
THE VENDEE AND RURAL REBELLION

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NOTE: This essay is a draft preface for the Harvard University Press paperback edition of The Vendée, which is scheduled for publication in 1976. Harvard first published The Vendée in 1964. The first paperback edition was published by Wiley in 1967, and is now out of print. A French edition, La Vendée, was published by Artheme Fayard in 1970. Rosenberg & Sellier is scheduled to publish an Italian edition, La Vandea, in 1976. Each of these editions has its own preface. If you cite or quote this version, please do so as a CRSO Working Paper, since the draft is still subject to change.

The Vendée was one of Europe's last great rural rebellions. There would be more: the Spanish insurrections which persisted into the twentieth century, the peasant movements which arose during the Russian Revolution, rural France's own massive resistance to Louis Napoleon's 1851 coup d'état, still others elsewhere. Nevertheless, the lineage of the Vendée was already declining in 1793. The family had been great. Among the ancestral portraits in the dark hall of rural rebellion, a curious visitor would find France's Jacquerie of 1358, England's Peasant Revolt of 1381, Bohemia's Hussite and Taborite rebellions in the 1420s, Germany's Peasant War of 1525. Although these ancients are recognizably of the lineage, details of the costume often give them an unfamiliar air; millenarian visions, egalitarian preaching, demands for freedom were paradoxically more characteristic of medieval than of modern rebellions.

The family resemblance to the Vendée would become more apparent as our imaginary visitor strolled by the great cluster of seventeenth-century canvases. In the French branch alone he would notice the Nu-Pieds, the Croquants, the Bonnets Rouges. There he would see many of the striking features of the Vendée's 1793 rebellion: its anti-bourgeois, anti-capitalist, anti-state animus, its mobilization of whole communities as communities, its reliance on nobles, priests and professionals for almost all links and almost all leadership above the level of the single community. The Vendée came late, but did not lack a pedigree.

The apparent nineteenth-century dwindling of the rural rebellion was actually an intercontinental migration. As the rural rebellion disappeared in Europe, it swelled in Asia and Latin America. Nor was

that simple coincidence. For the rural rebellion traced the rise of national states, markets and bourgeois property. By the nineteenth century, national states, markets and bourgeois property had triumphed over the privileges and liberties of rural communities in most of Europe. The European village's capacity to resist had collapsed. The same is true of most of North America. But in the rest of the world statemaking and the expansion of capitalism were proceeding apace. Where they encountered well-established rural communities and infringed the existing rights of those communities, rebellion ensued.

Not that all rural rebellions are alike. One of the most important lessons of recent research in rural history is that the grievances which lead to revolt are both concrete and variable. In contrast with an older picture of rural rebellions as unfocused reactions to hardship or to rapid social change, the last two decades' work on the subject has revealed a general pattern of response to specific violations of well-established rights. In Europe, and very likely in the rest of the world, new and intensified taxation has been the single most important stimulus to rural rebellion on a scale larger than the individual village. Tax rebellions have an important lesson to teach. On the surface, they seem like direct, uncomplicated reactions to misery. New taxes, one might think, are simply the last straw. On closer examination, however, rebellions turn out to focus on taxes which violate existing local rights and which threaten the rural community's ability to carry on its valued activities.

Tax rebellions do not break out most often or most ferociously where hardship is most acute. Really miserable people devote so much of their energy to survival that they have none left for revolt. In

order to understand why the North American colonists mobilized massively to resist unjust taxes in the decade before the American Revolution, we have no need to invoke material hardship, clever manipulation or short-sighted greed. We can even take the colonists' own word for it: they believed the new taxes imposed by the British violated American rights and principles of good government. So believing, they resisted the British assault on American rights.

The same general observation applies to other characteristic forms of rural rebellion: the food riot, the land occupation, anti-conscription movements. Their common denominator is the redress of specific violations of rural rights. In these cases the prior rights of the village to food produced or stored locally, to local land, to the labor power of its young men are at issue. When those rights are well-established, when merchants or landlords or officials violate those rights and when the village has enough organization and resources to resist, some form of rebellion occurs. The grievances are concrete, specific, well-defined. Yet they vary from rebellion to rebellion just as the patterns of local rights and of exploitation vary from place to place.

I have written as though rural rebellions were always defensive, always reacting to someone else's disruption of the established order. "Always" overstates the case. For rural Europe over the last few centuries, defensive rebellions are the general rule, but not the iron law. Two crucial qualifications apply.

First, some rural rebellions which begin defensively change direction or become tied to a major movement of social or political transformation by allying with other groups of rebels, with different

grievances, outside the rural area. In his Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century, Eric Wolf has shown how a number of our era's greatest rural movements -- including those of Russia, China, Mexico and Viet Nam -- began with a strong orientation to the redressing of local grievances, yet developed through the play of coalition and opposition into powerful forces for revolution. Wolf's analysis holds for rural participation in major European revolutions.

The second qualification is that genuine offensive, forward-looking movements asserting new rights rather than simply defending old ones have arisen in some rural areas, and have sometimes provided the bases of important rural rebellions. Spanish rural anarchism and Italian rural socialism are examples. In these cases and others like them the movements themselves began defensively, but had acquired a new offensive orientation before the point of rebellion. Again coalitions with outsiders, especially organized craftsmen and radical intelligentsia, have played a crucial part in the swing from defensive to offensive.

An inverse process worked itself out in the Vendée. A series of local conflicts which had much in common with the standard local conflicts of the old regime evolved and coalesced into a rebellion which was emphatically counter-revolutionary. This book traces the development of the counter-revolutionary movement from 1789 to 1793, and relates its pattern to the social structure of local communities in western France. It shows grievances similar to those which had long activated tax rebellions, food riots and anti-conscription movements becoming the fuel of a mass movement against the Revolution. Indeed, it shows grievances and forms of action which worked for the Revolution

in other parts of rural France working powerfully for the counter-revolution in the Vendée.

The book's resolution of that contradiction is not the obvious one: that grievances and forms of action are simply irrelevant to the revolutionary or counter-revolutionary character of a rural movement -- either because rural people absorb whatever specific grievances they have into their established world-view or because manipulative leaders direct the diffuse anger of the countrymen to their own ends. Instead, the book implicitly invokes an old political principle: the enemy of my enemy is my friend. It portrays a coalition of peasants, rural artisans, priests, and nobles lining up in different ways, at different times, for different reasons, against a bourgeoisie which had been gaining economic strength during the eighteenth century, and which rapidly seized control of the local and regional political apparatus during the early years of the Revolution. As they did elsewhere in France, the bourgeois who came to power in the Vendée received strong support from their fellow-bourgeois in the national government. Unlike their counterparts in most other regions, they lacked the allies and power base in the countryside to crush their enemies, neutralize the disaffected and generate active support among the rest of the population. Why and how that happened are the book's central problems.

On its own ground, The Vendée has stood up well to the dozen years of scholarship and criticism which have passed since its publication. Subsequent scholarship has generally confirmed the conclusions of the book concerning its main area of concentration, southern Anjou. For example, C. Petitfrere's new analysis of the participants in the counter-revolution of 1793 adds evidence from

post-revolutionary pension applications to the documents from 1793 I had studied and examines both bodies of evidence closely; Petit-frère comes to essentially the same conclusions concerning participation as you will find in the book.

Scholarship concerning other counter-revolutionary sections of western France has been less kind to any hopes for a simple extension of The Vendée's findings elsewhere; other students of the subject have confirmed the importance of local anti-bourgeois coalitions, but they have shown that those who lined up against the rural bourgeoisie varied greatly depending on the character of the region. In Brittany, for example, T. J. A. LeGoff and D. N. G. Sutherland find that the entire rural community tended to oppose the "petty notables" who opted for the Revolution.

The Vendée's critics have complained mainly about the book's analytic framework and about its incompleteness. I deliberately cast the book as an analysis of community structure, of urbanization and of related political processes. Some historians found that the definitions, analogies, models, and reiterated arguments cluttered an otherwise intelligible analysis of the counter-revolution. Many social scientists claimed that the emphasis on urbanization distorted an otherwise interesting account of the political impact of modernization, or centralization, or some other major social process.

After years of reflection, I find myself unshaken on the first charge, but a bit rueful on the second. Were I to rewrite the book today, I would be at least as careful as before about definitions, analogies, models and explicit statement of arguments. An author aids his readers, including other students of the same subject, by stating

the nature of the problem, identifying the connections he wants to make with existing work on that problem, and laying out the criteria of proof and disproof he regards as appropriate. The book's concern with concepts is correct.

I have, on the other hand, lost some of my confidence that urbanization was the best possible analytical focus. The growing and changing influence of cities unquestionably played an important part in shaping western France's response to the Revolution. As I see it now, however, the emphasis on urbanization obscures the influence in the Vendée of two other processes which have strongly influenced the development of rural rebellions in the western world: the expansion of capitalism and the concentration of power in national states. Cities and urbanization have fundamental roles in both processes. Too great a focus on urbanization (or too broad a definition of urbanization) nevertheless draws attention away from the independent effects of capitalism and statemaking. In the Vendée itself, it is valuable to learn the place of cities and city-based merchants in the growth of the cottage textile industry. It is also important to realize that the property relations which developed were not those of "city" or "country" but of classic mercantile capitalism.

As for the incompleteness of this book, I was the first to lament it. Scattered through the chapters you will find apologies that I was unable to carry out a more detailed analysis of changing property relations in eighteenth-century Anjou, of the revolutionary sale of church properties, of a number of other crucial topics. I regret now that the book says so little about the implications of

what happened in the Vendée for our understanding of the course of the French Revolution as a whole. I would be happier if it contained a more sustained treatment of counter-revolutionary movements elsewhere in France during the same period. Any one of these improvements, however, would have added months or even years to the eight years it took me to prepare the book that actually appeared. It is not certain that the improvement would have justified the additional investment of time.

In the light of the excellent studies of rural history and rebellion which have been published since the appearance of The Vendée, some other problems which the book neglects now deserve attention. Let me mention only two examples.

First, where did the rural proletariat come from, and what was happening to it in the years before the rebellion? The book devotes quite a bit of space to documenting the importance of rural textile artisans in the Vendée's population and in the counter-revolution. It also shows in passing that something like a tenth of the adult male population consisted of essentially landless agricultural laborers. As studies of the proletarianization of the rural population in other parts of Europe begin to come in, nevertheless, it becomes clearer that my treatment neglects a significant problem and a fine opportunity. Where did those landless workers come from? Was rapid population growth or the consolidation of land in the hands of noble and bourgeois propertyholders forcing the children of peasants to choose among emigrating, remaining single on their family farms, or taking up work as weavers or day-laborers? If so, we might better understand the pressures on the rural population at the start of the

Revolution, and the cooperation of peasants and artisans in the counter-revolutionary movement.

Again, the book neglects the daring expansion of the central government the French revolutionaries sought to accomplish from 1791 to 1793. Not only did they integrate the structure of the Catholic Church into that of the French government (a stormy process which the book does discuss in detail), but also they made the unprecedented step of extending the purview of the national government to everyday life at the local scale. Although Louis XIV had gained a great reputation as a state-builder and his successors continued the work of centralization, their efforts to penetrate local communities had been partial, tentative and often unsuccessful. They had succeeded mainly in the realm of taxation -- and even there the method of collecting the major taxes was to assign a quota to the whole community and let the local council do the assessing and collecting. For the rest, a kind of indirect rule via local landlords, priests and professionals subordinated the rural community to the sovereign.

The substitution of direct for indirect local rule has happened many times and in many places since 1789. It is a process which has repeatedly produced conflict in European colonies both before and after independence. Revolutionary France was the first large western country to try it on a national scale. This book describes the impact of that effort on local elections, religious practice, routine record-keeping and a number of other activities. But it does not seriously analyze the technical and political conditions under which the effort could succeed. Studies of the Terror in other parts of France, for example, bring out the widespread use (whether intentional or unintentional) of

two interim solutions: first, mobilizing the local population against a small number of presumed enemies of the Revolution; second, substituting indirect rule via local networks of trusted bourgeois for indirect rule via priests and nobles.

Proletarianization and state centralization are important problems on which The Vendée touches, but only touches. There are others: the nature of revolutionary leadership, the roots of violence, the effects of repression, the rise and fall of political rights. Yes, The Vendée leaves a large agenda unfulfilled. Let me take refuge in a self-serving homily: a good book opens doors, and makes people want to enter them. If The Vendée opens the way to places other people want to explore, that will be reason enough for its writing.

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