

Review

Reviewed Work(s): French Peasants in Revolt: The Insurrection of 1851 by Ted W. Margadant

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French Peasants in Revolt: The Insurrection of 1851, by Ted W. Margadant (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979).

On 4 December 1851, Baudin, a French legislator, stood up on a barricade near the Faubourg Saint-Antoine in eastern Paris and challenged the soldiers enforcing the *coup d'état* by which, two days before, Louis Napoleon Bonaparte overthrew the Second Republic. Alluding to a controversial sum paid legislators to defray expenses, Baudin shouted: "I will show you how to die for twenty-five francs a day!" – and was shot down. What happened next surprised the new regime and contemporary observers alike. Baudin's death, and the brief fight put up by some 2000 bourgeois and working-class radicals in the popular and traditionally militant eastern quarters of Paris, though impressive, were only the beginning of massive resistance to the *coup d'état* and abrogation of the Constitution by a President sworn to uphold it. While French cities, controlled by the army and police, remained quiet, country people in some 17 departments and 900 communes rose up to defend the Republic and, above all, the "Democratic and Social Republic" that they saw as its unkept promise. Thousands of ordinary people, mostly peasants and artisans, led by members of radical secret societies that had multiplied during the previous two years, trooped out to capture the seats of public authority. It was the largest single uprising in nineteenth-century France. The Second Republic, begun with the Paris Revolution of February 1848 and drawing most of its support from the cities, ended in the valleys and fields of distant departments to the south.

Ted W. Margadant's *French Peasants in Revolt: The Insurrection of 1851* caps the revival of interest on both sides of the Atlantic in the Revolution of 1848 and the Second Republic. Margadant's long-awaited book is a major, mature study, important not only as the definitive history of the Insurrection, but because the author reaches beyond the limits of a historical monograph to test theories of social and political change against his own exhaustive research. The result is a *tour de force* that, combining the thoroughness of a French *thèse* with the cohesiveness of research and argument more typical of Anglo-American historiography, ranks with the finest works on modern European history. Margadant's convincing conclusions are based on thorough research in the major Parisian sources (notably the Archives Nationales and the Archives de la Guerre, where the interrogation records on many insurgents from several departments are housed) and 17 departmental archives, as well as over 300 secondary works. He has consulted every available source of information on the economic, social, and political development of insurgent regions to write a book that is a model of research and analysis. Margadant seems to know intimately every one of the 900 insurgent communes, and combines an account of the overall patterns of economic change with a detailed, even moving portrayal of the Second Republic's impact on the community life of ordinary people. Margadant writes well, moreover, giving a splendid narrative of the 1851 Insurrection, and becomes awkward only in his chapter on "The People's Leadership," where a veritable avalanche of statistics should have been (as elsewhere) swept up into tables.

Why is Margadant's book important to readers outside the circle of specialists in French social history? Because he shows that the classical stereotype of peasant political behavior canonized in Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, which likens the French peasantry to a "sack of potatoes," is wildly mistaken. Of the

70,000 Frenchmen who took up arms to defend the “Democratic and Social Republic” (*La Belle*, as many of them called it), most were peasants. *Pace* Marx, peasants in several key regions of France were well organized and politically active. The role of country people, and particularly peasants, in the 1851 Insurrection, then, is Big News. Marx was not the only scholar to overlook rural resistance to the *coup d'état*, and later historians (who had rich stores of documentation to consult) should have known better. Hence *French Peasants in Revolt* fills a large gap in both the historiography of modern France and the literature on social and political change. The results of the *coup d'état* have not been analyzed since Eugène Ténot, the brave Republican school teacher, composed his résumé of the events in 1865 to defend fellow Republicans against the Bonapartist view that insurgents had waged a bloody, furious *jacquerie* of rape and pillage – a view that presaged official versions of the Paris Commune in the early years of the Third Republic. For the rest, we have only studies based on departmental archives, among them Maurice Agulhon's *La République au village* (1970) on the Var, Philippe Vigier's *La Seconde République dans la région alpine* (1963), and my own *The Agony of the Republic: The Repression of the Left in Revolutionary France* (1978), which includes an analytic account of the Insurrection in the Yonne and milder mobilization in the Haute Vienne. Until *French Peasants in Revolt*, we have had no convincing answer to the question: Why did the “Democratic and Social Republic” find such support and, indeed, its final but ill-fated defense among country people, particularly in the Midi?

Margadant's answer to this question is also his greatest contribution to the literature on social change in modern Europe. He sees political mobilization under the Second Republic as dependent on prior economic changes in the insurgent regions. It was no coincidence that the main insurgent areas had been drawn into market networks during the preceding decades, particularly in the period of the July Monarchy (1830–1848). Influenced by Charles Tilly's classic *The Vendée* (1964), Margadant stresses the importance of urbanization as a source of change in French political life. Tilly shows that support for the Revolution in Western France after 1789 arose mainly in the plains and valleys, where commercial agriculture was highly developed and where almost all the seats of government administration were located, whereas counterrevolutionary opposition sprang up in the *bocage* areas where unspecialized, noncommercial agriculture persisted while, in the century before 1789, a vigorous rural textile industry had grown up in its midst. Similarly, Margadant argues that the “political significance of urbanization rests primarily on the social interactions it facilitates between peasants and townsmen” (50), although he prefers the term “protourbanization” to characterize the “expansion of urban influence over rural communities” (55). As Maurice Agulhon points up the role of small towns and bourgs in the radicalization of the Var under the Second Republic, so Margadant (citing the works of Stein Rokkan and G. William Skinner) argues that the political vision of a “Democratic and Social Republic” followed the reach of urban influences through widening market networks and increased small-scale crafts production in rural regions. Thus *French Peasants in Revolt* accepts the “urbanization theory,” as Margadant calls it, stressing the “expanding economic and social horizons of the peasantry.” The growth of small towns and bourgs and of their economic services to surrounding areas may well have been the leading edge of “urbanization” in nineteenth-century France. Hence the census takers' decision in 1846 to call “urban” any commune with more than 2000 people living in the agglomerated settlement made

good sense, however much students of urbanization may resist regarding small bourgs as “urban.”

But was economic change alone sufficient to generate mass paramilitary mobilization in rural areas in 1851? In view of the other wave of provincial violence that swept the Second Republic, the tax and forest riots of 1848, Margadant rejects the “immiseration theory” of rural revolt that “emphasizes the unfavorable impact of economic trends on peasant living standards” (50), and refutes Philippe Vigier and Roger Price’s contention that economic hardship and agricultural depression per se drove peasants to rebellion. Communes active in the riots of 1848 did *not* mobilize in 1851, though the rural population of insurgent departments may well have been vulnerable to fluctuations in the market price of agricultural products. Thus, though Margadant details economic preconditions of the 1851 insurrection, his interpretation is principally political, emphasizing the role of popular organizations, chiefly the secret societies. As government repression – begun with the June Days in Paris – intensified after Louis Bonaparte was elected President on 10 December 1848, severely limiting the ways and means of political opposition, the Democratic-Socialist resistance (commonly called *Montagnards*) went underground. Secret societies fanned out from towns and market bourgs to the smaller communes, initiating new members and binding them to secrecy with passwords and rituals. As police repression raised the cost of Democratic-Socialist, and even Republican, opposition, many bourgeois leaders abandoned the fray, and thereby “popularized” the Montagnard movement. Having reached the village, the Republic went underground, sustained by artisans and peasants with their own distinctive forms of community life and sociability.

In *The Agony of the Republic*, I have argued that in the departments where there was little or no resistance to the 1851 *coup d'état*, repression had already greatly weakened or destroyed the Left opposition. Margadant shows that in the insurgent departments, *Montagnard* secret societies had largely survived the repression intact, and that when news of the *coup d'état* reached them, thousands of people showed up at prearranged meeting places, gave the required passwords (“the people – revolution,” “Nouvelle – Montagne,” and so on), armed themselves, and trooped out to defend the Republic. Their resistance arose from prior organization, but fell to the soldiers dispatched by Napoleon’s nephew. Margadant views political mobilization and collective violence under the Second Republic as the upshot of a crisis in “modernization,” citing Samuel P. Huntington’s argument in *Political Order in Changing Societies* (1968): “Political violence and instability is [*sic*] caused primarily by the gap between the rapid pace of social change and the rapid mobilization of new groups into politics, on the one hand, and the slow development of political institutions, on the other hand” (106). Margadant does not, however, fall back on “modernization” to *explain* the insurrection. Rather, like other recent writers on the Second Republic, he regards the *Montagnard* organizational network and protest repertoire as characteristic of a society whose political life and institutions are in flux. Margadant’s argument here parallels that of Maurice Agulhon, who writes about the “folkloric” aspects of *démoc-soc* mobilization (the political use of carnival and charivari), and Peter Amann, who in *Revolution and Mass Democracy* (1975) views the proliferation of political clubs in the heady Paris spring of 1848 as an important transitional stage in the development of political expression before mass institutions took root.

Nevertheless, some readers may object to Margadant's view of the period as a "crisis in political modernization." I do not, though I think that as a concept "modernization" can be quite useless for historical analysis because it prompts understandings of the past that are unfailingly presentist. And I do wince at Margadant's allusion to the forthcoming triumph of "interest group politics" when discussing what peasants and artisans did in 1851 – which, after all, was a long time before the advent of modern political science. But, to repeat, Margadant does not invoke "modernization" to *explain* what happened, and uses it only as a shorthand term for the process whereby peasants "became increasingly integrated into a national economy, an urban society, and a centralized political system while continuing to form a substantial portion of the nation's population" (338). Fair enough.

Margadant may seem to echo Eugen Weber's argument in *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870–1914* (1977). But in fact *French Peasants in Revolt* has bad news for the claim that peasants did not enter national political life until "modernizing" agencies (improved transport, mass military conscription, and popular education) integrated "savage," superstitious, patois-speaking rurals into the national state in the four decades before the Great War killed a million of them off. Does Margadant only date this political "modernization" some years earlier? No indeed: he carefully distinguishes his view from that of writers who portray the "disappearance, not the transformation, of the peasantry as a significant force in French politics" (338). And, unlike Weber, Margadant insists on the complexity of rural social structure and urban–rural relations. Whereas Weber uncritically accepts (and indeed presupposes) the idea of constant hostility between town and country people before a single urban culture could conquer and properly "civilize" the peasantry, Margadant shows that it was not that simple. Collaboration in the production and sale of local goods, for example, like *eau-de-vie* in the region of Béziers, sometimes attenuated urban–rural differences, and promoted a common political allegiance (including insurrection) in many parts of the Midi while, in many northern areas, conflicts of interest between producers and consumers of foodstuffs set peasants against workers in hungry times. Economic change, in any event, did not await modern roads and language.

Still, Margadant does suggest the ultimate integration of the peasantry into national political life, and shares Weber's view of urban areas as foci of the economic and political transformation that finally brought integration about. (That Weber's account centers on "cities," whereas Margadant's stresses "towns and bourgs," reflects the latter's happily less "modern" perspective.) But has such a complete integration of national social and political life really taken place in France? Margadant, like Weber, seems to take for granted that the national state – after a "storm and stress" period of popular mobilization and repression – was ultimately able to forge a national unity and consensus. One wonders, however, whether full integration was achieved, given the claims of Breton, Corsican, Occitan, and Catalan separatists. *French Peasants in Revolt* reminds us that the central authority has forced, sometimes at gunpoint, at least a *de facto* acceptance by most Frenchmen of government in the form of parliamentary democracy and party politics, administered within the framework of a bureaucratic state no less dominant and omnipresent under a Republic than under an Empire. Yet the "French" have often resisted. In the spring of 1980, for example, C.R.S. military policemen fell upon Breton mayors who had come to Paris to protest

official inaction after an oil slick damaged their beaches. The police wrestled the Bretons to the ground, grabbing them by their tricolor sashes, the symbols of their authority in their home communes. Indeed, the Breton militants, the Corsican nationalists, and the northeastern metalworkers and socialist politicians who try vainly today to break the state communications monopoly are political descendants of the peasants and artisans who, after the 1851 *coup d'état*, marched into their market towns to defend *La Belle*, the “Democratic and Social Republic.”

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