite in its own way. The southern farmers whom I met relied on robust crops like sweet potatoes and on trees with deep roots to earn their living. In short, what I discovered in the French countryside was a country made up of diverse rural territories, each one with a unique flavor and culture. I discovered a version of France at odds with the traditionally dominant French ideology of Jacobin centralism; not one people and one culture, but many peoples and many cultures bound together by a common language and by a common love of the land.

Though it surprised me at first, this model of nationhood, which I later came to think of as “peasant-France,” is consistent with the French love of the land, about which I had heard so much before embarking on my journey. To a greater extent than other European nations, the French wish to identify themselves as a rural people. Their culture is saturated with the idea that the real France, la France profonde, is the France of the countryside, and that true identity is land-based identity, derived from the region-specific earth and agriculture—terre and terroir. Based on these observations, I decided that, if I was to write about France and the French people,
my topic must be the role of these rural territories in modern France. It was during my study of this topic, after my return to the United States, that I came across the recurrent symbol of the peasant. As a representative of France’s rural or land-based territories, the peasant appears throughout French culture, spanning the centuries. In his various forms, this iconic peasant resonated with me as a way to make sense of my experience in the countryside, and so he became the focus of my research. As I mentioned previously, the figure of the hard-working, rural peasant is intimately tied to French ideas of nation and nationality, and he represents the ideal of life in harmony with the land. As we will see in this thesis, he has been attributed many different meanings throughout French history, but, on the most fundamental level, the peasant represents an opposition to urbanization and industrialization, which threaten to sweep away the unique rural cultures of the French countryside. The history of the symbolic peasant and the history of French ruralism are so closely bound that it is impossible to explore one without exploring the other.

The archetype of the peasant is the common denominator which connects Fred and Sophie Canler to the farmers of the North and the South, to every man and woman who has labored over the French land. He is the eternal ideal of what it means to truly be French. Every social and political movement has viewed the symbolic peasant in a different light, approaching him with admiration, distaste, or indifference, but he has weathered each of these movements and survived into the 21st century. In this thesis, we will try to understand the role that the French peasant has played throughout history and the ways in which different groups have perceived him. Ultimately, we will explore the place of the peasant, and of the French rural territories, in the modern European Union. The future of the symbolic peasant in an ever-changing France and
Europe touches on a host of pressing issues for members of farming communities, like the Canlers, which we will examine in the following pages.
Chapter One

The Peasant and the Earth in French Culture

The French love of *la terre* and practice of identifying with it can be traced back through the centuries, even before the rise of a French national state. Intimately tied to the archetype of *le paysan*, or the peasant, this wide-spread sentiment surpasses any literal connection to the land, attaining the near-legendary level of a national symbol. The valorization of the French soil and of those who sustain themselves by working it pervades nearly aspect of French culture, especially as part of the ideological conflict between the peasant and the forces of modernity, which replays itself throughout French history. The role of the land and of the peasant in French culture has been explored and reevaluated innumerable times throughout history, but the present and pertinent question is, “What place, if any, does this land-based identity hold in the modern European Union?” In a continent which strives to render national identity a redundancy, has the great, historic struggle of the emblematic peasant seen its final stand, or will it continue to be a relevant symbol for future generations?

It is often difficult for American readers, writers, and travelers, even those with a genuine interest in France and French culture, to fully grasp the connection that the French feel toward their land. This is not, as some might wish to argue, because Americans are a people divorced from the earth and its bounty, but simply because our social and historical paradigms for understanding the significance of our land are unlike those of the French.

A classic and often-employed illustration of the difference between American and French perception of land is seen in their respective wine cultures. Unlike many anthropological studies, this difference may be discerned even by the casual observer. Images one and two from Appendix A represent a typical American and French wine label. The label on the American
wine discloses: the name and emblem of the vineyard, a certification that the wine was estate bottled\(^1\), the year in which it was bottled, the location of the vineyard, its alcohol content, and—most importantly—the specific grape used in the wine’s production, in this case “Cabernet Sauvignon”. Though all of this information is important, the latter is the fundamental classification of the wine, a system of classification based on “varietal”. This is almost universally true in New World wine culture, to the extent that a bottle may be referred to in short as “a Pinot Noir,” or “a Merlot,” regardless of where it was produced.

The French label contains most of the same information, with one notable and obvious exception. The variety of grape used in the wine does not appear anywhere, let alone in the place of honor in the middle of the label. Instead, the top line reads, “Appellation Margaux Controlée,” followed by the name of the vineyard. All of the classifying information for the bottle of wine revolves around the specific location in which it was grown. That is not to say that the grape variety is totally ignored; in nearly all cases, the regional location and appellation correspond to a specific grape. Still, the French ostensibly reject grape variety as a system of classification in-and-of itself.

This is the essential difference between French and American wine culture. While American—New World—wine makers value the pure, relatively standardized character of a grape variety, French—Old World—wine makers place near-total emphasis on terroir, or the region-specific agricultural conditions which create the unique wines—for example—of Bordeaux and Burgundy. The advantage that French viniculture has on that of the New World\(^2\) is thousands of years of tradition leading to an unrivaled mastery of soil, climate, and other

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\(^1\) This means that the grapes were grown, crushed, fermented, aged, and bottled at the specified vineyard, rather than in a factory process in multiple locations.

\(^2\) In addition to the United States, this category includes nations with relatively short histories of wine culture, such as Chile and Australia.
regional conditions. This benefit inevitably leads to a system of appellation which values history and long-standing custom over change or innovation, and certainly over the standardization of New World viniculture.

This explanation of the difference between Old and New World wine traditions may seem gratuitous, but it perfectly represents the connection between the French and their land, and the way in which it defines them as a people. Attempting to define this aspect of French cultural identity, Susan Rogers writes, “Its identity is tied to a long history of deeply rooted traditions, many anchored in the French soil and expressed in the highly diverse rural societies historically composing the national territory.” The pride in the vast diversity of the French provinces, of their varied terroir, and unique products, which Rogers describes, is summed up by the Old World appellation system of France. The principle applies not only to wine, but also to food items of all kinds, from cheese and meat to fruits and vegetables.

France’s sternly enforced Appellation d’Origine Contrôlée (AOC), which officially came into being in 1935, regulates the locations in which specific wine and food items may be grown or produced. This represents a concentrated effort on the part of the French government and consumers to preserve their historic epicurean and agricultural traditions. In the face of the globalizing European Union, the French continue to adamantly defend their traditional wine culture and appellation. According to Daniel Gade, this is not despite but because of French anxiety about the standardizing forces of modern Europe. He writes, “The central role of place in defining the character and quality of agricultural products has emerged as a response to a world on the inexorable path of globalization. Massive transfer of foodstuffs that are industrially

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produced at low cost, often unidentified as to source and sometimes genetically modified, has heightened concerns about disappearance of local gastronomic traditions, decline in food quality and safety, and disengagement of food production from consumption.”

5 Essentially, the great anxiety of the French is that their agriculture and food industries will become nothing more than industries, churning out processed, assembly-line fodder devoid of the regional value that only centuries—in some cases, millennia—of tradition can impart. In short, the modern French farmer faces the possibility of being marginalized and rendered redundant by the industrialization of Europe.

Likewise, French consumers have become profoundly wary of the quality of the food that they purchase in shops and supermarkets, often shunning produce imported from Spain or Italy, even when it is more affordable than the local alternative. In Agnes Varda’s award winning 2001 documentary, Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse, a French chef who gleans produce left over from the harvest explains that, “I did this with my grandparents, in the garden, along fields and roads. I also glean because that way I know what produce I am using; I know where it comes from. I don’t want things that come from Italy that stay in a fridge for three weeks which is sold when someone feels like saying it is ripe.”

6 The chef’s attitude toward food and agriculture perfectly represents the wide-spread French belief that only produce from a known region, whose quality is ensured by generations of tradition, can be trusted. Food items shipped in from other European nations are viewed as suspect at best.

Though this sentiment is partly about the health and safety of food products, it goes much deeper, to the very heart of French culture. The production and the consumption of food and wine are about more than just nutrition; they hold immense symbolic power in French society.

5 Ibid.
When the French contribute to the making of a product—like a bottle of Bordeaux wine, which could only have been created in the unique agricultural conditions of the Bordeaux region—the French are symbolically connected to the countless forebears who toiled that land before them. Whether by working the land themselves or by financing the efforts of those who do, participation in the diverse food and wine culture of France gives its people a deep sense of identity in the land.

Agricultural production is an age-old and relevant part of French land-based identity, but it is not the only case of the valorization of the land and those who work it. This rural value system is represented in the form of *le paysan*, or the peasant throughout the history of French artistic movements. Beginning with medieval European art, the peasant has recurred as a symbol of utmost importance, spanning the centuries. Though the meaning of the symbol has evolved along with the changes in French society, it has always occupied a place of prominence, highlighting the honor and virtue of a life in intimate contact with the land. Tracing the peasant throughout the history of European art, Liana Vardi writes, “Peasants were too important a segment in society to be dismissed consistently… It was difficult to depict peasants as servile in an age that legally recognized their independence and no longer saw them as mere appendages to the manor. By the sixteenth century… cultural paradigms that sought to redefine the nature of man, stressing life in the world, also came to celebrate the peasants’ daily activities. Peasants were shown in command of the fields and as members of independent and lively communities.”

The question of what the peasant represents in French art and culture is not an easy one to answer. As Vardi points out, the meaning of the symbol in Europe’s artistic imagination has changed dramatically over the course of centuries, making it particularly difficult to pin down.

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The toiling peasant is a prominent figure in medieval art as a token of the curse visited upon Adam and all of humanity according to the Christian tradition—to live by the sweat of his brow. When juxtaposed with aristocratic land-owners, the peasant served to underline feudal class structure and the submissive yet essential role of the peasant labor class. Moving into the early-modern period of the eighteenth century, however, in a time of great social upheaval, the peasant took on new symbolic power in art. Vardi writes, “As an independent farmer, [the peasant] was virtuous, hard-working, and devoted to his family… The peasant emerged as a fitting citizen of the state. By the end of the eighteenth century, this figure had become an emblem for mankind.”

It is impossible to ignore the great valorization of the peasant in French artistic movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. He labors and sweats on the canvases of Jean-François Millet, Gustave Courbet, and Camille Pissarro. The question of the peasant’s symbolic role in early modern and modern society, however, can only be answered by examining the historical context of the artists who depict him.

Jean François Millet (1814 – 1875) is one of the best known painters of peasants in the history of French art. His priceless images of farmers, stone-breakers, shepherds, and gleaners line the walls of the Musée d’Orsay for millions to see, a great treasure of art culture. His painting Des Glaneuses (image three), for example, occupies a place of highest importance in the French artistic imagination. To understand Millet’s representation of the peasant class and of rural life in the French provinces, it is essential to understand the changing society in which he lived. In 1814, Millet was born into a nation in an unprecedented state of flux. The French Revolution had succeeded in overthrowing nearly every available paradigm of power and political authority, but ultimately had failed, along with the First Republic. The wars of the First

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8 Vardi, “Imagining,” 1397.
9 Jean-François Millet, Des Glaneuses, 1857, oil on canvas, 82,3 cm × 111 cm. Musée d’Orsay, Paris.
Empire, under Napoleon I, had ravaged Europe and Northern Africa, but ultimately had destroyed itself, leaving behind a threadbare and bloodstained legacy. From the time of Millet’s birth till his early adolescence, the restored Bourbon Monarchy held tentative power, in a desperate attempt to reinstate lost political paradigms. In 1830, a violent revolution forced out the antiquated Bourbons and replaced them with the constitutional July Monarchy under Louis-Philippe I. Millet’s active career as an artist saw the fall of this constitutional monarchy, and the rise of the Second Republic, which was swiftly replaced by the Second Empire under Napoleon III.

This brief history lesson hardly begins to do justice to the vast complexity of the political and social climate in nineteenth century France, but it does provide a glimpse of the cultural upheaval which was at the background of artists like Millet’s life and working careers. He lived in a time when even the most basic suppositions about power, freedom, and human nature were open to doubt and confusion. During Millet’s life, France as a political entity—as kingdom, as republic, or as empire—was a at a point of constant uncertainty, and accordingly the role of the French individual—as subject, or as citizen—was exceedingly difficult to identify. It is certain that the atmosphere of turmoil and identity crisis in nineteenth century France contributed to Millet’s work. As an intellectual, he was unquestionably aware of the political turmoil in Paris, which makes us question why he chose to paint almost exclusively rural subjects like the women from Des Glaneuses. Millet’s critical contemporaries read his painting as frightening political radicalism. Des Glaneuses was presented to the Salon in 1857, just nine years after the bloody Revolution of 1848, with the aristocratic and wealthy bourgeois members of the art community still wary of another working class uprising. One critic of the painting compared the image of the
gleaning women to “the scaffolds of 1793,”10 an icon of insurgent brutality against members of the upper and middle classes, of which the critic himself was a part.

This critical analysis of the peasant as symbol says a great deal about the anxiety with which the wealthier classes viewed the working class and the peasant’s potential role as an impetus for social change, but it seems contrary to Millet’s actual rendering of the women and the rural scene. Firstly, if the message of Des Glaneuses is radical or controversial, it is deliberately balanced by the timelessly conservative biblical themes of the piece. The particular image of the gleaner dates back to the story of Ruth and Boaz from the Bible, and represents both the destitution of the women reduced to such menial work, and the clemency of the landowners who allow them to keep the leavings from the field. If Millet had wished to radicalize the French peasant class with his art, the women would likely appear downtrodden, haggard and thin, clad in tattered rags. Though we know that these three women occupy the lowest social sphere from their identity as gleaners, and their labor is clearly taxing, they appear physically doughty and wearing dresses which are modest, but adequate. Millet paints them gently with soft lines and muted colors.

Most importantly, Millet depicts a certain connectedness between the peasant, the land, and the rural society in which they live. The lines of the women’s stooped backs are nearly parallel to the line between land and sky; even the woman who is half standing does not cross the horizon. Millet’s famous lighting also connects the gleaners to the scene around them. There is a golden haze on them that emanates from the sky, tying them chromatically as well as thematically to the sun, the grain that they are gathering, and the harvest activity in the background. None of these features are excessively blatant, leaving a certain ambiguity about the

role of the peasants in the image. The gleaners are right on the border of light and shadow; part of the nearest woman’s skirt is obscured by darkness. Millet does not entirely smooth over the harsh aspect of peasant life. If his painting borders on the sentimental, at least it is not an idealized pastoral scene, peopled by androgynous peasants at leisure. The gleaners are depicted with a quality of realism that renders them admirable. The harmony between the workers in the foreground, the workers in the background, and the whole harvest scene is undeniable.

For Millet, the gleaners represent the antithesis of urbanized city life, a life which he fled in 1849 to live thirty miles outside of Paris.11 If the peasant is the impetus for radical social change—as his critics feared—he (or she) is also the guardian of traditional culture, insulated from the forces of political upheaval in the capital. While the monarchy, the aristocrats, and the bourgeois middle class are tossed on the tempestuous waves of political change, Millet portrays the peasant as timeless and stable. His gleaners are poor, but not desperately so; they are the beneficiaries of the world’s oldest social welfare system. Their labor is physically demanding, but it ties them to the land in a way that industrial city-dwellers have lost. Unlike their urban counterparts, Millet’s peasants understand their own identity. They understand the place that they occupy in their world and glean strength as well as sustenance from the land. Whether or not this represents the truth of the French social order in the nineteenth century, the symbolic power of Millet’s peasants is essential to the French imagination, even in contemporary France.

Agnes Varda’s documentary, Les Glaneurs et la Glaneuse, to which I alluded earlier, represents Millet’s legacy in modern-day Europe, and attempts to orient the peasant-gleaner icon within the context of contemporary France. Varda opens her film with a clip of the encyclopedia entry for “Glaneur–euse,” complete with a black-and-white print of Millet’s Des Glaneuses, before launching into her 82 minute ode to the act of gleaning, in all of the word’s meanings.

11 Kimmelman, “Plucking.”
Throughout the film, she revisits the antiquated French society represented by artists like Millet, in which gleaning was a standard and widespread rural tradition. *Les Glaneurs et la Glaneuse* is not a film that focuses exclusively on this lost society, however. Varda alludes to the past to emphasize the way that it affects the thoughts and actions of those living in the present. In the first minutes of the film, she says, “Gleaning is from another age, but the gesture [of stooping] has not disappeared from our sated society. Urban and rural gleaners all stoop to gather.” What is important to Varda, as an artist, is the relationship between the past—be it the distant past of Jean François Millet or the recent past of her parents’ generation—and the present represented by the archetype of the peasant gleaner. An unnamed rural woman describes the gleaners of the past saying, “Gleaning, that’s the old way. My mother used to say, ‘Finish gathering, so you don’t waste anything’… Sadly we now no longer do because the machines are so efficient now, but before I used to glean.” As she speaks, the screen displays a montage of photos and film clips of twentieth century gleaners, interspersed with much older paintings. The juxtaposition of these images traces the timeless arc from archaic times, to recent past, to present, beautifully suggesting the connection between them. In this scene and others, Varda suggests that the peasant-society of the gleaner still exists, but it has been marginalized by an increasingly industrial society. The gleaner, like the peasant, is a figure which has survived into the modern age, but its place in contemporary France, where the machines leave little behind for gleaning, is tenuous at best.

The range of activities which Agnes Varda labels as gleaning is widely varied, pertaining to no single definition. Those who define the word in the oldest and most literal sense collect potatoes from colossal piles left behind after the harvest, as well as corn and cabbages left to rot in the fields. Those who include picking, or “grapillage”, in the same category as gleaning pluck

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12 Varda, *Les Glaneurs*, 00:02:43 – 00:02:51.
grapes, apples, figs, and countless other fruits from the trees. This is only the tip of the iceberg of the gleaning culture which Varda wishes to explore in her documentary. Though scenes of gleaners and peasants traditionally take place in the countryside, Varda is also interested in the marginalized gleaners of France’s urban centers. The film follows nearly a dozen groups and individuals who live on the food which they glean from trashcans and dumpsters throughout the cities. This act is distinct from the customary agricultural systems associated with gleaning, but the spirit, which Varda so adroitly identifies, is precisely the same. These men and women pick up what others have cast off and live hand to mouth from the land. In a very real sense, they are the peasants of the twenty-first century, but they have been relegated to the outskirts of the modern society in which they live. Unlike the noble and hard-working glaneuses from Millet’s painting, these urban gleaners are ragged and destitute social rejects, fit for sympathy but not admiration.

The groups or individuals featured in the film are not limited to any one role, description, or demographic. Varda’s gleaners are men and women, young and old, urban and rural. Some glean as a matter of pure necessity, because it is their only means of survival. Others glean as a matter of choice, because they place both nutritional and symbolic value on living directly off the land. The French gleaner is not singular; he, or she, is a symbol defined by a hundred different people with a hundred different motivations. Agnes Varda herself is a gleaner in her role as film maker—the Glaneuse denoted by the title—and she stoops to pick up stories and images, forgotten fragments of the lives of her subjects. Gleaning in French society is more than just a popular activity, it is an age-old way of life. It is a connection to the land and to a family, regional, and national past. Gleaning has symbolic power in French culture beyond its practical purpose because it represents the age-old land-based identity of the rural peasant. Varda’s varied
and eclectic collection of modern peasants, or gleaners, argues that this traditional identity still exists in modern-day France.

Despite her apparent optimism about the lingering influence of gleaning in France, Varda recognizes that the role of the gleaner has not remained unchanged. Over the course of a few generations, urbanization and industrialization of French rural areas have marginalized the traditionally central act of gleaning. In her film, Varda succeeds in capturing the difficult lives of modern peasants and gleaners, who hold onto their cultural identity and resist the overwhelming forces of modernity that are changing the face of Europe. She also maintains that the French as a people still place value on those who live off of the land. The wild critical and popular success of *Les Glaneurs et la Glaneuse*—which won eleven international film awards and was nominated for two others—proves that she was not wrong. As a national symbol, the peasant is not yet obsolete, and the French resistance to urbanization and industrialization, which threaten to wipe out traditional land-based identity, still have a role to play in modern Europe.
Chapter Two

The Peasant in French History

The peasant is one of the most diverse and potent symbols in French culture, appearing both as a revolutionary and preservative force throughout French history, as an emblem in political discourse, as an icon in nearly every French artistic movement, and as an ideological staple in the food and wine industry. In all of these different areas, he—or she—represents the meaningful, hardworking lives of those who live off of the land, and the cultural importance of France’s rural territories.

The peasant’s role is double. He stands in for the commoners, *le peuple*, who rose up against a wealthy and powerful aristocracy and formed the first French republic, yet serves as a protective guardian of traditional culture and values. He embodies the struggle of every revolutionary force of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which refused to be oppressed by a king or emperor, but he also represents stability and connection to *la terre*. On the conservative side, the peasant is upheld on the canvases of Millet, Courbet, and Pissarro as a noble guardian of French culture. In the food and wine industries, some of the oldest and most venerated professions in France, the peasant’s respectful relationship to the land and to the products that it yields, serve as validation for a *terroir* culture defined by strictly controlled appellation. The peasant is a complex, and often ambivalent, symbolic representation of the French people’s relationship to their land, to their country, and to the ever-advancing forces of modernity.

In the words of Susan Rogers, “the ‘peasant’ remains a potent and highly manipulable (and manipulated) symbol of French culture, one on which a variety of ideas is projected and legitimized.”¹ The malleability of the peasant as a symbol is clearly demonstrated by its wide range of applications, as just noted, but the list of possible meanings is far from arbitrary.

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¹ Rogers, “Good,” 56.
According to Rogers, the peasant represents one fundamental way of understanding France as a society. “On one hand, France is a highly centralized, modern civilization with a strong, unified sense of national identity… On the other, its identity is tied to a long history of deeply rooted traditions, many anchored in the French soil and expressed in… highly diverse rural societies.” Logically, the place of the peasant is in the latter camp, ideologically pitted against the modernizing forces of an urban and industrial society. If we accept Roger’s argument, the peasant and the intimate relationship to the land which he implies are essentially diverse and non-standardized in nature. He represents the vastly heterogeneous culture of French provincial life, which varies from region to region, from department to department, and even from town to town. There is a seemingly inevitable incongruity between this type of land-based identity, and the concept of France as a singular nation state. Despite this apparent ideological contradiction however, the idea that love of the land and the traditional image of the peasant are tied to far-right—Nationalist and Fascist—political movements is widely held in France and throughout Europe.

Before delving into the national importance of land or the symbol of the peasant further, it is crucial to understand the ways in which national identity has changed in modern Europe. The dawn of the European Union as a political and cultural entity has forced a reevaluation of the traditional nation state and of national identity in all its forms. At the end of a century marked by cataclysmic global wars, in which nationalist sentiment played a significant role, the EU was formed as a political and economic deterrent against future conflict. Since its beginnings as the European Economic Community (the EEC), this coalition “has delivered half a century of peace, stability and prosperity, helped raise living conditions, and launched a single European

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2 Ibid.
currency.” These achievements are notable and admirable, if overstated, but the European Union has also thrown the future of its member nations, as independent nations, into question.

In France, this apprehension about the future of national identity has had a polarizing effect throughout political and cultural spheres. As Mark Ingram states, “In recent years, there have been heightened anxieties in France on both the Left and the Right about the state’s ability to manage a national cultural community. The extreme-right party, the National Front, has received increasing support for its anti-immigration discourse.” The continent-wide breakdown of national borders facilitated by the EU has sparked fear that the unique culture of the French people may be lost. This anxiety has mobilized a political shift toward the far right in conservative and rural portions of the population, which in turn has pushed many of the EU’s supporters to the political left.

The changing French attitude toward Nationalism and the National Front is clear from the presidential election results starting in 1995, two years after the transformation of the EEC into the EU. In 1995, Jean-Marie Le Pen won 15% of popular votes in the first round of voting. In 2002, Le Pen surprised the nation by winning the second largest number of votes (16.9%) and continuing to the second round of voting, where he lost with 17.8% of the popular vote. After a slump in 2007, Jean-Marie’s daughter and successor, Marine Le Pen gained a record-setting 17.9% of votes in the first round, though she failed to move on to the second. As we will see, the success of the National Front significantly relies on the symbol of the peasant as a part of their radical, anti-immigration rhetoric. For far-right politicians like Le Pen, the peasant serves as the

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epitome of conservative tradition, and an idealized rural past that predated the “problem” of racial others, serving to alienate immigrants, Jews, Romani people, and other un-landed peoples.

In the past thirty years, the racially charged, anti-immigration, “France for the French” politics of the National Front have become a great source of concern for the politically left-of-center, or socialist population of France. With the extreme-right party’s rise to power, many traditional national symbols, including the tri-colored flag, have come to be associated with their radical politics. As a result, visible representations of the flag or other patriotic symbols on houses, cars, or clothing are increasingly considered “nationalistic,” a term that is almost exclusively employed as a term of abuse in contemporary France. The national emblem of the peasant, along with his profound attachment to the land, is no exception to this negative sentiment.

Though there is an ostensible contradiction between the “highly diverse rural societies historically composing the national territory,” which Rogers proposes as the heart of the peasant identity, and the xenophobic, uniformity promoted by the National Front, a connection between them exists nonetheless. This is in part because the peasant identity is tied to tradition. Toiling the land is, after all, one of the oldest and most traditional of all vocations. As a symbol of French rural life which dates back to medieval times, the peasant as an icon also represents a deep-rooted tradition. The appeal of this simple but noble pre-modern way of life is an essential part of the National Front’s rhetoric. Nationalist demagogues like Jean-Marie Le Pen promote a sense of nostalgia for the past and for the old order as a way of opposing immigration, racial or ethnic diversification, and social change. American academic Liana Vardi writes,

In the minds of many, peasant identity is indelibly linked to the past… In the

nationalist revivals of the nineteenth century, peasants thus came to embody the

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6 Rogers, “Good,” 56.
nation, its traditions and mores, unsullied by modern concepts. What the Right
seized on with glee, the Left rejected as reactionary. Karl Marx never wavered
from his conclusion that peasants attached to their plots of land, were a
counterrevolutionary force. They could not accept the march of history. Both
Right and Left agreed, then, on the timeless conservatism of the peasantry.
Whereas other groups in society had a history, peasants were historical emblems.\(^7\)

In short, extreme-right parties like the National Front take the potentially positive symbol
of the rural peasant to a cruel logical end. For the political right, the idea that identity is based on
deep-rooted tradition and intrinsically tied to the French soil leads to the conclusion that those
whose history and heritage are not connected to the land, whose families were not part of the
necessary traditions, are barred from French identity. For politicians like Le Pen, this includes
immigrants and the racial “other”.

The connection between the peasant as guardian of traditional land-based culture and far-
right politics was certainly not invented by the French National Front. This ideological pairing
has a long heritage which can be traced back through the twentieth, nineteenth, and even
eighteenth centuries, only serving to vilify the iconic peasant to many contemporary French,
particularly the young and urban populations. The peasant in nationalist and fascist political
discourse dates back to the eighteenth century, but one of the most prominent examples comes
from the Vichy government under Philippe Petain. During the German Occupation, from 1940
till 1944, this fascist regime held control of Free (non-occupied) France and openly collaborated
with the German Nazis. Though he maintained many of the symbols of the French Republic,
including the tri-colored flag and the national anthem, \textit{La Marseillaise}, one of Petain’s first
actions was to change the French national motto from “\textit{Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité}”—“Liberty,

\(^7\) Vardi, “Imagining.” 1357.
Equality, Brotherhood”—to “Travail, Famille, Patrie”—“Work, Family, Fatherland.” All three words have fascist undertones as employed by Petain and the Vichy government, but “Patrie,” in particular has a politically charged background. The word is literally defined as, “A country where one is born, or to which one belongs as a citizen, for which one holds a sentimental attachment.” “Patrie” is also the root of the word “patrimoine,” meaning “heritage.” The connection between national heritage and the physical land, which touches on the symbol of the landed peasant, is something which the conservative Vichy government wished to exploit for its own purposes, namely to validate its racist and anti-Semitic agenda.

Like the French National Front, the rhetoric of Vichy emphasized the importance of the past, the unique heritage tied up in the French soil, and the symbol of the hard-working peasant whose life is intimately tied to the land. In order to maintain support from the war-weary French people, Petain and his government needed to find a way to appeal to both the conservative bourgeoisie and the revolutionary popular masses. Zeev Sternhell writes, “In fact, the nationalist ideology prefigures the two aspects of the Vichy regime: its dynamic and romantic side, its exaltation of youth and the revolutionary masses, of the values of heroism and struggle, blood and soil; and on the other hand, the regime’s bourgeois and conservative side, its vision of a static society governed by the values of order and hierarchy, a rural and paternalistic society.”

For the Vichy government, the icon of the peasant was the perfect blending of these two, seemingly contradictory camps. The peasant class had proven its potential for revolution and revolt throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but still served as a timeless symbol of conservative rural culture in the national imagination, as proven by the popularity of artists like Millet. Recognizing the power of the peasant as a symbol, the Vichy government still needed an

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enemy, against which to pit the French people. With the all-encompassing peasant as the “us” of the “us versus them” paradigm, the position of “them” still needed to be filled. In response to this lack, Vichy turned to the old enemy of French conservative society, the cosmopolitan Jew.

Since Vichy had set up the land-based peasant as the hero of French society, the logical next-step was to make its enemy those who were alienated from the land and its rooted history. The idea of targeting the Jew in this capacity was not an invention of the mid-twentieth century. From 1894 until its resolution in 1906, the Dreyfus Affair, in which a military officer of Jewish descent was falsely accused and convicted of treason, scandalized the issue of anti-Semitism in France. This well publicized incident created a great rift in French society, even causing famous friends, Emile Zola and Edgar Degas, to take separate sides and fall out. The Dreyfus Affair only highlighted the general suspicion with which the French viewed the landless, cosmopolitan Jew. Even before the German invasion and the rise-to-power of Petain’s Vichy regime, French public opinion, “reflected new preoccupations: the struggle against ‘this too cosmopolitan… socialism, which would weaken the defence of the patrie’ against the plotting of international finance and its allies, the enemy within—more precisely, the Jews—who, through their ‘greed, speculation, and cosmopolitanism,’ were threatening to empty the land of its substance.”

Like the appeal of rural peasant identity, Vichy exploited this anti-cosmopolitan sentiment to fuel their authoritarian rhetoric, and to push out the prevailing political trend of democratic socialism.

The logic and symbolic rhetoric of Vichy politics, with its clear connections to those of the contemporary French National Front, do not represent an isolated incident in French history. Rather, this mentality which favors the traditional, landed peasant and reviles the cosmopolitan

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10 Though they had been friends for most of their professional lives, Zola openly defended Dreyfus in writing while Degas took sides against him. This brought an end to their professional and personal relationship.

“other”—Jews, Gypsies, and immigrants, to name a few—has been prominent in French national discourse for centuries. In view of this, it is not surprising that many modern French reject rural, land-based identity as backward, hyper-conservative, and intrinsically unaccepting of cultural variety. Though not without basis, this view fails to recognize the wide range of possible meanings which the peasant-identity holds in French culture. The peasant represents a life in intimate contact with the soil, and the pride that the French take in their land and in the unique products that it yields. He appears throughout French artistic movements as an emblem of the common man, performing timelessly meaningful and rich activities. For Agnes Varda, the gleaner—for all intents and purposes, a synonym for the peasant—exemplifies an entire culture, which transcends age, race, and sex, indelibly linking contemporary France to its distant and recent past. Love of tradition and life in touch with the land are not necessarily linked to xenophobia or racial hatred. As we have seen, the symbol of the peasant—of the gleaner—is more diverse than the rhetoric of any one political group.

In contrast to the intent of the French political right, the symbol of the peasant has been famously utilized by the political left as well. In recent years, the far-left political activist and 2007 presidential candidate, José Bové, has famously championed the rights of the modern French peasant. Bové first took political action on behalf of the peasant in 1976 when he participated in the fight for the Larzac, a large-scale protest of the planned expansion of a military camp on the Larzac plateau in southern France, which would have forced the local sheep farmers to relocate. In a series of well executed protests and other efforts, which began in 1970 and eventually garnered international attention, Bové and his fellow peasants successfully
defeated the plans for the military base.\textsuperscript{12} Bové was imprisoned, along with several others for destroying documents in the Lazrac military base, but this did not stop him from pursuing the rights of French farmers. In 1987, he helped to found the Peasant Confederation, a politically left organization intended to protect the modern peasant from centralist national policies and the globalization of agriculture which we examined in chapter one.\textsuperscript{13} Since then, Jose Bove has continued to represent the rights of the French peasant in modern Europe. He has written and published numerous texts on the subject, some in conjugation with other authors, and he ran for president in the 2007 French national election.\textsuperscript{14} In opposition to the politically-right peasant of the National Front, Bové is living proof that the peasant also has a place in the rhetoric of the French radical left. Despite the industrialization of French culture, Jose Bove and the Peasant Confederation show that the peasant is still a powerful symbol capable of rallying national support.

All of this brings us to the essential question of this discourse. What place does the iconic peasant, and by association the French rural territories, have in modern day Europe? If French national identity fades into the background of a greater European identity, will there still be a place for the unique rural traditions that make up France? To answer this question, it is important to distinguish between peasant-identity and the idea of a centralized nation. Not only is peasant-identity distinct from far-right nationalism, it is distinct from the very concept of national identity and of the nation state. Even outside of the influence of far-right politics, however, rural French identity is nearly always construed as a national phenomenon. This is due in large part to


\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Ibid}. 
the way in which we—including many French—imagine the Revolution of 1789. Equipped with romantic images of the storming of the Bastille, we envision the downtrodden peasant class of France rising as one and casting off the yolk of oppression in favor of the Republic. The truth of the matter was considerably more complicated. As Susan Rogers points out, “peasant France” is historically opposed to the “process of increasing integration into an ever more hegemonic State and the washing away of region-specific cultural diversity in the wave of a single national culture,” which she calls “France of the powerful.” The rise of the Republic perfectly exemplifies the process which Rogers describes. Though it is tempting to think romantically of the 1789 Revolution as the birth of the politically liberated peasant, this is not entirely true. In fact, Marc Bloch makes the argument that peasants in pre-revolutionary communities, delineated by region, held a great deal of political sway, and that the revolution was the death blow to their autonomous provinces.

This fact is exemplified by the counter-revolutionary uprisings in the Vendée, between 1793 and 1799. Nineteenth century historian, Alexis de Toqueville, maintains that these bloody rebellions were in direct opposition to the centralizing power of the Revolution. He writes, “centralization was not abolished by the Revolution, because it was, in fact, its preliminary and precursor, and I may add that when a nation abolishes aristocracy, centralization follows as a matter of course.” In the Vendée, peasant forces, rallied by the rural aristocracy who lived among them, resisted the centralizing power of the Republic in favor of the less-intrusive monarchy. “These noblemen [of the Vendée] who were said to be slow to perform their duty to

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15 Rogers, “Good,” 58.
17 A coastal region south of the Loire Valley.
the king, were the only ones who defended the French monarchy in the field, and died for it; they owed this glorious distinction solely to their influence over the peasantry, among whom they were censured for choosing to reside.” Unlike many of their aristocratic contemporaries, the nobles of the Vendée preserved a feudal style of leadership, living in relative symbiosis with their peasant tenants, and inspiring provincial loyalty against the standardizing power of the Republic. The violent actions of the rebels were suppressed with even greater brutality, resulting in massive casualties on both sides, as well as atrocities against civilians and massive destruction of farm land by the Republican forces. Honoré de Balzac describes a fictionalized account of these events in his first great novel Les Chouans, and, even today, the rebellion in the Vendée remains one of the most infamous moments in French history. Though they only posed a temporary hindrance to the progress of the Republic, and the centralization of power which it represented, the counter-revolutionary peasants of the Vendee epitomized the symbolic role of the peasant as a preserver of tradition and of diverse provincial identity. The peasants of the Vendée set themselves in opposition to the Jacobin-centralism which became the dominant ideology of the French Republic. Like the modern peasants represented by José Bové, they saw the concentration of political power in the nation’s urban capital as a threat to the political and cultural autonomy of the French rural territories, and they fought to prevent it.

Even before the Revolution, the role of the peasant as guardian of regional, as opposed to national, identity was clear. Before the seventeenth century, the division of France into politically and culturally distinct provinces was clear. These territories did not correspond to the post-revolutionary departments, which merely serve as segments of a cohesive national whole; these provincial states were quasi-independent entities with unique cultures and traditions. The

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19 Tocqueville, *The Old Regime*, 85.
tension between these provinces—or regions—and the nation state inevitably lead to violence. In numerous cases where the French monarch attempted to exercise dominion over the region, peasant-based popular revolts erupted. One of the most unambiguous examples of this took place during the reign of Louis XIV, in the form of widespread peasant rebellions against his absolutist policies. Leon Bernstein emphasizes that this phenomenon was not merely an expression of fidelity to a feudal lord or to a ruling aristocratic class. He writes, “In reality, this cooperation among the various classes was an illusion. When the peasantry resorted to arms, they were concerned with their own economic interests rather than with those of their seigneurs.”

The peasant did not rise up because of a political duty to their overlords, but simply to preserve their own land-based societies. This commitment to provincial identity, particularly in the face of interference from the crown, characterized them as a group, and contributes to their symbolic power in contemporary France.

The peasant remains as a symbolic vestige of the pre-national, heterogeneous collection of rural societies, each one with its own history and traditions. What Rogers calls “peasant France” is simply the conglomerate of these separate entities, drawing cultural meaning not from their oneness but from their diversity. The autonomous regional state has long since disappeared from France, but the fight between rural diversity and a single political identity—one which precludes all other forms of identity—has gone on to be resolved on countless cultural battlefields, which we will explore in depth. As Rogers suggests, the struggle between “peasant France” and “France of the powerful” is one that can never be solved once and for all. In each case where modern or industrial culture threatens to supplant traditional land-based culture, a portion of French society rallies behind the icon of the peasant.

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Even the vastly greater modernizing force of the European Union, which seeks to standardize Europe on a continental level, will not eliminate the peasant from French society. José Bové and the Peasant Confederation are current proof of this. Even if the EU causes the French nation as a supreme-entity to fade out, the French will still be left with “peasant France.” In many ways, the idea of a pluralistic “peasant France” has gained force since the onset of the European Union, and, as we will see, the dominant ideology of Jacobin-centralism has lost ground. The decentralized vision of France, represented the peasants of the Vendee and by José Bové may yet be attainable in modern Europe.
Chapter Three

Decentralization: the Shift away from Jacobin-Centralism

So far, we have explored the symbol of the peasant in many aspects of French society, from food production and agriculture to political rhetoric. We have also looked at some ways in which the modern peasant has been affected and marginalized by urban society. To understand the place of the iconic peasant in modern Europe, however, it is essential to understand the connection and continuity between the land-based, rural identity which the peasant ostensibly represents and the changing political climate in France over the past three decades. As Susan Rogers points out, the French love of the land, symbolized by the hard-working peasant, is tied up in the idea of peasant France, a national model based on the composition of unique rural territories. Rogers writes, “The peasant has stood for a heritage, a cultural diversity, [and] a strand of French national identity in marked opposition to a highly unified identity derived from a powerful center.”\(^1\) When we discuss the symbol of the peasant in France, we are also attempting to define national identity and to understand what it means to be part of, or to be excluded from a nation or a republic. Do the French Republic and its citizens gain identity from unifying sameness, as nineteenth and twentieth century national models would suggest, or do they gain identity from the diversity of the territories which make up the whole? Both responses raise a host of new questions, problems, and challenges, but we must try to understand the tension between them in contemporary France under the European Union.

At the end of chapter two, we saw an example of peasant France in the pre-revolutionary period of the middle-ages, a collection of more-or-less autonomous territories loosely governed by the king. The extent to which the regional lords governed their territories and the landed peasants exercised their rights differed sharply from France of the Renaissance and especially

\(^1\) Rogers, “Good,” 56.
from the highly centralized French republic. This mode of nationhood, based on feudal social contracts, has long since disappeared from human society, so, if we wish to define peasant France in a purely historical context, we will never find it in modern Europe. Rather, “the frontier between [peasant France and France of the powerful] is a moveable one.”

The underlying ideological opposition of identity based on uniformity and identity based on difference holds true today as much as it did in the Middle Ages.

The greatest opposition to a pluralistic national model in France is traditional republicanism. “In contrast to American national identity, for example, where cultural diversity and national unity are quite compatible, the French nation is not defined with reference to pluralism or melting pots, and there is no such thing as a hyphenated Frenchman.” With the Revolution of 1789, an ideology emerged in France that associates cultural uniformity with the ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Under this system, citizenship becomes the ultimate source of unity within the republic, a full identity in-and-of itself. This form of citizenship is available to anyone who will accept its standards, regardless of origin, race, or religion, but it does not leave room for alternate forms of identity. By refusing to distinguish different kinds of citizen, the requirements of French citizenship are intended to uphold equality and to defend against persecution of the kind seen under the Vichy regime. For those who wish to become French while preserving another ethnic or cultural heritage, however, it poses a problem. The rhetoric of the traditional republic is entirely based upon one-ness: one republic, one language, one culture, one identity. Professor Alistair Cole writes, “French republicanism has a bias against policy diversity and local experimentation… For many French citizens, decentralization is synonymous with social regression, unequal provision, even a return to a pre-republican social

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order,” with its implications of tyranny or civil chaos. “Upstanding republicans equate territorial uniformity with ideas of progress, equal opportunity and citizenship.”4 The idea that equality depends upon uniformity is totally counterintuitive to citizens of an immigrant nation like the United States. For the French, however, this traditional form of republicanism is hardwired into their deepest-held ideas about nationality and citizenship.

Though this republican opposition cannot be underestimated as a social force, the past three decades have seen an undeniable shift in French political and popular consciousness in favor of a less centralized peasant France. As we will see, the process of decentralization, of transferring power from the central national government in Paris to the regional governments has been gaining significant force since the 1980s. Giovanni Poggeschi writes, “Currently… France [is] experimenting with a process of decentralization which looks like a revolution… especially from the symbolic point of view.”5 The word “revolution” is an overstatement in all but a few cases, but Poggeschi uses it deliberately to emphasize the dramatic shift in French national policy in the past thirty years. This is not to say that decentralization was an invention in the ‘80s, or even of the twentieth century; it is simply a version of the central conflict between peasant France and France of the powerful which began at the dawn of a French nation. Policy changes in the past thirty years, however, have significantly changed the role of the French regions from political units under the full control of the national government to increasingly self-governing and democratic territorial collectivities. According to Patrick Le Galès, “decentralization in France signifies the transfer of powers, resources and staff from central ministries to democratically elected sub-national levels of government… [It] has come to represent a massive

long-term change in the organization of French polity. Under the influence of decentralization, France has become a more pluralistic, negotiated and territorialized democracy, one less dominated by a Parisian elite.”

Before exploring the phenomenon of French decentralization in greater detail, it is important to understand some of the reasons behind it. This shift in policy and popular consciousness is not an isolated incident; it is representative of a continent-wide change in the way that nation states and nationality are perceived. Though it is counterintuitive in some ways, decentralization of power in European nations is a consequence of the European Union, and of the European Economic Community which preceded it. As we began to discuss in chapters one and two, the EU itself represents a unifying and standardizing force to many French people, threatening to expunge all that is unique to France and the French people. This anxiety is the basis for most of the anti-Europe sentiment in popular France, and it has been taken up by far-right political parties, like the French National Front, and hard minded republicans alike. Contrary to expectations, however, there is a great deal of evidence that the European Union has facilitated the shift away from a centralized French state and toward a diversified peasant France. Rather than acting as a suzerain to the individual member states, or establishing a single center of power to set the standard of citizenship for other nations, the EU has tried to push for development across Europe, particularly on a sub-national level.

There are many ways in which the Europe Union has facilitated a shift in French culture and in the French conception of nationhood. By the very nature of its existence, the EU represents the possibility of a more-or-less cohesive political body composed of territories with unique cultures, histories, and languages. For all the challenges and difficulties that it faces, the

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EU does function in some capacity, challenging, if not debunking, the traditional republican argument that a nation cannot survive without a single, unifying identity. To use Susan Rogers’ expression, if peasant Europe is an attainable goal, then peasant France, which seeks to incorporate a lesser degree of diversity, is certainly possible. Since its rise into the political landscape, the European Union has effectively pushed the issue of decentralization and regionalism by questioning all of the components which traditionally contribute to the idea of a nation. It represents a challenge to France and to its other member nations in terms of geographic boundaries, legal authority, and the inclusion or exclusion of citizens.

In his 2001 commentary, *The Idea of France*, Pierre Birnbaum points out the essential instability of France, as a nation made up of geographic territories. If we take a broad historic view, “the image of France begins to blur. What was once a triangle narrowing toward the south, barely recognizable, then became a square, a circle, an octagon; next an irregular quadrilateral; and finally, a hexagon… The nation’s contours have varied over the course of its history, giving rise to opposed views of France and what it means to be French.” Birnbaum’s point is that thinking of a nation like France as a singular entity is highly problematic because of the major geographic shifts which it has undergone over time. Images four through six in Appendix A represent maps of France in the years 1035, 1328, and 1791 CE respectively. The maps show three radically different collections of regions and territories: first, a loose collection of fiefs enclosing the royal domain; second, a complex network of royal and ecclesiastical territories and princely holdings, breached on all sides by English colonies; and third, a relatively structured, post-revolutionary state in transition between the old provinces and new departments. In a historical context, the unity of France as a nation is revealed to be an illusion. These few examples show the essential instability of nations, which the European Union now brings to the

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foreground once again. “The boundaries that formerly divided the country from its neighbors so effectively now begin to fade; absorbed into a larger European territory, they have lost both their sureness and their distinctness.”

A prominent example of the fading boundaries between countries which Birnbaum describes is the Schengen Agreement, first signed by France, Germany, Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands in 1985. In short, this agreement opened up the borders between the signatory nations, allowing each other’s citizens to move freely within their collective territory, without the vehicle stops and rigorous passport checks which became commonplace after the first World War. The five member nations also agreed to standardize their visa policies so as to avoid complications with immigration. In 1985, when the possibility of the European Union was still uncertain, the Schengen Agreement was a huge step toward a cooperative multinational community, and it laid the tracks for the abolition of internal border control throughout Europe.

Ten years later, shortly after the dawn of the European Union, the Schengen Area was expanded to include all of the nations of the EU, except for the UK and the Irish Free State, as well as the non-EU nations Iceland and Norway (see image seven). Though the Schengen Agreement was designed simply to improve economic and public relations between the signatory members, it also represents a major challenge to a traditional definition of nationhood. In the most literal possible way, a nation is defined by the geographic territory within its borders. It maintains its authority by its ability to defend these borders from external threats and to determine with who is permitted entry and who is not. By rendering its perimeter permeable, France and the other

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8 Ibid.
9 The European Union did not yet exist in 1985, so the Schengen Agreement was initially under the auspices of the European Economic Community, and pushed by the Benelux Economic Union (Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg).
members of the Schengen Area gave up an important component of their national authority. Birnbaum writes, “Now the Rhine no more protects France than do the Pyrenees. The defense of France slowly recedes in the imagination of its citizens, no longer left to the blue line of the Vosges or the Maginot line, but to… a multinational force whose common language is as likely to be German or English as French.” As traditionally defended borders become a relic of the past in Europe, the French and their European neighbors increasingly recognize the territorial instability and permeability of France as a nation. Under the pressure of the EU, the distinct and unified identity of any single nation is becoming problematic.

Of course, the physical territory of France is not its only source of identity. In many ways, the most important quality of the nation, the cornerstone on which the French Republic and all republics are built, is its ability to enforce law. Throughout the history of France, this has been the measure of a regime’s authority. In the monarchy, the right to make and enforce law belonged to the king; under the Republic, to the people through their elected officials; under the Empire, to the reigning Emperor. In each case, the success or failure of the state is dependent upon its capacity to enforce the terms of its laws over its subjects or citizens. In the case of the Bourbon monarchy, for example, the moment that Louis XVI lost his ability to hold his subjects accountable to the law of the crown, he forfeited his right as head-of-state in the eyes of the people. Regardless of the style of government, the sovereignty of France as a nation has always rested on its supreme legislative authority. Under the European Union, however, this supremacy has been overshadowed by the higher legislative power of Europe. While previously the Constitution of the French Republic represented the highest standard of law, the French have

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since submitted themselves to the legal authority of the European Union and its treaties\textsuperscript{12}. This is not to say that the EU makes a habit of interfering with the French Republic’s right to enforce its own laws. Its member nations maintain a large degree of legislative autonomy, but the fact that there is a democratic community with the capability to affect law in France is undermining to the supremacy of the nation.

Finally, the defining power of the nation lies in its authority to include and exclude individuals from citizenship, to determine who may be granted citizenship and who may not. Like the ability to enforce law, the power to accept or reject citizens has been a key source of national authority throughout the history of France. In the eighth century, Charlemagne validated himself as Emperor and helped to define his empire by expelling the Muslim Turks from France. During the brutal religious wars of the sixteenth century, the predominantly Catholic kings strove to push out the Protestant Huguenots in order to maintain the dominance of their religious identity. Even after the secularizing Revolution of 1789, citizenship was defined by its unavailability to women as well as certain racial and religious “others”. Today, as then, nationhood is largely determined by the state’s ability to exclude others from membership. By participating in the European Union, however, France has ceded its absolute authority over citizenship. “Unlike the old French passport, the passport of the European Union does not unambiguously testify either to a sharp separation of one country from another or a clear belonging to one country rather than another. As this new community nears the moment of its full and final constitution, the law of France begins to lose its majesty.”\textsuperscript{13} By opening their borders according to the terms of the Schengen Agreement and by trading in their uniquely


\textsuperscript{13} Birnbaum, \textit{The Idea}, 280-281.
French passports—the symbol of citizenship in the modern world—for generic European passports, the French Republic has given up its exclusive right to determine citizenship.

All of this evidence goes to show that the singular power of the nation state, which dominated the politics of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, has been dramatically compromised by the presence of the European Union. The republican ideal of citizenship based on a single, unified identity appears more and more anachronistic in the context of an open and heterogeneous European state, and, in many ways, the decentralizing trend toward peasant France seems inevitable. When Europeans of diverse ethnic, racial, and national backgrounds can move in and out of France without even a passport, it is unsurprising that identity based on coexisting difference is gaining preeminence over identity based on uniformity. The parallel between this trend and political decentralization in France is far from coincidental; the admission of cultural others under the auspices of the European Union has opened up the possibility of alternate forms of identity on an intranational level. Birnbaum maintains that “the explosion of identities in recent years… has had the effect of breaking up the monolithic picture. The process of decentralization… has encouraged the emergence of dormant local and regional identities, which are now reimagined with the ebbing away of Jacobin centralism, and… are gradually finding formal expression within the framework of public law.”

The formal expression that Birnbaum describes can be tracked through the recent history of French legislature. Long before the signing of the Schengen Agreement in ’85, political decentralization and the possibility of a multicultural France were part of the national consciousness. The first president of the Fifth Republic, Charles de Gaulle, was deeply interested in amending the balance of power in the French government. “Reforming the State was essential for the Gaullist modernizing project of the Fifth Republic against what was seen as the archaism

14 Ibid, 267.
of political elites.” In 1969, amid great social unrest, de Gaulle proposed a sweeping political
reform which, in addition to scaling back of the power of the senate, was intended to empower
regional governments and to give them an unprecedented degree of autonomy. “The project was
rather ambitious, including constitutional, organic and ordinary laws… Other provisions foresaw
a complex system of transfer of competences from the state to the regions and the way the
regions could exercise self-government.” Despite de Gaulle’s best efforts, the reform was
defeated at the Constitutional Referendum of 1969, leading to his resignation as president. De
Gaulle never lived to see the kind of decentralizing reform for which he had hoped; he died the
next year on November 9th 1970.

Though the matter of decentralization never disappeared altogether, no major
breakthrough was achieved until 1982, when “decisive reforms on the issue were carried out
with strong governmental support and will. The regional reform was part of those that
[P]resident Mitterrand wanted for the renewal of the country.” The reform passed into law by
Prime Minister Pierre Mauroy in ’82 achieved many of the goals which de Gaulle had set
forward in the ’69 referendum, revealing a significant shift in French national feeling during the
thirteen year interlude. This change can be attributed in part to the new socialist government of
Mitterrand, but it also represents a different relationship between France and the international
European community. In any case, the 1982 reform succeeded in taking legislative power away
from the departmental Prefects—non-elected officials who were appointed by the President of
the French Republic—and giving it to directly-elected regional presidents instead. The reform
also redefined the regions of France as “territorial entities,” giving them nationally recognized
legislative power. In short, the passage of these laws represented a refutation of the traditional

15 Le Gales, “Reshaping,” 123.
17 Ibid.
“French doctrine [which] stresses that this lack of autonomous legislative power [on the regional level] determines the border between a divisible and an indivisible state… [and] the fear that a strong decentralization may lead to the dissolution of the country.”\textsuperscript{18} In particular, the decision to give the citizens of each regional territory the right to directly elect its president allows for a more pluralistic—and thus less unified—political landscape in France.

This transition toward a diversified political model was but the first of many. The acknowledgement of the legislative authority of regional territories by Mitterrand and his government opened the floodgates for a deluge of political reform in favor of regions and their right to self-govern. Perhaps the most important and permanent of these were the constitutional amendments of 2003. The first and most obvious change was to Article 1 of the Constitution of the French Republic. To the existing article ("France shall be an indivisible, secular, democratic and social Republic. It shall ensure the equality of all citizens before the law, without distinction of origin, race or religion. It shall respect all beliefs.") the words "Its organization shall be decentralized,"\textsuperscript{19} were added. The significance of this change literally cannot be overstated. By placing the adjective "decentralized" in a comparable position to "indivisible," "secular," "democratic," and "social" Congress and the Constitutional Council gave it credence as one of the fundamental values of the French Republic. Specifically, the alignment of the words "indivisible" and "decentralized" shows a major shift away from a traditional mode of republicanism, which would hold them as irreconcilable values. The second constitutional amendment passed on March 28, 2003 was the addition of Article 72, which laid the groundwork for economically autonomous territorial units, including regions, departments, and communes.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.

Though the specific terms of the article were left somewhat ambiguous, it established an important framework for political and economic decentralization. Since 2003, organic and ordinary laws have been built upon the foundation of the new Article 72, rendering the authority of the territorial units increasingly explicit. As a result of the reforms of March 28, 2003, “decentralization remains high up on the political agenda today. It appears as a dynamic process, with significant reforms passed every three or four years.”\(^{20}\) The reforms of 1982 and 2003 are just two important examples of a much greater movement in French politics and public law away from the traditional republican model. With each passing year, the French Republic moves a little further from a highly centralized and authoritarian system of government and closer to a model of decentralized public management. “Within the domains examined in this chapter, the French state appears to be moving from the classic model of ‘hands-on policy’ with direct intervention in every department of the Republic, to a more strategic regulatory, and possibly enabling role.”\(^{21}\)

There are many specific examples of regional territories asserting their authority and their identity against the authority of the nation. Brittany has historically struggled against the suffocating national identity of the French Republic and has succeeded in preserving a complex and unique regional identity. Unlike the majority of French regions, whose rural dialectics have been lost under the republic, Brittany has not one but two regional languages, Breton and Gallo, which are still taught in schools today. Image eight in Appendix A shows a set of bilingual street signs in both French and Breton. A 2008 study which polled a representative sample of Bretons asked them to describe their connection to Brittany as: very attached, somewhat attached, somewhat unattached, or totally unattached. 65.2% of Bretons identified themselves as very

\(^{20}\) Le Galès, “Reshaping,” 129.

\(^{21}\) Ibid, 136.
attached to their region, and 29.1% as somewhat attached. Another question asked them to identify themselves culturally as: Breton and not French, more Breton than French, equally Breton and French, more French than Breton, or French and not Breton. 22.5% identified themselves as more Breton than French, 50% as equally Breton and French, and 15.4% as more French than Breton. The study effectively demonstrated that the vast majority of French citizens in Brittany have a strong sense of both national and regional identity, without appearing to find a contradiction between them. As a cultural and geographic territory whose relationship to the French Republic (and to the pre-republic French nation) is historically complicated, Brittany perfectly represents the increasing shift toward the multicultural model peasant France as well as the possibility of duality of identity within the Republic.

To avoid presenting a biased and one-sided view of decentralization in France, we must acknowledge certain limitations of the movement toward a more diverse model of nationhood. While the trend away from traditional republicanism and toward decentralization is significant, it must be qualified. In the words of Patrick Le Gales, “This transformation is far from complete and requires further examination.” For one, the diffusion of political authority from the centralized national government in Paris to regional, departmental, and local authorities should not be overstated. Despite Poggeschi’s claim that “France [is] experimenting with a process of decentralization which looks like a revolution,” it is a far sight from the sudden and violent action of the Revolution of 1789, or even the slow, smoldering urban malaise of the 1980s and ‘90s. Though the territorial collectivities have gained much greater autonomy since the reforms of 1982, Paris is still the powerful political center of the French Republic. The President of the

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Republic holds his seat at the Palais de l’Élysée in the eighth arrondissement. The Prime Minister stays at the Hôtel Matignon in the seventh, with the majority of his governmental ministries arrayed around him. The Upper House of French Parliament, the Senate, holds court at the Palais du Luxembourg in the sixth, with the President of the Senate in the neighboring Petit Luxembourg. Meanwhile, the Lower House of Parliament, the National Assembly, meets in the Palais Bourbon in the seventh. Finally, the Constitutional Council convenes at the Palais Royal in the first arrondissement. All of this goes to show that Paris remains the heart of power in the republic; the ultimate symbol of what Rogers calls France of the powerful. Even the buildings—the palaces—in which they convene represent the traditional power of the French nation. From these legal and decision-making bodies, all political authority trickles down, even to the newly autonomous territorial collectivities. Without the influence of the Senate, the National Assembly, and the Constitutional Council, no decentralizing reform would have been achieved at all. As we have explored throughout this chapter, the French state is in the process of distributing its central powers to the diverse territories which make up the nation, but the role of Paris in the process, even into the foreseeable future, should not be underestimated.

The decentralization and diversification of French culture, in favor of a pluralistic form of identity, is also a trend which cannot be oversimplified. Again, though there is a great deal of evidence that France is moving toward multiculturalism, the transition is neither smooth nor unchallenged. In particular, the decentralizing movement has sparked a massive reaction from the political far-right. In chapter two, we discussed the increasing support for the National Front and its historic leader, Jean Marie Le Pen. The extreme right’s rise in popularity, garnering national attention in the 1995 presidential election, was in direct response to the threat of European multiculturalism, which we have explored in this chapter. Of the ’95 elections, Pierre

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Birnbaum notes, “For the first time in the history of France, a party has been able to attract roughly 15 percent of the vote by openly declaring itself to be racist.” The rise of the French National Front has everything to do with its appeal to traditional republicanism, to a national identity which ties unity to uniformity. Le Pen’s success at the polls seems to suggest that this vision of the French Republic still resonates with portions of the population. Despite, or perhaps because of the shift toward multiculturalism since the early ‘80s, a radicalized faction of French citizens have embraced the view that “French identity [cannot] support any rival identities whatsoever. Blood and race constitute its cultural foundation, which tolerates no pluralism, no difference.” This xenophobic conception of French identity rejects the historical diversity of the French rural territories, as well as the heritage of racial or ethnic others, such as immigrants. It seeks to defend itself against all cultural decentralization; against the increasing autonomy of regional identity within, and against the multicultural pressure of the European Union without. Despite the surge of Le Pen and the French National Front since the 1990s, however, they still represent a marginalized, if radical and outspoken, minority of the French population. Far from halting the decentralizing movement in French culture and politics, their nationalist objections have served to marginalize them further. Both regionalism and multiculturalism have gained force since the 1990s.

In this chapter, we have explored the shifting balance between France of the powerful—a highly centralized nation-state defined by the uniformity of its territories and of its cultural identity—and peasant France—a collection of diverse regional territories which allows for unique cultures and identities to coexist within the state. Though the tension between these fundamentally opposed visions of the French Republic are unlikely to ever be fully resolved,

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27 Ibid.
they can help us to understand the changes and reforms of French society, particularly in the past thirty years. Since the 1980s, a decentralizing shift toward peasant France has occurred in French legislation and in popular consciousness. The very Constitution now describes the French Republic as “decentralized”. “What seems certain is that the process of regionalization in France… [is] strongly linked to the process of European integration.”

By challenging the sovereignty of the nation, the European Union has facilitated the rise of local and regional forms of identity, including the “deeply rooted traditions…, anchored in the French soil and expressed in highly diverse rural societies,” which define peasant France. Despite opposition from minority political groups, like the French National Front, the European Union and the newly autonomous territorial collectivities are diversifying the French Republic and will continue to do so.

In this chapter, we have spent a great deal of time discussing the trend toward decentralization in French culture and politics—a trend toward what Susan Rogers calls “peasant France”—and the role that the European Union has played in this transition. The themes of decentralization and regionalism in Europe are important in many ways, but for the purposes of this paper their primary significance is the way in which they contribute to rural development and to the symbol of the peasant in modern France. Now that we have explored the decentralizing shift away from Jacobin-centralism in French public policy, we can look at rural development in the next section.

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Chapter Four

The Development of New Rural Territories

In the minds and imaginations of the French, the highly centralized Republic is associated with unity, modernity, and most often with the dominant urban centers like Paris. In contrast, the decentralized state made up of relatively autonomous, identity rich regions represents “La France profonde, an almost untranslatable term [which] conjures up the idea that the “real” France is rural France, found in the landscape that shifts constantly from plain to mountain and back again.”

“La France profonde”—a phrase famously used by Michel Dion as the title of his 1988 book—represents the deeply felt French view that the diverse rural spaces, the spaces belonging to the symbolic peasant, are the true heart of the French nation. According to this view, the decentralizing movement away from “the dominant ideologies” and the hegemony of Paris is in fact a return to true France. Of course, there are many French citizens who would dispute this claim for a variety of reasons, but the importance of peasant-France in the national culture is strongly expressed by the trend toward decentralization and regionalism. Rogers writes, “In the post-1968 era, peasant society has more often been championed (and its demise mourned)… as a way of objecting to the over-bearing weight of the State, defending a people’s right to self-determination or protesting the artifice and oppression of urban life.”

On a symbolic level, it is clear that the development of independent regions, departments, and communes is consistent with French land-based identity, as the inverse of modernization, urbanization, and industrialization in French culture. Also on a practical and political level, decentralization contributes to the re-development of rural communities. “The existence of a

29 Bruce Crumley, “How to Save Rural France,” Time (Monday Aug. 02, 2010), 1.
31 Rogers, “Good,” 59.
multiplicity of rural territories and localities that... possess a strong historical and cultural
identity, coupled with a persistent communal structure that divides the country into over 36,000
distinct administrative territories, collectively provide a framework that is propitious to a rural
development initiative that seeks to encourage and build upon local experience, identity, and
actions.”32 In a very real sense, a centralized and hegemonic government, exclusively located in
the urban center of France was ill prepared to achieve meaningful rural development. For one,
the elitist national government of Paris was completely out of touch with life in la France
profonde and with the needs of those rural territories. Also, the traditional republican ideology—
what Dion calls “the dominant ideology” of Paris—which refuses to acknowledge the cultural
difference of its constituent territories, only served (or, in some cases, serves) to alienate the rural
communities. In the past thirty years alone, the authority of regions and communes, which exist
in much closer symbiosis to the rural spaces that they represent, has contributed to the
development of “new rural territories.”

Though the re-development of rural France is nearly always described as the return to a
state which previously existed, as the rebirth of an old order, it is important to note that the
make-up of the French countryside has radically and perhaps irreversibly changed since the rise
of industrialization in the early 19th century. “As in all post-industrial societies, France’s
agricultural labor force has dropped to a small percentage of its total working population (8% by
1975, stabilized since then).”33 Despite the massive changes which the countryside has
undergone since then, including a consistent worsening of the agricultural economy and mass
migrations toward urban centers, the state did little to support its agricultural communities. Up
till the 1980s, “rural France, like the rural parts of many of the country’s neighbors, still retained

32 Henry Buller, “Re-creating Rural Territories: LEADER in France,” Sociologia Ruralis 40, no. 2 (Dec. 2002): 190-
198, 190.
33 Rogers, “Good,” 57.
a territorial organization that was a legacy of the nineteenth century, when the rural population was much larger and more evenly distributed, when the rural economy was more autonomous… Since that time, the demography and economy of rural France have been transformed.”

To remedy this stagnation, current agricultural policy focuses on the development of “new rural territories,” which incorporate many traditional aspects of the agricultural communities while seeking new solutions to their economic and social problems.

One such solution is the growing importance of tourism in rural spaces, “tapping into the urban French’s infatuation with the countryside.” As it becomes increasingly difficult to make a living through traditional wholesale agriculture, the tourist industry presents many opportunities for rural families to secure their financial well-being. *Time* magazine’s Bruce Crumley reports that “the nation’s adoration of its countryside means that its villages, farms, plains and rivers are the leading destination in France for both domestic and international tourists.

According to France’s Chambers of Agriculture, that fondness for the French terroir already generates around $25 billion in tourism-related income for the countryside per year.” Though in some ways the importance, and indeed necessity, of tourism in the countryside is a testament to the loss of traditional agrarian communities in France. In times of better economic health, the participation of the urban population in the French countryside would have been not only redundant but indeed unwelcome. On the other hand, the fact that the French people, approximately 75% of whom live in cities and towns, are willing to dispense 25 billion dollars annually just to experience the countryside shows a major focus on rural heritage in

34 Buller, “Re-creating,” 191.
35 Crumley, “How to Save,” 2.
36 Ibid.
37 Ibid.
38 Equivalent to about 19.5 billion (19,506,750,000.00) euros. Presumably Crumley converted the sum to U.S. dollars for the sake of clarify to his American readership.
modern France. There is a strong possibility that this sentiment is a wide-spread reaction to the centralized urban centers and the social problems that they represent. “Despite the country’s [traditionally] dominant Jacobin ideology of one country, one language, one people, the French have shrugged off the national myth of uniformity and headed for areas where regional flavors and customs remain vibrant.”\textsuperscript{39} What’s more, the rise of tourism in predominantly agricultural spaces represents an important change in the mentality of French rural culture. Increasingly, the people of these regions are adopting an open and hospitable perspective on outsiders, in contrast to the backward, xenophobic mentality often attributed to them by republican critics.

Another unique feature of the new rural territories, somewhat related to the trend of tourism, is the rise of peri-urbanization. This term was developed to help understand the changing relationship between urban and rural spaces, and describes the areas in between highly populated urban centers and sparsely populated rural territories. These in-between areas have significantly increased in number over the past thirty years. Traditional studies by the INSEE\textsuperscript{40} have used a straightforward urban-rural binary, so that depopulation of rural areas was understood only as a migration to urban centers, and vice versa (theoretically, though the past two centuries have seen little movement in this direction). In the 1980s, however, it became clear that “this representation was overly simple. It ceased to be relevant when tendencies for rural population losses becoming city gains changed into rural growth associated with urban sprawl and peri-urbanization. Rural areas now house a new population category, of residents who work in urban areas but live in the ‘periphery’.”\textsuperscript{41} This complication of the traditional urban-rural binary is one of the most important aspects of the new rural territories. The populations of peri-

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{39} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{40} The French National Institute for Statistics and Economic Studies, or l’Institut national de la stastique et des études économiques.
  \item \textsuperscript{41} Keith Hoggart, \textit{City’s Hinterland: Dynamism and Divergence in Europe’s Peri-Urban Territories}, (Abingdon, Oxon, GBR: Ashgate Publishing Group, 2005), 72.
\end{itemize}
urban areas, also called the hinterland, are increasingly essential to the survival of agricultural communities and to the new rural identity. Though some rural people still view the expansion of the hinterland as a kind of encroachment by urban populations and a loss of their unique heritage, this is not necessarily the case. In a very real sense, peri-urbanization represents the integration of new populations into the rural territories. They are drawn by the symbolic and practical appeal of the countryside, by the unique and quintessential French-ness of these spaces, which they failed to find in the urban centers. As we saw in chapter three, this migration has corresponded to a dramatic increase of diverse regional identity in the public consciousness over the past thirty years.

Moreover, peri-urbanization represents a possible solution to two major problems in French society. The first is a host of issues, all related to over population in urban centers, such as Paris. In addition to the predictable resource problems intrinsic to massively concentrated groups of people, France has faced (and in many cases contributed to) mounting conflict with immigrants and racial others. Beginning in the mid-80s, these marginalized and excluded groups began to express their discontent with the urban and national administration in increasingly violent ways. The trend of aggressive demonstrations, public acts of violence, and all out riots in the streets of Paris and other French cities, has carried through the 90s and well into the new millennium. Non-coincidentally, this rise in urban violence corresponds to the major peri-urban migrations to the French countryside. Henry Buller maintains that this social movement is directly “linked to what is generally perceived to be a growing ‘urban crisis’ in France.”\(^{42}\) Though there is no clear end in sight for the violence in French urban centers, peri-urbanization does present an alternative for the disillusionsed masses of French immigrants. “The urban-rural movement observed here… is very different, comprising… an essentially disenfranchised and

\(^{42}\) Buller, “Re-creating.” 195.
marginalized urban population, often living in poor housing and upon social assistance for whom the city offers few, if any, opportunities for improved well-being. For such groups, rural areas become associated with development opportunities and reinsertion within a local social fabric.\[^{43}\]

The new rural territories of France offer advantages and prospects which are simply unavailable in the overloaded cities, but they also rely upon the residents of the hinterland for their present and future survival. The second problem to which peri-urbanization is a potential solution is the trend of rural depopulation which has continued unchecked since the 19\(^{th}\) century. Gradual and continuous loss of jobs in the agricultural sector has been the driving force behind traditional urbanization. The growing population of individuals who live in the countryside but work in the cities or larger towns has successfully stemmed, and even reversed, the migration out of rural territories. INSEE reports that, over the past thirty years, the countryside has ceased to depopulate. As of about 1985, migration to predominantly rural spaces, including the rural hinterland, has begun to rise at the moderate rate of 0.1\% per year. Under the influence of peri-urbanization, this number has become positive for the first time since the creation of the INSEE, while migration from rural spaces into cities has fallen into the negatives. This population growth does not extend to the most isolated rural areas which are unaffected by peri-urbanization. Those territories continue to depopulate.\[^{44}\] Though agricultural jobs are still significantly lower than fifty years ago, rural communities made up of industrial and urban workers continue to gather in the hinterland, providing a potential base of economic support for local farmers.

The tourists who regularly flock to the French countryside and the more permanent peri-urban populations represent two crucial components of the new rural territories. While neither of these groups participate directly in the agricultural lifestyle, and their place in \textit{la France}\[^{45}\]

\[^{43}\] \textit{Ibid}, 196.
profonde is dubious at best, the movement of the French population toward rural spaces shows that a strong vestige of land-based identity still remains at the heart of French culture. The trends of the past thirty years also represent a change in the mentality of the rural peoples of France. The new rural territories are characterized by increased cultural openness and acceptance of outsiders. These qualities are essential in a country where the traditional division between urban and rural spaces has become blurred and permeable. Also the agricultural economy has become more and more dependent on the support of the tourist and peri-urban communities around them. As selling produce to whole-sale buyers becomes less profitable, direct sale to smaller local buyers has become more common.

France’s new rural territories have had to undergo many changes in order to survive in modern day France and Europe. One of the ways in which they have sought to preserve their traditional, regional identities, however, is through a profound (though not always successful) resistance to the industrialization of agriculture. For the French, who place such cultural value on food, wine, and other elements of the terroir, local and regional agriculture is not simply an industry; it is a crucial piece of their identity as a people. French land-based identity “represents an attempt to see farming less as an element in a series of largely vertical production chains and more a key horizontal component of local territorial construction, definition and identity; the de-territorialization of agriculture being one of the more marked features of agricultural modernization.”45 This mentality is intimately connected to the trend of political and cultural decentralization which we explored in chapter three. The majority of French people are unwilling to trade in the unique terroir of their regions for a standardized and industrialized agriculture which acknowledges no difference between the diverse territories of the French countryside. This resistance on the part of the French people is consistent with the idea of France as the “land

45 Buller, “Re-creating.” 194.
of artisan tradition, well defined local specificity, and culinary refinement. It also represents a similar sentiment to that behind the system of Appellation d’Origine Contrôlée, which we discussed in chapter one. All of this is set in opposition to “foodstuffs that are industrially produced at low cost, often unidentified as to source, and sometimes genetically modified,” and to the wiping out of region-specific agricultural heritage.

The European Union plays an interesting role in the French binary of industry versus local tradition. In the French imagination, Europe is often cast as an industrial force, or at least as a threat to their unique agricultural identity. This is partly because the EU encourages open trade between its member nations, introducing questionable, low-cost foreign produce into the French market. In contrast to this view, Europe’s agricultural policy is highly invested in the success of local and regional governance in France. Henry Buller argues that, “the central objectives of the EU policy as it is implemented in a single state, might be summarized by three key words; local, development, actors, all three being brought together, in policy terms, under the broad umbrella of ‘innovation.’” Just as the European Union enabled the French move toward decentralization and regionalism in a general sense, its agricultural policy reaches out to the sub-national levels of French government. The main branch of Europe’s Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) at work in France is the LEADER initiative. This European initiative is partly guided by the observation that “both the market and the state have arguably ‘failed’ much of rural France… particularly as they have often colluded in pursuing a single productivist rural-agricultural development agenda whose impact has largely been the deterritorialization of rural space.”

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47 Ibid.
48 Buller, “Re-creating,” 191.
49 A French acronym for “Liaison Entre Actions de Developpement de l’Economie Rurale”, or “links between actions for the development of the rural economy.”
50 Ibid, 190.
light of this failure, the LEADER initiative has sought to capitalize on, rather than undermine, the French love of regional *terroir*, focusing on tourism and the commodification of region specific products. It is not plausible to list, or even summarize all of the projects coordinated and funded by the LEADER initiative, many of which have been criticized for being wasteful and inefficient. For the purpose of this chapter, however, the important fact is the way in which the European agricultural policy has empowered local and regional authorities to achieve meaningful rural development. LEADER has been influential in developing the new rural territories whose characteristics we have examined in this chapter, particularly by strengthening the economic autonomy of the French regions. While LEADER I, the first phase of the initiative, focused its funding on individual communes, with all projects under full oversight of the European Commission; under LEADER II “the French programme has been regionalized. In France, one could claim that the regions are more territorially ‘innnovative’ than commune-based localities." 

In short, European policies have helped to develop innovative bottom-up reform in France and to consolidate this reform on a regional basis. Though the full effects of these initiatives has yet to come to light, the existence of relatively self-determining rural territories, each endowed with unique identity and commodities, is a hopeful sign for French agriculture.

Our final example, which ties together many of the themes of this chapter and thesis, is the French organic farming movement. Organic farming is generally defined as a type of agriculture which rejects the use of any unnatural elements. This includes: synthetic fertilizers and pesticides, genetically altered crops or livestock, added growth hormones, and any other chemical additives to the soil, crops, or livestock. Organic farming places premium emphasis

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52 In French: agriculture / fermeture / cultivation biologique (bio).
upon sustainable and environmentally responsible farming practices, often in the form of a return to pre-industrial or pre-modern techniques.

It is impossible to mark the beginning of organic farming in France, since it is largely based upon ancient methods of agriculture, but it entered the national consciousness as a social movement around the 1980s. We have discussed the wide-spread French resistance to the view of food and wine production as just another industry, and this is an example of the same social sentiment. In response to the industrialization of agriculture, with increased use of chemicals, hormone treatments, and genetic tampering in crops, opponents began to demand a return to a historical style of farming. In 1981, organic farming gained attention from the French government, which “officially recognized it by creating a national commission responsible for the organization and development of organic farming in France. In 1985, the state logo for organic products, AB (agriculture biologique) was launched. This level of state recognition led to the wide acceptance of organic agriculture in France and across its borders.”

When the AB logo was released, France was the European front-runner in organic farming, containing an estimated forty percent of Europe’s organically farmed land.

With their sentimental attachment to the earth and to the idyllic peasant France, it is unsurprising that organic farming found a niche in French culture. The movement has only gained force since its rise to prominence in the 1980s. Image nine contains a bar graph showing the evolution of surface area and number of farms using organic production methods in France,

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from 1995 through 2011. The graph unmistakably shows a steady increase, both in number of hectares and number of farms using organic techniques. It also shows a regular increase in the quantity of land being converted from non-organic to organic. In the sixteen year period, the total number of French organic hectares (including those in conversion) has risen from well below 200,000 hectares to nearly one million hectares; from less than 0.5% of total French farmland in 1995 to 3.6% in 2011. While 3.6% is still a relatively tiny amount of land, what matters is the tremendous growth which the French organic movement has achieved in a short space of time. Even as other areas of the agricultural market have suffered setbacks and losses, particularly since the 2008 financial crisis, the number of organic farms has continued to increase sharply. From the beginning of the financial crisis in 2008 to the INSEE’s most recent figure, taken at the end of 2011, the amount of organically farmed land in France has increased from 584,000 hectares to 975,141 hectares. The phenomenon may still be small, but organic agriculture is on the rise in France. The statistics unambiguously confirm this conclusion, leading us to two essential questions. How do organic farms fit into France’s new rural territories, and what does their success tell us about the future of French agriculture and rural life?

The organic farm movement certainly represents one possible solution to French agriculture’s most pressing question: “what should the spaces and territories of rural development be, and how should they relate to existing organizational forms... as the policy agenda for European rural spaces shifts away from primary production exclusivity towards a

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56 The exceptions are 2004, when the conversion land dropped significantly but existing organic land remained unchanged, and 2006 – 2007 when both conversion land and total organic hectares fell.
57 Ibid.
concern for more sustainable forms of resource use." If there is one word which defines the organic agriculture movement, it is “sustainability,” making it the perfect answer to the demands of European agricultural policy. The E.U.’s Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) is of particular importance now, since it is set to expire and be renegotiated in 2013. Currently, French farmers are the recipients of almost 20% of CAP funding, equivalent to about $54 billion. Going into 2013, “E.U. criteria linking subsidies to greener, sustainable farming practices and wider rural development rather than traditional production volumes will expand considerably, placing additional pressure on France, whose $82 billion agricultural sector is by far the largest in Europe.” Changes in Europe’s criteria for agricultural aid will have a massive impact on the development of French rural territories, though the exact nature of the impact is still a matter for debate and speculation. In any case, the organic farming movement and those who abide by its standards have taken the lead on what may become a much larger-scale rural transformation. With the financial aid of Europe’s Common Agricultural Policy, it seems likely that organic practices will soon take on a significantly greater role in French agriculture.

The demands of the European Union aside, organic farming is perfectly compatible with the values and characteristics of the new rural territories, which we have discussed in this chapter, and with French land-based identity which we have explored in various ways throughout the thesis. In a figurative sense, the successes of organic agriculture represent the continued importance of the peasant in French culture and a potentially optimistic future for its rural communities. In order to understand the connection between the role of organic farms and the larger themes of this work, we will look specifically at one such farm, located in Yonne, Bourgogne, an hour south-east of Paris (see image ten). The small, three hectare farm, which we

59 Buller, “Re-creating,” 193.
60 Crumley, “How to Save,” 1.
previously examined in the Introduction, is called the Ferme de Rosny, and it is the home of Frederic Canler, his wife Sophie, and their six children. The Canler family purchased the property in 2008, at which time they began their experience with organic farming.

When asked why he and his wife chose to follow the organic route, despite its many challenges, Frederic simply responded, “We chose organic agriculture because it is the only kind that respects nature, the planet, and thus human beings… We have to leave a clean planet for our children and educate them a respect for nature and for themselves.” This answer serves to underline the essential motivation of organic farming, respect for the land and for ourselves as human beings. As we have explored, nothing could be more fundamentally French than the love of the land which this philosophy implies. As a people, the French have always identified themselves with their soil, with the unique terroir that it produces, with their regional flavor, for which there is no substitute. Organic farmers like Frederic have simply picked up this land-identity and generalized it to a categorical imperative: if human identity is derived from the soil and its produce, then they must be treated with all the respect that we owe to ourselves and our fellow man. The connection between people and their land must also be taken literally, since the pollutants that farmers put into the soil will in turn be ingested by the residents of the community. This is why the organic farming movement places such great emphasis upon respect for the earth, and why it has resonated so well with the French people.

Another driving force behind organic farms like the Ferme de Rosny, is a strong emphasis on tradition. Like the symbol of the peasant from chapter one, the age-old agricultural practices, which Frederic uses, serve as a connection to past generations, both recent and distant. By preparing his fields as bygone French farmers would have prepared theirs, by planting as they

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61 The quotes from Frederic Canler are taken from an email interview sent by the author on March 13, 2013, and answered by Frederic on March 18, 2013. A transcript of the interview, in French, is available in Appendix B. The English responses in the chapter are the author’s own translations.
would have planted, and weeding as they would have weeded, Frederic preserves the heritage of his rural community every day. His labor does not just have financial value; it has tremendous cultural value as well. Frederic Canler goes beyond the minimum standard for organic farmers, even using donkeys to plow and weed his fields. Image eleven shows Frederic and Sophie working as a team with a donkey-drawn plow to weed their corn field. While it would certainly be easier to use machinery for tasks such as this, the Canlers find cultural value in more traditional ways of doing things. In Frederic’s own words, “Tradition is huge in agriculture. The family burden in particular… One has to have a strong character or a great independence of spirit [for organic farming].” The strength of character and independence of spirit has everything to do with the French resistance to industrialization of agriculture, which strips away the unique rural heritage that should be inherent to working the land. For organic farmers like Frederic and Sophie Canler, farming is less about the quantity of food that they can churn out and more about growing high quality crops, whose production is part of their cultural identity at every stage. They are willing to work harder to preserve a connection with their rural heritage.

While tradition is essential for organic farming, innovation is equally important. Of innovation Frederic says, “Even if the methods of cultivating land are old, innovation is essential for organic agriculture because it allows [us] to reduce the time and aggravation of the work… Organic farmers are constantly searching for innovation on their land. They share their knowledge.” This need for innovation is a general truth in the new rural territories; as we discussed earlier in the chapter, French agriculture must adapt to the modern world in order to survive. One form of innovation in France’s contemporary rural communities is the direct sale of produce in neighboring peri-urban or urban communities. Compared to selling produce to large scale distributers, this method can yield greater profits, but the challenge of finding customers is
also greater. Luckily for Frederic, there is a crucial niche for organic produce, which allows him to market his goods successfully. His financial success might not be possible, however, in a cut-off rural community without access to urban or peri-urban populations. This is where the structure of France’s new rural territories proves so important. Through the organization AMAP, and with the help of the internet, he can easily set up two market dates per week: one in his local peri-urban community in Yonne and one in Paris. The customers simply purchase his produce in advance online, then they arrive on the market day and pick up the goods for which they have already paid. Modern technology and modern rural communities, with their blending of rural and urban elements, make transactions like this possible.

The second source of innovation in the rural territories is the major introduction of tourism, bringing peri-urban, urban or even international people into the countryside to experience the cultural value of the rural way of life. The way in which Frederic harnesses this at the Ferme de Rosny is through his “ferme pédagogique,” or “teaching farm”. One to three times per week, Frederic allows a group of children or adults to visit his property and to learn about some aspect of organic agriculture or life on the farm in general. The education topics range from animal care, to soil treatment, to proper planting and harvesting techniques. The visitors to the farm range from mentally disabled children to fully capable adults who hope to purchase land of their own. Image thirteen shows Frederic teaching a class of children from a nearby school. For a standard fee, any group of people may come to the Ferme de Rosny and experience “la vie bio”. The proceeds from these lessons and tours allow Frederic to keep on top of his financial obligations and to continue the work that he is doing on his small plot of land. In order to

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62 AMAP stands for Associassions pour le maintien d’une agriculture paysanne, or associations for the maintenance of a peasant agriculture. Note the significant use of the word peasant in this context.
maintain the traditional, peasant lifestyle of an organic farmer, Frederic is forced to use innovation to earn his living in the countryside.

In conclusion, organic farming (and la Ferme de Rosny in particular) represents identity-making tradition and heritage combined with ground-breaking innovation. Frederic exemplifies the potential of French agriculture by preserving a connection to the historical past and rejecting the industrialization of food production, while also exploring new ways to make a living from his land. As the make-up of the French countryside continues to evolve, its farms and farmers will have to find a way to reconcile their traditional heritage with many social changes. The recent success of the organic farming movement, despite widespread economic distress, is an encouraging omen for the future of the French rural territories.
Conclusion

Over the course of the past fifty-five pages, we have studied the role of terre and terroir in the culture of food, art, film, history, political rhetoric, the politics of decentralization, and, most importantly, French agriculture. In each of these subjects, the peasant and the land-based identity which he represents have appeared as a major unifying theme. This is because the struggle, survival, and disappearance of the peasant—depending on the context of the symbol—capture a central conflict in the French imagination. He represents the ideal of life in contact and in harmony with the earth; he represents a pre-modern, pre-industrial, or even pre-republican social order, often located in France’s rural communities; he represents resistance to the centralized power of urban centers like Paris and to the republican “washing away of region-specific cultural diversity.”¹ For all of these reasons and more, the peasant remains as potent a symbol to the contemporary French as he has ever been. Anxiety about loss of cultural identity to industrial modernity takes many forms, but it is as present today as it was at the turn of the nineteenth century.

Even today, the peasant serves as the emblem of la France profonde, of France in its truest form as it exists in its diverse rural territories. Of course, this vision of France as a nation, of peasant France, is directly opposed to the traditional republican view of one republic, one republic, one language, one culture, one identity. This conflict, between national uniformity and regional diversity, is at the heart of French culture and history, beginning with the Revolution of 1789. In the ideological clash of peasant France and France of the powerful, the peasant serves as the emblem of a nation which gains identity from the cultural diversity territories which comprise it, a nation associated with its rural or agricultural communities. The inverse, of course, is a nation defined by the uniformity of its culture and of its constituent territories.

¹ Rogers, “Good,” 58.
In recent decades, the rise to power of the European Economic Community and then the European Union have sparked great anxiety about the future of peasant France. The fear for many French is that the standardizing pressure of a continental government will wipe out the unique collection of sub-national cultures within France’s borders. There is much evidence, however, that the EU has had the opposite effect. By challenging the sovereignty of the nation-state, Europe has facilitated a significant rise in sub-national, particularly regional, forms of identity. Since the 1980s, France has undergone a major trend of political and social decentralization, in which governing authority and economic autonomy have gradually been transferred from the centralized republic to the regions, departments, and communes. On a social level, this phenomenon has manifested itself as an increased tolerance toward alternate forms of identity within the republic.

The advances of peasant France in recent decades has also lead to a greater focus on the France’s often marginalized agricultural communities, and to the development of new rural territories. European agricultural policy has helped to integrate the traditional French love of the land and the historic diversity of the rural territories with innovative forms of revenue. The result is a French countryside that successfully capitalizes on the tourist industry and taps into peri-urban and urban populations. The new rural territories are more open to outsiders and better integrated with the greater French population, while preserving the integrity of their agricultural heritage. Exemplified by the rising organic agriculture movement, France’s rural territories face the challenge of balancing tradition and heritage with innovation, in order to guard their place in contemporary Europe.

Despite the difficulties and challenges which the future holds for French agricultural communities, the evidence suggests that they will play an important role in modern France and
Europe. As the steady rise of organic agriculture suggests, the French people have not forgotten their fundamental attachment to their unique soil and terroir. Though his meaning will inevitably evolve, the iconic peasant is still essential to French culture.
Appendix A

Image 1: French Wine Label
Image 2: American Wine Label
Image 3: Jean-François Millet, *Des Glaneuses*, 1857, oil on canvas, 82.3 cm × 111 cm.

Musée d’Orsay, Paris.
Image 8: Street signs in Brittany translated into French and Breton
Image 9: The evolution of surface area (in thousands of hectares) and number of farms using organic production methods in France, from 1995 through 2011.
Image 10: Yonne, Bourgogne; respectively the department and region of the Ferme de Rosny.
Image 11: Frederic and Sophie Canler weeding their corn-field with a donkey-drawn plow.
Image 12: Frederic showing children from a local school the proper way to hold a chicken.
Appendix B

This is a transcript of an email sent by Ben Sargent to Frederic and Sophie Canler on March 13, 2013.

“Bonjour, Fréderic et Sophie. Je sais que vous devez être très occupé à la préparation des champs et à la plantation. Je vous souhaite tout le meilleur. J’espère que tout va bien chez vous et que les enfants réussissent à l’école.

La raison pour laquelle je vous écris est parce que, au moment, j’écris ma thèse dernière au sujet des territoires rurales de la France, du symbole du paysan dans la culture française, et (plus important) de l’agriculture bio. Si vous avez du temps, j’espère que vous êtes disposés à répondre à quelques questions.

1. Quand et comment est-ce que vous avez arrivé à la Ferme de Rosny ?
2. Pourquoi est-ce que vous avez choisi l’agriculture bio pour la Ferme de Rosny ?
3. Que signifie l’agriculture bio pour vous ?
4. Comment va le marché des produits bios, compare aux autres produits (les produits non-bios) ?
5. (A) Quel rôle joue la tradition dans l’agriculture bio ? (B) Quel rôle joue l’innovation ? (C) Est-ce que les fermes bios réussissent à combiner les deux ? Comment ?
6. Quel rôle joue les fermes bio dans l’agriculture française ? Quel rôle joue l’agriculture bio dans la France et dans l’Union Européen ?

Je ne me dépêche pas, mais, si vous avez du temps, je serais sensible à vos réponses. Comme le printemps arrive, je pense et rêve de plus en plus de la Ferme de Rosny. J’espère qu’un jour je vais retourner chez vous.

Cordialement, Ben Sargent”
This is a transcript of the reply from Frederic and Sophie, received on March 18, 2013.

“Ben, voici les réponses à tes questions.

1. Nous sommes arrivés à la ferme de Rosny il y a 4.5 ans. C'est un ami agriculteur qui nous a informé que la ferme était à vendre.

2. Nous avons choisi l'agriculture bio parce que c'est la seule qui respecte la nature, la planète et donc l'être humain.

3. Pour nous l'agriculture bio signifie respecter la planète et donc respecter les humains.
   Il faut pouvoir laisser une planète propre à nos enfants et les éduquer au respect de la nature donc d'eux même.

4. Le marché est bon et progresse mais il reste encore très minoritaire. La crise économique n'incite pas la population à se diriger vers ces produits.

5. (A) La tradition est énorme dans l'agriculture. Le poids familial en particulier. Il est très difficile pour un jeune agriculteur qui prend la suite de son père de changer de méthode de cultures. Il faut avoir un fort caractère ou une grande indépendance d'esprit. (B) Même si les méthodes de cultures sont anciennes, l'innovation est primordiale en agriculture bio car elle permet de réduire le temps de travail et la pénibilité du travail. Ainsi, on peut espérer des gains de productivité. (C) Oui très bien. Les agriculteurs bios sont en constante recherche d'innovation pour leurs cultures. Ils partagent leur savoir-faire.

   Nous aussi nous aimerions te revoir prochainement,

Amicalement, Sophie et Frederic.
Bibliography


Millet, Jean François. *Des Glaneuses*. 1857, oil on canvas, 82,3 cm × 111 cm. Musee d’Orsay, Paris.


