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Peasants into Citizen in the European Countryside: The Modernization and the Politicization of the Countrymen since the 19th Century

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Abstract

The terms of ‘modernization’ and ‘modernity’ have been called into question not only in their French uses, but also in Italian, English and German. This questioning is largely based on historians adopting and using arguments which originate in the economic and anthropological disciplines. To our great regret, the term of modernisation has very much become a taboo amongst historians. Without going into great detail, we would like to outline the two main types of opposition:

On the one hand, the term of modernisation is criticised because it is thought to impose hierarchy of values and an image of ‘progress’ and of society which is not well adapted to the society of the 19th Century. This is the easiest criticism to refute as it takes a caricature of historiography as its starting point and puts forward a kind of anthropological refusal of modernisation in the name of consideration of inequalities and balance of power. But on the other hand, and more fundamentally, it is the nature of economic and moral representation of the 19th Century transition to liberal capitalism which is important, especially when it suggests that the market economy had already penetrated the countryside, and this independently of generalisation of urban models.

While the economic and social domains have seen the meanings of modernisation and its links with the State called into question, it seems difficult to reject its political and cultural significance and this fundamental coupling by Eugen Weber is reused in recent works about European countryside.

The debate around the role of the State in rural politicization, based on readings of Eugen Weber’s classical book Peasants into Frenchmen. The modernization of rural France (1870—1914) goes a lot further than the simple question of the efficiency of the administration and the limits of the image of those who represented it: it directly concerns the virtual integration into the State and the role of rural elites between that which is local and that which is national.

With using “politicization”, we intend to emphasize, on the one hand, the steps of the national integration of the whole rural society after 1830 and, on the other hand, the political acculturation of the peasants, their positive interpretation of citizenship, their own political agenda (learning to use the ballot after 1848 and adopting the mechanisms of political and not only social conflicts).

The aim of our paper is to consider the part played by the State and the “rural elites” in the political modernization of european countryside from 1830 to 1914 by comparing the European situation.

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With the terms of “rural elites”, we want to pursue the question of the relationships between social power and political influence with exploring the diversity of “rural elites” through the three following meanings: a) the traditional “notable” defined by “fear, respect, sympathy and dependency” (Eugen Weber) b) the mediators of rural society the “élite” as an intermediary class between peasantry and middle-class, between rural and micro-urban society (Henri Mendras) c) the emergence of a new group of local and national political leaders coming from the peasantry.

In choosing to approach political integration of the countryside—and particularly peasants, farmers and sharecroppers—through the example of the French, European and Mediterranean area by the turn of the century (mainly by comparing Italy, Spain and France and to a certain extent Germany) I do want to stress the importance of a comparative historiography of politicization on the European scale during the 19th century with the hope that these elements could form a basis for a broader comparison (with peasants politicization in other continental areas and with other periodisations like in 20th c. China for instance). But in using the formula “Peasants into citizens” which is a clear reference to the important book of Eugen Weber, Peasants into Frenchmen I do not mean to put forward peasants integration as a new field of research for the Euro-mediterranean region only according to a schema connected to the French field.

Let me illustrate the importance of this historiography by referring for instance to some articles of la Revue d’histoire du XIXe siècle, of Histoire et sociétés rurales and for a comparative approach to the couple of books from the conferences of l’Ecole Française de Rome about “La politisation des campagnes au XIXe s. en France, Italie, Espagne et Portugal” Jordi Canal, Gilles Pécout, Maurizio Ridolfi (eds.), La politisation des campagnes au XIXe siècle. France, Italie, Espagne et Portugal-Colloque de Rome 20—22 février 1997, EFR-De Boccard, 2000, 376 p.; Id. (eds.), Sociétés rurales du XXe siècle: France, Italie et Espagne, Rome-Paris, EFR-De Boccard, 2004 and Gilles Pécout, “La modernisation des campagnes italiennes des années 1830 à la fin des années 1920”, in Michel Pigenet, Gilles Pécout (eds.), Campagnes et sociétés en Europe. France, Allemagne, Espagne et Italie, 1830—1930, Paris, Editions del’Atelier, 2005, pp.5-16.. This historiography stressed that the France of the IIIrd Republic (from 1870 to World War I), the new united Italy (after the unification and the birth of the liberal Kingdom of Savoia and the old Spanish monarchy of the Restoration (after the the Revolution and the first Republic of 1873) have several common points in spite of a traditional historiography of the French republican specificity. Among these common features we have: the importance of the role of the State, the role of the Elites and the development of both an integrative and conflicting politicization.

My proposal is to consider some aspects of this historiography of the relationships between modernisation, political integration and citizenship in the French and Euro-Mediterranean countryside.

With using “politicization”, I intend to emphasize, on the one hand, the steps of the national integration of the whole rural society after 1830 and, on the other hand, the political acculturation of the peasants, their positive interpretation of citizenship, their own political agenda (learning to use the ballot after 1848 and adopting the mechanisms of political and not only social conflicts).

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The question to be discussed seems to me double:

a) is there, broadly speaking, a euro-mediterranean specificity of the evolution of rural political integration at the end of the 19th Century?

b) And more precisely what is the role of the organisational development in the political and democratic acculturation of—Italian, Spanish and French peasants which, by the ay, will be marked by the future corporative experiences of Mussolini, Franco and Petain?
I will therefore attempt to show the following:
- at first a number of points of discussion considering the relationships between modernization and agrarianism in the definition of a “partial rural citizenship” using readings of Eugen Weber’s texts of Peasants into Frenchmen.
- secondly, I will come back to the role of the state in political modernization and integration.
- and thirdly and finally I will briefly outline several comparative approaches on the political acculturation of the countryside in France and Mediterranean Europe, developed in the last 10 years.

There is no doubt that the terms of ‘modernization’ and ‘modernity’—at the heart of our panel—have been called into question not only in their French, Italian and Spanish uses, but also in English and German and I suppose in Chinese historiography.

This questioning is largely based on historians adopting and using arguments which originate in the economic and anthropological disciplines. To my great regret, the term has very much become a taboo amongst historians, even if we know that it is perfectly possible to have a “non naïve use of the concept of Modernization” as Clemens Zimmermann recently demonstrated starting by the observation of the German peasantry and micro-urban society at the end of the 19th Centuryiv.

Without going into great detail, I would like to outline the two main types of opposition developed in the recent historiography:

On the one hand, the term of modernisation is criticised because it is thought to impose hierarchy of values and an image of ‘progress’ and of society which is not well adapted to the rural society of the 19th Century. This is the easiest criticism to refute as it takes a caricature of historiography as its starting point and puts forward a kind of anthropological refusal of modernization in the name of consideration of inequalities and balance of power. We can find the same mechanism at work in French historiography’s clear contestation of the term ‘acculturation’ which is accused of similar defaults: suggesting that there are political ‘primitives’ which are to be civilised by political culture.

On the other hand, and more fundamentally, it is the nature of economic and moral representation of the 19th Century transition to liberal capitalism which is important, especially when it suggests that the market economy had already penetrated the countryside, and this independently of generalisation of urban models. In the French case, Nicolas Bourguinat’s work on the “révoltes frumentaires” takes up this idea of the existence of a “village fraction” which does not adopt communitarian reflexes of security and rejection of trade. We could find exactly the same reasoning among Italian historians of the Mezzogiorno, Pasquale Villani, for instance, who explain that trade outside the village community has been a feature of peasants’ lives since the Middle Agesv. Furthermore, recent studies on Spanish peasants in Cantabria, the campesino adaptativo by Martin Rafael Dominguez remind us that it is possible to engage in trade with the outside and even internationally despite living in a traditional region which is known to be isolated without following a standard process of modernisation which would assume its integration into the national trade economy. The result of this important and original thesis should be that there is no absolute connection between economic modernization and nationalisation of the market, between socio-economic and political citizenship.

But, while the economic and social domains have seen the meanings of modernization and its links with the state called into question, it seems difficult to reject its political and cultural significance.

Let me get back to Eugen Weber’s Peasants into Frenchmen. The main thesis is summered in the subtitle: “The Modernization of rural France”. The argument is quite simple: there is a clear connection between economic integration of French countryside and republican politicization during the IIIrd Republic (from 1880 to the first World War). For Weber, a great part of rural society (in the mountains of Massif Central or in Haute-Provence in southern France) has been forgotten by the Republican State and that means that the agrarian politics of Jules Meline couldn’t concern all the peasant classes and the peasantry of these areas is considered as culturally and socially backward. The author wrote even “un pays de sauvages” (a savages country).

This observation—id.est. the inequality of the penetration of the agrarian State is not an original discovery, but let’s reflect on the consequences of this inequality in the perspective of our conference by one question and two remarks.
The first observation is that the idea is in contradiction with the image of a popular and democratic agrarianism connected to the Republican State in France and in opposition to an elites and anti-democratic agrarianism connected to the Junkers’s State in Prussia. So, even if we have to share the main conclusions of the comparative study of protectionism in France and Germany at the end of the 19th century by Rita Aldenhoff-Hubinger (opposing the French way to the German one) we must be aware—looking at areas of French countryside—of the nuances of this French republican agrarianism. Following the first empiric remarks of Eugen Weber we see that “La République des paysans” “The Peasants Republic” was not so widespread.

The second observation concerns the relationships between economic integration, ideology and mentalities. Peasants into Frenchmen’s reasoning is too well known for me to go over it again in detail and I will limit myself to an observations of a synthetic nature on Weber’s model of impossible or difficult integration into nation and state: the State does not achieve its goal until late across the entirety of the country. Political and cultural acculturation—not solely economic integration—only become perceptible at the turn of the 19th century, the time when, as Weber puts it in the last sentence of his book, ‘popular and elite culture had come together again’. This in turn leads us to reject the peasant described by Maurice Agulhon as having an archaic mentality linked to his community, but a modern ideology linked to Republican ideas and the State which embodies them since 1848. And this leaves all debate open about the periodisation of politicization.

After the 2 observations, the question deals with alternative economic and political vectors of nationalisation: what is the relation between this unequal State and so called liberal or republican agrarianism and the development of agricultural cooperation? We know that both in France and in Italy after the Eighties of the 19th Century (For Italy it is after the Trade Code of 1882 about Joint-Stock Companies-Sociétés par actions there is a growth of cooperatives and popular banks Casse rurali popolari-Banques agricoles populaires (For France the date of the Meline law about rural banks is 1894).

Interesting is to know if this form of associationism is stronger in the areas considered as regions of backwardness. For my knowledge the answer is no: for the network of cooperatives and Rural Banks is above all important and early in Central Italy: Emilia-Romagna where the agrarian capitalism is more developed—with an important proletariat—and in Tuscany (with one of the fist Banca rurale of Italy in 1884 in Castelfiorentino) where the mezzadri, the sharecroppers begin to be well organized to resist to the Crisis of the eighties. For this cases, for this areas, it is impossible to make a systematic relation between, on the one hand, backwardness, insufficient penetration of the market and the State agrarianism and on the other hand rural cooperation. That’s why I think it’s always important to turn to the central role of the State.

II

The State—not only in the Jacobin France—is the main factor of peasant politicization between the middle of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century.

The diffusionist pattern of a political acculturation by “descente de la politique vers les masses” according to the classical study of Maurice Agulhon about the Second Republic in the French Mediterranean department of Var and the fundamental coupling (economic and political integration) by Eugen Weber are re-used in recent works, such as for example the conference proceedings published by Lutz Raphael and Jean-Luc Mayaud and entitled From Village to State which has a section called “Acculturation and modernization—the role of the state” x. Interestingly, Miguel Cabo Villaverde’s contribution on ‘State—and nation-building in Spain’ starts with a significant critical appraisal of the echo of Peasants into Frenchmen in French historiography and states the necessity for us to, I quote, ‘dare to reproduce the exploit for the whole of Italy, Germany or Spain’​. Writing on Galicia, Cabo Villaverde concludes his examination of Eugen Weber by insisting on the validity of the analysis of vectors of nationalisation (market, school, army and so on) even if he does not agree with other conclusions of Weber xii. And this is where the complex question of the role of the state intervenes.

Let us return to Weber’s text to see how the state is perceived in the process of modernization and of penetration of citizenship in the countryside.

The state appears first of all in a study of a system of reciprocal representations: The state seen by the peasants—and the countryside seen by state representatives. Weber’s approach is based on images and representations. We know that such an approach is not sufficient but the interest naturally lies with the analysis of the evolution of their register and the passing from one dominant image to another: from the primitive savage to the civilised patriot, from
the interchangeable, passive peasant to a peasant who subversively defends the Republic in 1848 and ‘conformist’ consent to the regime under the 3rd Republic. And following this use of images by peasants—which is very difficult to do for obvious reasons of sources-, I think we can observe that the agrarian citizenship cannot be limited to an organic view of the society but agrarian citizenship does work in France, in Italy and in Spain as a mix of, on the one hand, of communitarian, traditional values, and on the other hand, of collective, liberal, progressive and national values.

At this point, I will make one remark only in this analysis of reciprocal representations: The state is strictly synonymous with authority by means, primarily, of taxation, conscription and public order. We can simply wonder if there was not at the same period in time a positive image of the state as a protective entity, a possible recourse for the peasants. That, in any case, is the image freely found in parts of the French countryside after 1848 and clearly also in Italy during the period of unitary transition. And I’m sure the image of the Protector State is not completely absent of the Baltic Sea “ways of thinking” of Peasants or Village Elites.

Naturally, the state is not solely an exchange of representations linked to a balance of power.

First of all through the development of material structures in daily life, its communications and relations. ‘Roads, roads, and still more roads’ is the title or slogan of the 12th chapter of Peasants into Frenchmen which evaluates the impact of roads and railway lines in the development of new ideas and habits in the countryside. This reasoning is all the more valid in the case of a country like Italy that knew change at a national scale and where the development of modes of nation-wide communication predates the Nation-state—which explains the political role which Cavour attributed to railway lines during the Risorgiment.

Alongside these material vectors, E. Weber especially emphasizes the role of the school and schooling—defined, using period vocabulary as ‘a serious undertaking for civilisation’. No French critics of Eugen Weber—neither Maurice Agulhon nor Pierre Barral—question this role, quite to the contrary, in fact. They do, however insist that it is necessary to rethink the positions on the results of schooling, especially in terms of linguistic acculturation of rural society (and this is something we could come back to with the book of Chanet about Regional France and the national schoolxii).

As we can see, the debate around the role of the state in rural politicization, based on readings of Weber’s Peasants goes a lot further than the simple question of the efficiency of the administration and the limits of the image of those who represented it: it directly concerns the virtual integration into the state and the role of rural elites between that which is local and that which is national.

III

This debate—occasionally lively and polemical—has given rise to new or reformulated approaches on political acculturation in the countryside.

In the case of France, numerous paths have been opened up and I will not dwell upon them: Ranging from works on the beginning of the 19th century all the way to recent works on regional singularity of rural communism in the 20th Century, I would simply like to pick up on two elements:

- The question of periodisation which was widely debated has enabled us to grasp the problem of the relative hierarchy of the factors of entry into politics. Naturally, we are well aware that the factors are numerous and complex, but we also know that at certain times, it is a single one of these factors which becomes the crucial initiator. It is based on Weber and Agulhon, who both underline the importance of electoral permeation (1848 and at the end of the century), that historians and politists such as C. Guionnet have reinstated the problem of, I quote, ‘the apprenticeship of modern politics’ outside universal male suffragexiii.

- Another very important element is drawn from a reflection of Weber’s on the role of the Catholic Church which finds its place in the rational field of modern political combat. This particular attention to the positive role of the Church in the process of acculturation was not so widespread in French historiography. It is in the wake of these reflections that other works have sprung up on the modernising role of nationalising structures and instances considered traditional and anti-republican. The best example is Brittany where a new examination of the relations between ‘Religion and political identity’ was attempted for ‘Creating the Nation in Provincial France to quote the study of Caroline Fordxiv.

Finally, I would like to add some thoughts on the opening of new Euro-Mediterranean domains of research on politicization.
First of all, a remark which takes us back to the question of periodisation and the role of the second half of the 19th century. The conclusions on belated integration can be questioned for France, but they are particularly suited to a comparative reading of the evolution of the relations between the state and the countryside in Europe. There has been mention of a real administrative take-off for the peasants around 1860—1880 and the turn of the century. This is true of post-union Italy, of Spain in the sexenio democratico and the Restauration, of Prussia who experienced her great liberal reforms, it is also true of Greece under King George who, in 1863, put in place universal suffrage and reorganised local administration.

**Italy illustrates** a whole new way of approaching peasant politicization. In Mediterranean Europe, it is the only country where E.Weber’s book was published and received in a lengthy and important review by Alberto Banti. The heuristic posterity of the discussions around the argument of Peasants is clearly visible in the important text which concludes the storia dell’agricoltura—history of agriculture—edited by Bevilacqua. It is written by the historian Silvio Lanaro and is, rather significantly, entitled ‘Da contadini a Italiani’—‘Peasants into Italians’.

This approach to the Italian countryside does not go without saying—let me explain. For a long time the dominant model was that of the peasant victims of Italian Unity in the partly achieved process of the Risorgimento. This argument was linked to Gramsci’s lucid analysis but it transported a little too systematically the reality of the political exclusion of peasants during the first half of the 19th century to the second half of the same century.

It seems important to me to underline what an integrative force for politics was played by the new Italian state for the peasantry. New research undertaken, for example, in Tuscany and Romagna, have let us value the period of unitary transition as a first step of politicization by integration. This has made it possible to insist more strongly on the vectors of nationalisation (previously left aside in the Italian case) such as school or the army. True, this movement is contemporaneous with the repression of political brigandage in the South.

Nevertheless, the revaluation of integrative liberalism (by looking at the position of the elites and the measures of administrative rationalisation) is one of the important domains in Italian research on the politicization of peasants. And here, paradoxically, Weber’s model means we can advance and not wind back the chronology of politicization which had previously been seen as strictly linked to the socialist and catholic organisation of the countryside before the war.

What research on the Italy of the 19th century wants therefore to prove first and foremost is that the liberal state used regional and local diversity in order to gain better access to the countryside and that the state even called upon local clientelism to establish itself. At the same time, as I was able to see in studying the contado in Tuscany, the state did not really achieve this, which in turn explains the success of tempestuous and radical politicization by the socialists from the 1880s onwards. I am nonetheless persuaded that we need to revalue the potential and the attempts of the liberal integrative state after 1860 in order to be able to explain the birth of the red countryside in Italy at the turn of the century. This is why the pair: integrative politicization—conflicting politicization is necessary and even primordial.

**What about the relationship between conflictual politicization, organisational movement and the corporative State penetration in Italy or Spain?** Cooperatives and pre-fascism to say it briefly. We perfectly know the role of Agrarian elite in the growth and the installation of fascist power during the crisis of 1919 and 1922. It has been shown for instance by the monograph of Anthony Cardoza about Bolonian agrarianism. But what about the popular cooperative in this process? Only the precise chronology give some solutions to the complex problem of relationships between economic democratic associatism and rural fascism.

**First of all**, we observe that the cooperatives (both catholic with the network of the venetian Toniolo and socialist with the network of Central Italy) did offer resistance to the first revolutionary Fasci in the countryside after the War.

**But, after** 1922 and before the full organization of the Corporative State, the residual network of catholic and socialist cooperatives is reused by the rural fascist authorities who stressed the apolitical and interclassist nature of some cooperatives.

**And the last step**, after 1925—1926, is the complete dissolution, breaking up of the cooperatives in the great agrarian and corporative organizations of Confederazione nazionale dei sindacati fascisti dell’agricoltura and Confederazione nazionale fascista dell’agricoltura. Anyway with the decree of December 1925 the fascist government centralized the agrarian credit in an institution Istituto Nazionale di credito per la Cooperazione which is clearly a means to control and suppress any form of rural cooperation outside the fascist structures.
In conclusion, I would like to remind the simple, the pedestrian difference between two patterns of nationalisation and citizenship of the peasants and the countryside, we can perfectly observe in the cases of Italy, France and Spain between the mid of the 19th century and 1945. Between the liberal and national integrative movement of the 19th century, on the one hand, and the authoritarian rural integration from Italian fascism to the Vichy regime of the Second World War in France, on the other. Even if we know that there is no possible confusion between these conceptions of rural integration, the historiography about rural fascism and corporatism is sometimes carrying the idea that these periods represented a “golden age” of the Peasant Unity and prosperity.

Such an argument is dangerous, I don’t mean ideologically dangerous—It isn’t the present problem-. It is scientifically dangerous and wrong because It does use a system of representations (the images and propaganda of rural universe and rusticity as the founding of nation (homo rusticus as homo fascistus), and it uses such a system as an historical and teleological system of explanation of the causes of the fascism, as a rural, traditionalist and organic movement. And let us add that such a historiography reduced the meaning of peasant citizenship to an artificial politic and civic integration connected with repression and absence of visible conflict.

So in my opinion the problem of peasant and rural citizenship in its socio-economic diversity has to be thought as a pair, a relation between integration and conflict as modalities in the acquisition of politics. That’s why from the end of the 19th century to the interwar period, in France and Euro-Mediterranean countryside, the cooperation movement represented an integration vector of citizenship only when it could be both an agrarian structure of unification and rationalisation of the market and an organization of economic resistance and even political contestation. Sure that apprenticeship of Citizenship and politicization are at the price of this duality of integrative and conflicting manifestations of the public sphere in the countryside.

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