

The Other “People”

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With the accession of Napoléon III, French republicans encountered an undiscovered people: rural peasants. Because these country dwellers were satisfied with the Bonapartist regime, they constituted both a theoretical and a practical challenge for the republicans. How to explain that satisfaction with such a despotic regime and how to attract this people so indifferent to republican ideals: by catering to their interests, or by educating them in republican virtues?

Before the rise of what Gambetta hailed as the “new social stratum”, the left saw the people as Delacroix portrayed them in “Liberty Leading the People” (1831): Parisian (or at least city dwelling), sometimes heroic, and a social composite blending street child, student, worker (mostly skilled), and committed bourgeois. But there was a different people that the left would soon be unable to ignore: the much more numerous people of the countryside, who were given overwhelming electoral power by the establishment of universal male suffrage in 1848. On the whole these country people appeared to be indifferent if not indeed hostile to left wing candidates. At least that was the impression given to contemporaries by various elections from 1848 to the 1870s; apart from a few victories – for example, by the Democratic Socialists in legislative elections in 1849, when they were supported in some rural areas – country dwellers normally voted for the traditional right, and even more so for the Bonapartist candidates, sending the left into long-term opposition.

Democrats faced a very difficult situation: evidently the sovereign people were not equivalent to left wing people, and the lower classes were not necessarily devoted to the Republic. The first experience of universal male suffrage in France was thus traumatic for democrats, for they were confronted with a people who evaded the role that they had assigned to it, and who seemed to disregard them and to reject the hopes that they had formulated for it. This experience also set off serious questioning about identity and strategy, destined to recur in the history of the democratic left: questioning about what position to take with regard to these electoral majorities that were so frequently disappointing – these “silent majorities”, as they were to be called much later. Many documents – essays, pamphlets, newspaper articles, and speeches – bear traces of the debate that stirred up the French left at this time. Faced with a people that they had not thought would be so difficult to persuade, the partisans of a political and social republic pondered how to go about getting support for their political project from peasant voters, raising the kinds of question that were to loom large in French political debate for a long time thereafter.

Uncertainties on the French Left

The elections following the proclamation of universal male suffrage in March 1848 were at first difficult for contemporaries to interpret. After having voted overwhelmingly for the Conservatives (“tomorrow’s republicans”) in April 1848, the peasants made a significant contribution to Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte’s victory in the presidential elections of December 1848, but in some areas they also showed sympathy with the Democratic Socialists’ campaign in 1849, and were even prepared to resist the coup d’état of 1851. Nevertheless, the restored Empire in 1852 soon found its greatest support among them, much to the chagrin of the liberal and republican opposition¹.

However, the democratic left kept its hopes up for a long time. The most frequently adopted position was to deplore the lack of political education of country folk, and to highlight the pressures on the rural electorate brought to bear by large landowners, who were often right wing, and later by agents of the imperial government. But there was a turning point in the 1860s. With the moderate liberalization of the Empire, those pressures were loosened, with no sign of Bonapartism losing its appeal in the countryside². Even in the opposition there were many who insisted on accepting the obvious: the peasant vote for Napoléon III was not extorted, it was a vote of acceptance, freely given, and this should induce the left to revise its electoral thinking.

A problem of integration

Until then, assuming that voting was coerced had allowed democrats to maintain their faith in universal suffrage: basically, they could hope that after it was emancipated, the will of the people would spontaneously move towards favouring the Republic. Admitting that the rural voters had freely exercised their voting rights put them in an untenable position: they could either maintain their belief in the infallibility of the people, but therefore recognize the legitimacy of the imperial regime; or they could repeat their condemnation of Caesarism, but therefore recognize the fallibility of the people.

So most of them adopted a view of the elections that let them (at least temporarily) escape this alternative. This view consisted of showing that the rural vote, although freely exercised, was nevertheless invalid insofar as it was apolitical. Peasant voters were described as ignorant about national issues and therefore unable to comment on issues that go beyond the boundaries of their little patch of land. For many in the opposition to the imperial regime, country dwellers were not even aware of their belonging to the national community: they hardly knew their own country, spoke its official language very badly, and were indifferent to its fate – in short, they were “foreign to the rest of the nation”³.

Today we know that this explanation contained some exaggeration and overgeneralization. While perhaps valid for some remote areas, it failed to take into account the various points of contact that connected the countryside to the rest of the country: the mobility of some groups, the improving channels of communication, the presence of agents of

¹ For example, see Sylvie Aprile, “La gauche sous le Second Empire”, in Jean-Jacques Becker and Gilles Candar (eds.), *Histoire des gauches en France*, Paris, La Découverte, 2004, pp. 85-94.

² In contrast, the opposition did make gains in the cities.

³ This is the expression used by Ténot, an associate of Gambetta (Eugène Ténot, *Le suffrage universel et les paysans*, Paris, Librairie centrale, 1865, p.13).

central institutions in villages, the still living memories of the Revolution and the First Empire, and so on.⁴ But it held sway over all those who could not imagine an electorate knowingly voting for Napoléon III, and it allowed republicans not to question their commitment to the sovereignty of the people: yes, Bonapartist votes were the majority, but in these republicans' eyes these votes were the acts of inhabitants who are not really part of the people, at least not yet.⁵

Even when it was perceived, the disparity between the lack of integration of the peasantry as an explanation of its adhesion to Bonapartism on the one hand, and the reality of those barriers to national integration on the other, rarely led to amendments in the opposition's analysis of the rural vote. Instead, this disparity tended to exacerbate their impatience with voters who now had the means to form political opinions but (in their view) just wouldn't take the trouble to do so. Some of them didn't hesitate to condemn country dwellers' lack of interest in public affairs. They denounced these "voluntarily illiterates" who couldn't be bothered to learn the basic alphabet even now when they were called on to influence the country's fate⁶; and lashed out at the political indifference of the peasant who, "if he knows how to read at all, reads nothing but Matthieu Laensberg's Almanac"⁷.

In this way, they adopted a very ambivalent concept of citizenship, which although founded on universal suffrage, continued to distinguish good from bad citizens on the basis of their will to integration – and in their view the clearest evidence of such a will was voting in favour of the Republic. Their Bonapartist opponents then had a field day in mocking these "emigrants from the interior"⁸ who called themselves friends of the people even while despising country people, and who even though in a minority dared to accuse the majority of not being sufficiently integrated.

A class too people-like?

However, most opponents of the imperial regime were content to attribute the lack of integration among the rural population to their conditions of life. In other words, they thought we must see in peasants' low interest in politics not their ill will, but an objective impossibility of extracting themselves from lowly, everyday material problems. The portrait resembles the one that Marx had drawn some years earlier⁹: with long days bent over their fields, workers on the land were not only obsessed with the future of their own land, but also isolated from each other, deprived of the sociability that would make it possible for them either (for Marx) to become a class or (for the republicans) to perceive the general interest¹⁰.

⁴ For example, see Peter McPhee, *The politics of rural life: political mobilization in the French countryside, 1846-1852*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1992.

⁵ On this topic, see Pierre Rosanvallon's account: *Le sacre du citoyen: histoire du suffrage universel en France*, Paris, Gallimard, 2001, pp. 460-468.

⁶ Ferdinand de Lasteyrie, *Le paysan, ce qu'il est – ce qu'il devrait être: petite étude morale et politique*, Paris, A. Le Chevalier, 1869, pp. 115-116.

⁷ Eugène Pelletan, *Aide-toi et le ciel t'aidera*, Paris, Pagnerre, 1863, p.7. Published annually starting in the 17th century, the Almanac of Matthieu Laensberg (also known as the Liège Almanac) offered calendars, useful tips, popular maxims, and especially prophecies, which made it popular but also brought criticism from Enlightenment *philosophes* and their republican heirs, convinced that it comforted people in their obscurantism and superstitions.

⁸ Henri Vierne, "Les émigrés de l'intérieur", *Le pays: journal de l'Empire*, 16 March 1868, p. 1.

⁹ Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, 1852.

¹⁰ For example, see Jules Ferry, *La lutte électorale en 1863*, Paris, E. Dentu, 1863.

When a significant portion of republicans were calling for the spread of public education, those most attentive to social structures questioned this approach. For example, in 1856 Eugène Bonnemère remarked: “you will multiply the number of schools, and make education free, but you will have done nothing – nothing – as long as you have not changed the conditions of existence of the man who, brutalized and bent over his fields at all hours of every day of his whole life, arrives at the end of his career as ignorant and pretty much as miserable as at the beginning”¹¹. So the opposition’s electoral difficulties in the countryside did reside in the earliness or prematurity of the introduction of universal suffrage, but less because of the education available (or not) to the rural population than because the very conditions of any political apprenticeship whatsoever had not been assembled. The people – the whole of the citizenry – was on the whole too people-like – too poor – to carry out its new mission. Charles Dupont-White remarked that before 1848 “the people was never sovereign when it was a people in the traditional European sense of the word, meaning the masses drowning in ignorance and misery”¹².

Such views were widespread in the ranks of the opposition, who refused to see the real improvements in the peasants’ condition under the Second Empire. These views especially undermined the democratic left, who had defended universal suffrage as a way of supporting the lower classes and their material interests. In fact, while the democratic left had expected that universal suffrage would enable the masses to make their voice heard and their aspirations recognized, those aspirations actually turned them away from public affairs and threw them into the arms of Bonaparte from the moment that he promised them the moon and the stars. Defending the “people’s interests”, which up to now had been the heart of the democratic left’s political commitment, became problematic: how could one promise the lower classes a better future without encouraging in them this “politics of needs, interests, and cupidity”¹³, now that it seemed clear that this politics prepares and strengthens despotism?

However, by the 1860s some republicans started appealing to their political friends to brush aside their scruples. Ténôt asserted that democrats should move on from their disdainful “abstention”¹⁴ and make contact with the peasants, as they had in 1849: they could rally them to their cause by talking to them about the one thing that in his view they were capable of hearing – their interests – and by showing them that the Republic would be better than the Empire in meeting their expectations. But was it not debasing to imitate in this way the methods that they had so denigrated in their opponents?

Establishing the “True” Republic

The debate about that did not take place right away. The legislative elections of 1869 and the plebiscite of 1870, which confirmed the rural population’s support for the Empire, and above all the first elections of the Third Republic in February 1871, won in the countryside by the Conservatives, aroused exasperation on the left. The newspaper *Le Rappel* called on the

¹¹ Eugène Bonnemère, *Histoire des paysans depuis la fin du Moyen-Âge jusqu’à nos jours: 1200-1850, précédée d’une introduction an 50 avant Jésus-Christ – 1200 après Jésus-Christ*, Paris, F. Chamerot, 1856, vol. 2, pp. 418-419.

¹² Charles Dupont-White, *La liberté de la presse et le suffrage universel*, Paris, Douniol, 1866, p. 42.

¹³ Jules Ferry, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

¹⁴ Eugène Ténôt, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

peasants to abstain until the Republic had taught them to vote¹⁵; others, such as Quinet, saw in the Commune an excessive but very understandable reaction by enlightened city dwellers who had been for such a long time subjected to the absurd choices of rural imbeciles¹⁶. There was a need for the skills of a Gambetta, and after the suppression of the Commune he came back onto the political scene to persuade republicans to implement Ténot's advice and to conquer the countryside slowly but surely.

However, after 1875, the importance of material interests returned to the left's message when those who were from then on called the opportunists lowered their ambitions in the light of the cautious and timid "temperament" of the country people. The criticism then addressed to them by the radicals brought to the surface a fundamental question: is the great majority of the people ready to support the Republic?

The "true" interests of the people

According to Jules Ferry, the republicans' support in the countryside was due to their moderation; they had given up on implementing their whole program, to avoid damaging the peasants' interests. In Ferry's view, the peasants wanted to immerse themselves completely in their work, and expected the government to maintain order and to spare them from a too time-consuming participation in politics: "it is in periodical elections that this great country, this huge and toiling mass with universal suffrage, stirs itself up, gets agitated, contemplates public affairs, and pronounces its judgement. In the intervals, the country is quite inclined to let its delegates act".¹⁷ That is why he called on republicans partially to drop their demands, at least temporarily. The ideals of a weak government, the election of judges, the separation of church and state, frequent elections, and compensation for municipal elective offices were all measures that he asserted were legitimate but inapplicable in a rural country such as France. And when radicals held up foreign counterexamples – especially England, which in their view represented the insufferable paradox of being a monarchy and yet more liberal than the French Republic – he endlessly repeated that the French are a people that "is a stranger, not yet accustomed, and long will remain unaccustomed, to these practices of a free government that we see working so brilliantly on the other side of the Channel"¹⁸.

This astonished the radicals. Although such prudence had been needed at the beginning of the Third Republic, when the regime was still at the mercy of its enemies, it seemed to them to be completely demagogic from the moment that the republicans were sure of their power: why encourage the rural population in their political indifference when it was now possible to initiate them into the "true" Republic¹⁹? Wasn't that too readily sacrificing republican ideals to crass electoral considerations? And didn't the concern to manage the peasants hide a kind of contempt for the French people, preconceiving them as unable to hold true sovereignty? In any case, it was mistaking the needs of country dwellers, and confusing

¹⁵ Victor Vallein, "Le suffrage rural", *Le Rappel*, 11 March 1871, p. 2.

¹⁶ For example, see Edouard Lockroy, *La commune et l'Assemblée*, Paris, A. Le Chevalier, 1871; Edgar Quinet, *La République: conditions de la régénération de la France*, Paris, E. Dentu, 1873, pp. 299-300.

¹⁷ Jules Ferry, "Séance du 25 juillet 1884 au Sénat", in Paul Robiquet (ed.), *Discours et opinions de M. Jules Ferry, publiés avec commentaire et notes*, Paris, Armand Colin, 1893-1898, vol. 6, p.342.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ That is what the radicals liked to call the regime that they wanted to install. Daniel Mollenhauer revived this expression in the title of his book: *Auf der Suche nach der "wahren Republik": die französischen "radicaux" in der frühen Dritten Republik (1870-1890)*, Bonn, Bouvier Verlag, 1997.

them too readily with their “prejudices”; thus one reads in *La Justice*: “in France, all reactions, all fears, have always been traced to the peasants, i.e. to their prejudices, to their ignorance, and never to their interests”²⁰. In contrast to the opportunists, the radicals now called for frequent and extensive participation by citizens in public affairs, as the only way to instil in the rural electorate “the habit of looking around oneself and of conducting one’s own affairs”²¹ and thus of looking after one’s “true interests”.

On this point, they were reconnecting with the ideal of direct democracy, which some of their predecessors had also pinned their hopes on back in 1850-1851. But the perspective had now changed. At the end of the Second Republic, it had been a matter of ending representation, always capable of becoming organized betrayal of the represented by the representatives, and of letting citizens directly manage their interests, considered to be known, transparent and convergent with the general interest. At the end of the Second Empire and beginning of the Third Republic, the radicals, although supporting representative democracy, nevertheless aimed to inject the spirit of direct government into institutions, no longer to let the interests of the people be expressed as they were, but in order to rid them of prejudices and to elevate them by politicizing them. Like Allain-Targé, they deeply distrusted “constitutional, parliamentary government, which, instead of stirring like the ebb and flow of the sea, agitating the whole people on frequent popular election days under the winds of direct government, and in this way preventing them from becoming corrupt, pushes the mass of the governed people back towards their occupations and their material pleasures, and makes them lose interest in the salutary and noble passions of politics”.²²

Which republic for rural France?

The conflict between opportunists and radicals was partly about methods (and that is how it is most often portrayed²³): to maintain the Republic in France, must we reduce the demands of citizenship, demands that can trouble a people who are concerned about sacrificing the least of their material interests; or should we on the contrary immediately require everyone to make a large political commitment, in order to inspire in everyone an attachment to the common good that is higher than their personal concerns? It seems that everything depends on the psychosociological characteristics of the inhabitants, which are the subject matter of lively debates. Historical examples, statistics and personal experiences are invoked to support different ideas about this, variously depicting a reasonably prosperous rural life, aspiring to peace and stability, or – for another example – a world of peasants who are still too often living in need, and who have every interest in pushing directly for the implementation of social reforms.

But as is often the case in politics, behind problems of method lie core issues, and the method that one chooses relates to the republic that one is defending. The radicals’ republic evoked classical models and gave priority to political virtue; it was prepared to praise small landowners, but only if they agree to spend part of their time in discussions of the common good. In contrast, the opportunists’ republic resolutely “banished... the memories of the republican cities of the Greece or the Italy of the Middle Ages”²⁴: being liberal, it recognized

²⁰ Charles Longuet, “Avocasserie”, *La Justice*, 1 September 1885, p. 1.

²¹ Alfred Gaulier, “Ni aveugles, ni complices”, *Le Rappel*, 4 September 1885, p. 1.

²² Henri Allain-Targé, *La République sous l’Empire: lettres, 1864-1870*, Paris, Grasset, 1939, p. 133.

²³ For example, see Serge Bernstein in the debate on the contributions of Odile Rudelle and Jean-Pierre Rocher, in Léo Hamon (ed.), *Les opportunistes: les débuts de la République aux républicains*, Paris, MSH, 1991, p. 103.

²⁴ Jules Ferry, “Discours de Bordeaux, du 30 août 1885”, in Paul Robiquet (ed.), *Discours et opinions de M.*

the legitimacy of pursuing private interests, and for this reason it set up a “government by delegation”²⁵ that released citizens from political tasks between elections; haunted by the spectre of rural Bonapartism, it made sparing use of the peasants, whose moral qualities it celebrated but whose “susceptibilities”²⁶ it feared, which reinforced its reluctance to call upon universal suffrage very frequently.

Thus, political preferences determined the characteristics that were attributed to rural inhabitants as well as the definitions of their interests, which in turn influenced or confirmed ideological assertions. For opportunists supporting moderate liberalism, the rural electorate were obviously going to be devotees of order and not much inclined to turn away from their material interests, which in the opportunists’ view justified the priority given to a strong government in a regime with delegation. For radicals faithful to the Belleville program²⁷, simply mobilizing more of the peasant majority would make that majority see the virtues of political participation, and this confirmed the legitimacy of the radicals’ commitment to a “whole” republic, both democratic and social. So each group made itself the spokesman of the country’s feelings and interests, in a competition that some have seen as detrimental to the main interested party, the rural voters²⁸.

And yet, Ferry tells us, that was “the role of all of the parties”²⁹: to hold up to the electorate a mirror, no doubt a little distorting but one in which it will recognize itself and will find reasons to support the political project presented to it. Therefore it matters little whether it was the radicals or the opportunists who described rural realities more objectively; anyway, on this question, historians themselves are divided. The key was to offer to the majority of voters an image that it was prepared to accept, to have one or the other version of the Republic triumph. But in the elections of 1885, before the Boulanger affair and the rise of socialism reshuffled the political cards, the majority seemed to hesitate, once again frustrating generalizations about the world of politics³⁰.

The left’s reactions to its electoral failures in rural areas in the second half of the 19th century thus illustrate its difficulties in imagining lower classes that were not its natural supporters. Rebuffed by the peasants, its spokesmen and militants developed an interpretation (which was to have many later echoes) blaming the lack of integration and/or social misery. This clearly misjudged the realities of rural life and fed untenable contradictions, but these representations, though distorted and problematic, were nevertheless reality-producing, insofar as they led the left to amend the political project that had presided at the time the Third Republic was established. Thus these representations emphasized the original divisions, which, formed in line with the opposites agitation/delegation, probably go back to a

Jules Ferry, publiés avec commentaire et notes, Paris, Armand Colin, 1893-1898, vol. 7, p. 42.

²⁵ Jules Ferry, “Séance du 25 juillet 1884 au Sénat”, *op. cit.*, p.341.

²⁶ Jules Ferry, Senate session on 7 May 1877, *Journal officiel de la République française*, 8 May 1877, p. 3380.

²⁷ In 1869, the republican opposition supported the program that Gambetta and his friends issued at Belleville for the election campaign.

²⁸ For example, see Pierre Bourdieu, “Une classe objet”, *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, no. 17-18, November 1977, pp. 2-5; Theodore Zeldin, *Histoire des passions françaises: 1848-1945*, Paris, Seuil, 1980-1981, vol. 1, p. 170.

²⁹ Jules Ferry, “Séance du 25 juillet 1884 au Sénat”, *op. cit.*

³⁰ Although the opportunists remained in the lead with a little more than 200 seats, the radicals made some progress, including in the rural areas, and sent between 100 and 150 Deputies to the Assembly. For an analysis of the election, see Odile Rudelle, *La république absolue: aux origines de l’instabilité constitutionnelle de la France républicaine 1870-1889*, Paris, Publications de la Sorbonne, 1982, pp. 156-157.

fundamental tension in French republicanism, constantly hesitating between an ideal of demanding citizenship and the recognition of popular aspirations.

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