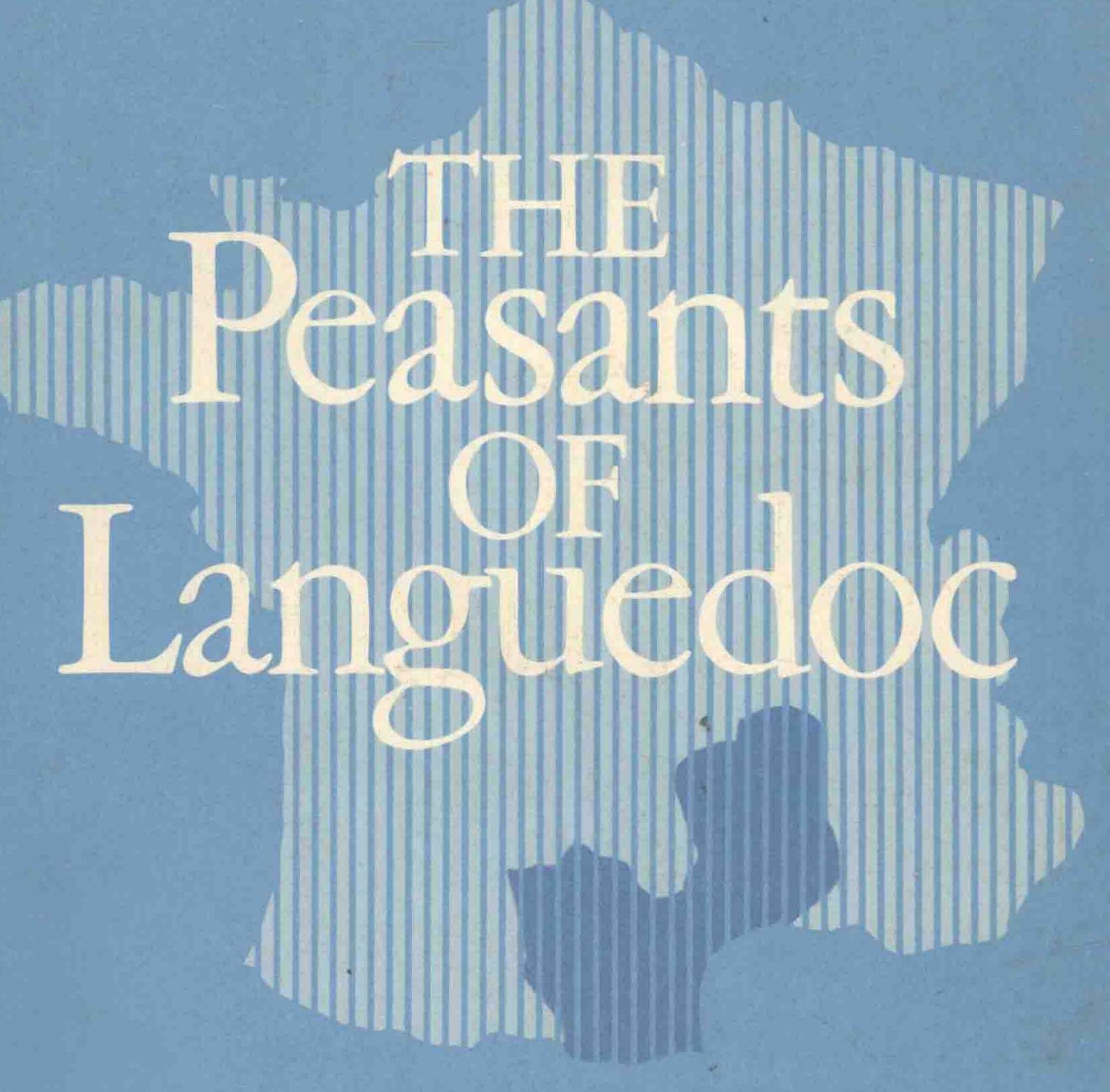
Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie



Translated by John Day

THE Peasants OF Languedoc

Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie

Translated with an Introduction by John Day

George Huppert, consulting editor

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Foreword

Professor Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's The Peasants of Languedoc is an outstanding work of historical scholarship in the best tradition of that uniquely French institution, the monumental thèse d'Etat. It is, at the same time, a remarkable demonstration of the continuing vitality of France's Annales school of historiography (so named from the title of the journal founded in 1929 by Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre). Certainly no major study by an Annales historian since Fernand Braudel's classic The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II1 comes closer to realizing the purposes of a history without frontiers, "the sum of all possible histories." What is implied in such expressions is a readiness on the historian's part to employ the tools and concepts of the other social sciences in his reconstruction of the past. Pride of place is reserved for the study of economic, social, and-increasingly-intellectual (or sociopsychological) structures and structural change-the "unconscious" history of human collectivities as distinguished from the surface history of individual events (l'histoire événémentielle). Annales scholars, in other words, tend to concern themselves with what is recurrent, or at least comparable, in the history of past societies (and hence translatable into the common scientific language of statistics) rather than with what is unique—the delight of traditional historiography, with its noted bias in favor of great events and great personalities.

Le Roy Ladurie set himself the particular task of writing just such a "total" history of peasant society in the ancient French province of Languedoc between the Middle Ages and the Enlightenment. His work combines elements of historical geography, demography, and sociology; of economic

¹ Paris, 1949; revised edition, Paris, 1966; English translation, New York, Harper & Row, Publishers, 1972.

X Foreword

history; and of psychohistory in a single construction, baptized "a great agrarian cycle." These different structures are studied in their reciprocal relationships as component parts of a whole. Great events of the period—the Calvinist Reformation, the religious wars, the Camisard revolt—are reconsidered in the changing perspectives of this polymorphic histoire inconsciente (which is not to minimize their role or significance).

The author's two key statistical sources are land tax registers, or compoix, for shifting patterns of landownership and tithe accounts for the evolution of the gross agricultural product. But the successive phases of the long-term movement he has studied are also delimited and analyzed in terms of more familiar kinds of quantitative data: hearth lists, prices, wages (including wages in kind), land rent, interest rates, and profits. The various series and samplings, like most Old Regime statistics, tend to be disparate and discontinuous, unsuited to the ingenious model building of the "new economic history." To make them speak at all requires not only a perfect understanding of their nature and limitations but also a generous measure of improvisation (see, in particular, Part I, chapters 3 and 4, and Part IV, chapter 2).

The combined results of Le Roy Ladurie's calculations, which are carried out without resort to difficult statistical concepts (and, for that matter, without computers), serve to illustrate the book's central theme—the Malthusian dilemma of a traditional agrarian society incapable, over the long run, of preserving a balance between population and food production.

In the late Middle Ages, Languedoc—in common with the rest of Europe—had suffered a major demographic setback that resulted in the retreat of agriculture and sometimes rural land settlement. But the situation contained within itself "the seeds of a new advance": high wages, improved nutrition, consolidated (that is, viable) peasant landholdings, low rents, and a "frontier" of potentially productive farmland. The sixteenth century was characterized, in the first instance, by a veritable population explosion (the "Malthusian Renaissance") which touched off a whole series of interrelated processes: a progressive division of landholdings, a decline of real wages, a rise in prices (also induced by the notorious effects of bullion imports from the New World), and accumulating profits from direct cultivation in its various forms.

The first sixty years of the grand siècle, with profits shrinking and agricultural wages at rock bottom, were the heyday of the parasitic rentier landlord—the "feudal reaction" of an older historiography. If the ensuing "general crisis" (to borrow a term favored by English historians), with its predictable

Foreword xi

negative repercussions on population, brought some relief to the rural proletariat, it proved almost fatal to farm profits and to all forms of rente. The guilty variables, at this juncture, were soaring taxes, under Louis XIV, and a gross product that still obstinately refused to budge. It was not, in fact, until the age of the Enlightenment that improved yields, the spread of wine growing, and progress in manufacturing finally succeeded in exorcizing the Malthusian specter of recurrent subsistence crises in rural Languedoc.

Le Roy Ladurie breathes life into his statistical blueprint of economic developments with innumerable concrete examples; the career of Guillaume Masenx, a cynical back-country capitalist, symbolizes "primitive accumulation" in the inflationary sixteenth century, and the story of the Lalle family debt to the canons of Béziers illustrates the unhappy predicament of borrowers during the Colbert depression (likened to that of American farmers during the Hoover depression).

But the book's horizons are not bounded by the facts of economic life—by what, with luck and ingenuity, can be counted and quantified. The work also represents a pioneer venture in the history of popular culture inspired, in turn, by the concepts of a Freud, a Weber, a Lévi-Strauss, a Foucault. Thus, for example, if the extended peasant family of the late Middle Ages constituted a practical solution to the labor shortage, it also provided a needed psychological anchorage in an age of violence and insecurity. Or again, the primitive rebels of the late Renaissance (to say nothing of the acolytes of rural witchcraft) were motivated as much by irrational fantasies and Freudian anxieties as by a reasonable resentment against depressed wages and the "uneven growth of wealth." In the post-Revocation period, as a matter of fact, what passed for economic self-interest was often completely submerged in a sea of religious fanaticism. Finally, not all the roadblocks to sustained economic growth were economic in nature. What was also wanting, prior to the eighteenth century, was a spirit of initiative and a minimum level of education. In short, the complex processes described in the book were not determined by economic and demographic factors alone.

The Peasants of Languedoc contributes in numerous ways to our understanding of the problems and contradictions of peasant societies both past and present. At the same time, it offers the example of a new and demanding kind of historical synthesis inspired by the Annales ideal of a unified science of man.

The original French edition of *The Peasants of Languedoc* was published in 1966 in two volumes. In the shorter paperback edition of 1969, on which

xii Foreword

this translation is based, Part One of the original version (devoted to climate and human geography), much of the statistical appendix (tables and graphs), and a number of shorter sections were sacrificed, and Part Four (now Part Three, "The Rent Offensive") was summarized. The bibliography and the list of manuscript sources, which were also eliminated from the second French edition, have been restored, and an index has been added.

Professor Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie occupies the chair of Modern History and European Civilizations with the Collège de France. His other publications include Times of Feast, Times of Famine: A History of Climate Since the Year 1000 (New York, 1971), Histoire du Languedoc (Paris, 1967), Les Fluctuations du produit de la Dîme (in collaboration with Joseph Goy, Paris, 1972), Le territoire de l'Historien (Paris, 1973), and many articles, especially in Annales: economies, sociétés, civilisations.

Paris John Day

Contents

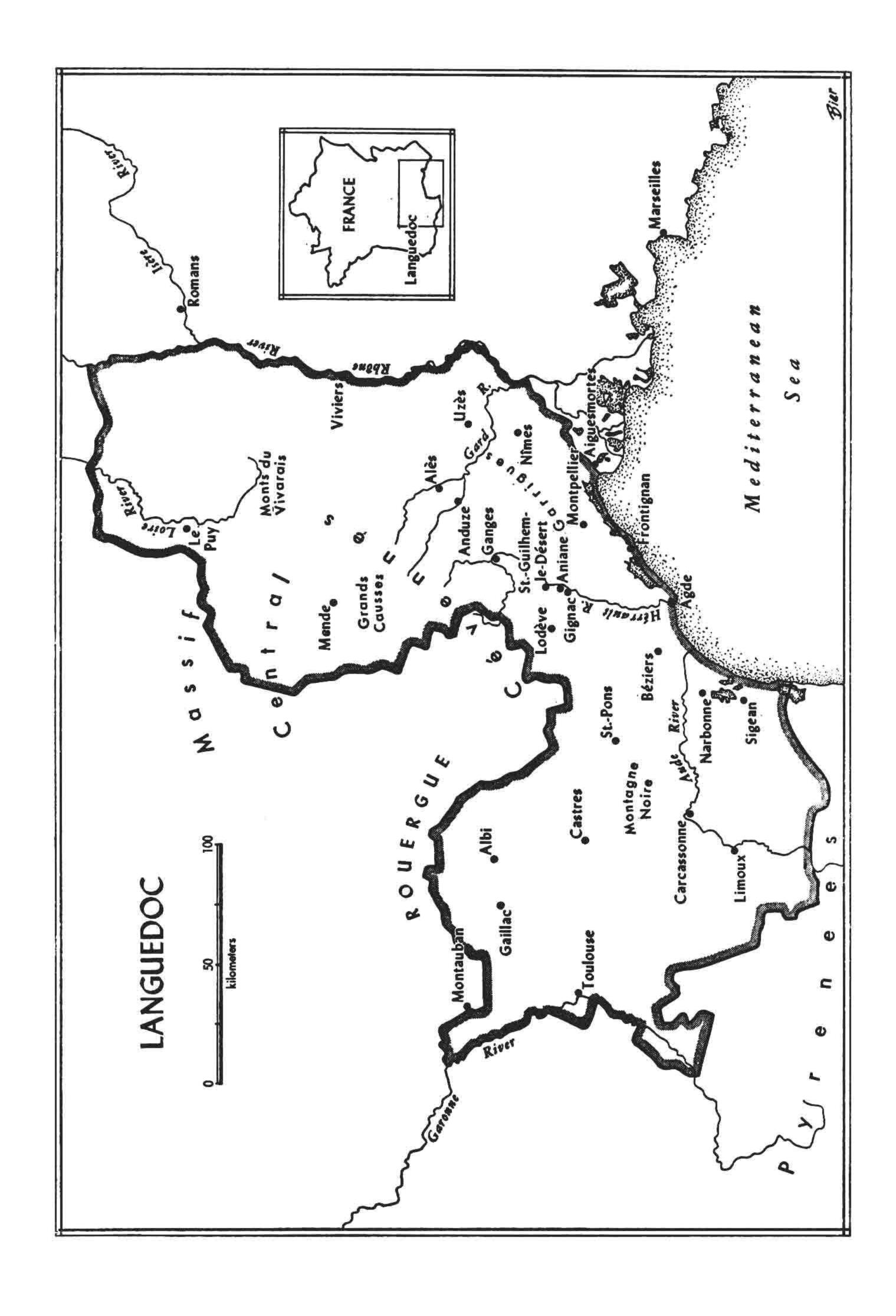
Foreword	ix
Introduction	3
PART ONE	
Malthusian Renaissance	
1. The Low-Water Mark of a Society	11
2. Population, Subsistence, Income: The "Scissors" of	
the Sixteenth Century	51
I. THE POPULATION EXPLOSION	51
II. TOWARDS AUSTERITY	73
3. Land Subdivision, Land Concentration, Pauperization	84
4. Wages, Rents, Profits: The Impoverishment of the Rural	
Wageworker	98
I. THE DETERIORATION OF REAL WAGES	98
II. THE PERSISTENT STAGNATION OF REAL RENT	114
III. THE TRIUMPH OF PROFIT	119
5. General Perspectives	132
PART TWO	
New States of Consciousness	
and Social Struggles	
1. The Paths of Scripture	149
2. The Huguenot Offensive and the Lands of the Priests	172
3. The Tithe: Reform or Revolution?	181
4. Struggle and Action of the "Lower Classes"	191
5. Witches' Sabbaths and Revolts	203

PART THREE The Rent Offensive

PART FOUR The Depression

Prices and Chronology	219
1. The Vicissitudes of the Gross Product	223
2. The New Demographic Depression	239
3. From Land Subdivision to Land Concentration	246
4. The Land Is No Longer Profitable	251
5. The Savage Rebellions	265
Conclusion	
A Great Agrarian Cycle	289
Tables and Graphs	313
Principal Manuscript Sources	323
Bibliography	335
Index	365

The Peasants of Languedoc



Introduction

It was in 1955 that Raymond Dugrand first spoke to me of the *compoix* of Languedoc and suggested I undertake a study of them. The *compoix*, he told me, are old master cadastres composed solely in regions subject to the taille on real property. The earliest date from the fourteenth century. They describe in detail the extent, nature, and value of landholdings. They make a long-range history of property possible and can therefore be made to shed critical light on the long-ago conquest of the land on the part of capital—on one of the essential aspects, in other words, of the birth of capitalism.

It seemed like a forbidding assignment. The departmental and village archives contained literally hundreds of discouragingly voluminous compoix. But I was young at the time; I was teaching at Montpellier, close to the sources; I had my sixièmes and my vacations; I was interested in agrarian history and loved the Mediterranean countryside; and I was fascinated by the problem of the origins of capitalism. I decided to follow my friend's advice.

The first results did not disappoint me, and from the start I discovered in the *compoix* exactly what I was looking for, namely, the classic activity of capitalist land engrossers already described by Febvre, Bloch, Merle, Raveau, Vénard, and a host of others. Lattes, in the countryside of Montpellier—a city of notables—was a perfect illustration for the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries of the time-honored and still valid model of the progressive accumulation of rural property by city-dwellers. Has this very model not become a mainstay of agrarian history? I published an article on the subject in 1956.

Little by little, however, these happy convictions began to strike me as insufficient if by no means inexact. My methods of sifting the statistical material in the *compoix* improved with practice and became more exhaustive. I

broadened my investigation to take in the almost purely peasant countryside as well as the mountain districts far from the small cities of the land engrossers. Here, certain phenomena that did not fit the traditional picture or confirm my original hypothesis attracted my attention. The process of concentration lost its linear simplicity, and I began to discern the outline of phases, lasting well over a century, of almost unrelieved subdivision of landholdings. Peasant property, during the course of several generations, seemed to be disintegrating, while the *number* of landowners—of diminutive properties for the most part—increased at a dizzying rate. This relentless process of decomposition tended to make a mockery of the persistent efforts of the land engrossers, whether nobles, bourgeois, or *coqs de village*.¹

At other times—that is, in the subsequent phase—the consolidation of landed property resumed while the number of individuals subject to the taille diminished. The process seems to have continued for a century, more or less, but it was neither definitive nor irreversible. Once again, landholding subdivision became the order of the day, and once again the taxable landowners increased in number as the average holding contracted in size. I observed these great secular movements with growing fascination, and I thought I could perceive the immense respiration of a social structure.

By that time I was immersed in agrarian history pure and simple. I had come a long way from the "origins of capitalism" that had preoccupied me in the beginning. Mine was the classic misadventure; I had wanted to master a source in order to confirm my youthful convictions, but it was finally the source that mastered me by imposing its own rhythms, its own chronology, and its own particular truth. My initial presuppositions had been stimulating, but they were now outmoded.

Little by little, a periodization imposed itself; it was confirmed, despite the usual exceptions, in the case of a hundred-odd rural circumscriptions, with the cadastres and land tax rolls of the empires, monarchies, and republics of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries serving as relays for the compoix and the books of the taille. This periodization offered immediate access to the long-range movements of agrarian history.

The starting point was the state of relative concentration of landholdings in the middle or at the end of the fifteenth century—relative, that is, to the preceding period (before 1350) and the succeeding period (after 1500). It

¹ Coq de village: "cock of the walk," that is, a well-to-do peasant, a village kulak (tr. note).

was not a question, in all probability, of a passing phase of capitalistic consolidation, but rather the consequence of rural depopulation born of the crises, plagues, and wars which had reversed the process of land subdivision still raging in the first half of the fourteenth century.

For that matter, following this passing phase of concentration at the end of the Middle Ages, the subdivision of landholdings recommenced with renewed vigor after 1500; it was strongly manifest throughout the sixteenth century, and it continued at a somewhat slower pace for a good portion of the seventeenth century until it reached a sort of critical threshold, a point of saturation and congestion of smallholdings, generally by about 1680.

At this juncture it came to a halt and slowly gave way once again to the reverse process of land concentration. Marginal holdings were sorted out. The better-qualified, the better-off, and the luckier individuals were cast in the role of engrossing landowners. The process favored surviving heirs and urban land buyers. The smallholders were decimated while the big and medium-sized landlords rounded out their properties from the spoils.

In the period about 1750–70 there was a new inflection, or rather a new inversion, and a resumption of the process of fragmentation spurred by the growth of population and stimulated by the spread of viticulture (which raised income per land unit and reduced the minimum size of a viable, taxable holding). This final offensive of land subdivision was unmatched by any similar movement in the past. It lasted fully a century, up to the phylloxera debacle of 1870–73 and up to the beginning of the rural exodus. Then, with slow deliberation, the contemporary movement of land concentration got under way. It has spared, right up to the present day, some solid blocks of peasant smallholds, but it is far from over.

Such a history of landed property, as outlined briefly above, would have been of little interest except from a juridical or purely technical point of view if it had not served as a sort of secular indicator and if it had not provided us with a concrete insight into the long-range evolution of agrarian society itself.

The outcome might have been different regarding the chronology and the real significance of the vicissitudes of landownership if I had studied the countryside of northern France, which was dominated by large farming units, but in the French Midi, characterized by small-scale agriculture and by the multitude of scattered tenements, the ebb and flow of smallholds constituted evidence of the greatest importance. It underscored the difficulties of an entire society; it served as a partial control, or cross-check, for other kinds of long-term movements; and on several occasions it helped delimit the frontiers of southern agriculture.

Three times, it appears, peasant society in Languedoc, at the end of a long period of expansion, reached one of these frontiers which deflected but never entirely blocked its slow, secular growth from the eleventh to the nineteenth century. The first time, apparently, was in the fourteenth century on the eve of the great collapse symbolized, as a rule, by the Black Death and the Hundred Years War. The second time was under Louis XIII or Louis XIV at the critical juncture of the seventeenth century—in some cases by about 1630, but more generally about 1675–80, depending on the region, as we shall see later in detail. A third time was about 1873–76, when the long period of expanding viticulture which had lasted from Louis XV to the Second Empire was terminated by the phylloxera epidemic and also by the economic depression of the seventies.

The present study is concerned essentially with the problems of the second frontier that marked the conclusion, in the last quarter of the seventeenth century, of the phase of agrarian development under way since the Renaissance. It was not possible, in fact, to exploit the long-term data furnished by the *compoix* and the cadastres in their entirety. Once the overall chronology had been determined and the main points of inflection had been situated on the time scale, it was necessary to stake out a period for a study in depth. Three major phases of expansion and contraction suggested themselves for this purpose: the medieval phase (from the eleventh century to the fifteenth century); the modern phase (from the end of the fifteenth century to the beginning of the eighteenth); and the contemporary phase (from 1750 to 1950).

The third phase, everything considered, is well known and fairly well understood thanks to the studies of various geographers, agronomists, and historians of Languedoc. It could still be enriched in detail, but it promised little in the way of new discoveries. It was during this last phase, in fact, that a good many cultivators of Languedoc ceased being *peasants*, who by tradition practice forms of polyculture and subsistence farming, and became modern winegrowers, purchasing their food and producing exclusively for the market.

As for the first, or medieval, phase, just the contrary was true. It was difficult to study because in its case the *compoix* were rare and, above all, late, dating from the fifteenth century at the earliest.

I have therefore chosen to ignore—except for brief glimpses where strictly unavoidable—the problems raised by the medieval expansion and by the great agrarian crisis that brought it to a close. I have concentrated instead on the strategic middle phase, or "second wind," when at the end of the fifteenth century the rural society of Languedoc raised itself from the ruins and set off on the highroad of modern development.

The compoix can serve to delimit this long, cyclical movement lasting from Louis XII to Louis XIV. They fix the basic chronology and reveal certain major inflections. But one must not expect them to shed light on every last detail. The problems raised by the expansion of a preindustrial society, and by the inevitable limits to such an expansion, require a multiple approach and the appeal to documents and statistics of the most diverse sort, for it is a question of discovering the actual movements behind the abstract data of the cadastral records.

In 1958, therefore, I forsook the history of rural property in order to study variables and constants other than land structures. First were the constants: Trained as a historian, was I going to have to describe the geographic structures of Languedoc because of a sister discipline's failure to do so? Fortunately, no. Raymond Dugrand, a geographer by trade, had spared me that task thanks to the remarkable thesis he defended in 1963. I could therefore practice the true historian's craft with a free spirit. I was able, in the first place, to isolate certain anthropological constants. We shall see how these were rooted, paradoxically, in the very mobility of the men of the past, in their regular migrations and those of their flocks and herds, and in the migrations of their cultivated plants.²

Next come the variables, whose moving chronology and ever-changing interrelations constitute, basically, the fabric of my book. I have not omitted the variable of climate, which is so important in agrarian history. It helps us to account for harvest fluctuations and the vagaries of supply, at least in the short run. But above all, I was interested—in connection with the long-term tendencies—in the major variables susceptible to lasting inflections and to secular fluctuations; that is to say, population, the different sectors of production and the regional gross product, nominal as well as metallic prices, aggregate income (both nominal and real), revenues, and exactions of various sorts (land rent, tithes, taxes, interest, farm profits or income, money wages, wages in kind, and mixed wages). Behind these abstract, if by no

² The sections dedicated to these problems are to be found in the original French edition of the present work (Paris, S.E.V.P.E.N., 1966).