

AFTER THE BLACK DEATH



A Social History of Early
Modern Europe



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GEORGE HUPPERT

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PREFACE

This preface is an apology of sorts for all the things the author did not do. His aim was to write a short, readable book which might serve as an introduction to the social history of Western Europe in the period extending from the fourteenth to the eighteenth centuries. That is to say, from the time of the first outbreak of bubonic plague, in 1347, which was referred to as the Black Death by dazed survivors, to the time when the plague left Europeans alone. Its last threatening appearance, in the Mediterranean port city of Marseille, was observed in 1721.

The plague itself will not appear in this book. Those who witnessed the terrible epidemics thought of them as Acts of God, punishments meted out by the Almighty in retribution for some awful misdeed. Six centuries later, we are more likely to think that natural disasters are unrelated to human behavior. Epidemics, like hurricanes and tidal waves, we view as blind forces unleashed by natural causes—and nature's indifference to mankind we assume to be universal and unvarying.

Wind, rain, frost, or drought have crushed the hopes of farmers, quite impartially, in Spain as well as in the Ukraine, in Napoleon's reign as easily as in Nero's. Yet human beings are not always and everywhere equally helpless when confronted with natural disasters. In the fourteenth century, Europeans were especially vulnerable to disease because of a succession of famines from which they had suffered. Famines are not entirely natural disasters. They can be, at least in part, caused by imprudent behavior. There were too many mouths to feed in Western Europe, in the early fourteenth century.

After the Black Death had done its work, the survivors became more prudent. They did not allow themselves the luxury of multiplying again to the point of outstripping their resources as dramatically as they once had. To forestall famine, they learned to control population growth. They also developed techniques of long-distance trade and navigation which allowed the importation of grain from the thinly populated plains of Eastern Europe. Against epidemic diseases, they learned to enforce ruthless quarantines. In time, they learned to develop vaccines. They had been helpless against famine and disease, in the fourteenth century. By the eighteenth century, they had reached a remarkable level of resistance to

both. They had also enlarged their cities and transformed their political systems. They had invented guns, clocks, printed books, new kinds of ships, new forms of art and of religion, new philosophies, new sciences. They had discovered new continents and settled them. And they did all this before the French and Industrial revolutions were to accentuate the differences between Western Europe and the rest of the world even further.

One of the assumptions which governed the writing of this book is that historians have shown excessive concern for the French and Industrial revolutions. These momentous transformations of the political and economic realities of the western world exerted a deep, hypnotic power over historians, political economists, and journalists throughout the nineteenth century. One of the more lasting legacies from this epoch of fascination with the Declaration of the Rights of Man and with the arrival of the factory system has been a tendency to consider European society “feudal” and “traditional,” right up to the summer of 1789.

In reaction against this approach to social history, some historians, more concerned with understanding the social changes that led to the late eighteenth-century revolutions than with absorbing their impact, advocate the minute examination of slow change over a long stretch of time, in a setting, of necessity, narrowly circumscribed: a single village over a period of a century, a single city in the course of a generation. The impetus for this approach we owe to scholars active on the eve of the First World War, among whom I should single out Professor Lucien Febvre, whose model study of the social life of a single province was published in 1912.¹ In that book, in subsequent ones, and in the pages of the journal *Annales*, which Febvre founded in 1929, in collaboration with the medievalist Marc Bloch, a new approach to social history gradually took shape. The influence of the *Annales* grew only slowly, and it was largely limited to French scholarship, at first. In the 1950s and '60s, however, the *Annales* approach was producing such tangible results that it began to serve as the acknowledged model for social historians in Italy, in England, in Germany, and in the United States. It is to this tradition of social history that the present book belongs.

It is a frequent misunderstanding of the *Annales* approach to assume that its practitioners are necessarily number-happy. For the study of historical demography, it is necessary, to be sure, to count births, marriages, and deaths. To determine economic trends, an accurate record of prices and wages is indispensable. The social structure of an urban com-

munity can hardly be grasped without an attempt at calculating the shifting percentages of rich, middling, and poor families, as they show up in the tax rolls. Acreage, crop yields, food consumption, cloth, and salt production—all these are appropriately grasped by statistical means.

But these are means only. The great merit of Lucien Febvre and of his most thoughtful collaborators has been that they never reduced social history to impersonal trends, never declared themselves satisfied with the mechanical recording of those things which happen to be calculable. Their ambition was to come as close to grasping the totality of historical experience as possible. Hence they chose to limit the scope of their inquiries to a manageable slice of terrain which was to be scrutinized, from the ground up, in every way.

The study of material civilization provides the foundation for an inquiry which should not stop short of examining family structure, social conflict, and religious beliefs. In the end, it becomes necessary, when following the proven methods pioneered by Febvre and Bloch, to enter, whenever possible, into the minds of individual men and women so as to understand their fears and hopes.

The specialized studies which I have consulted in the course of writing this book belong to this tradition of social history. They all suffer from the same, inevitable shortcoming; they are narrowly limited in scope. The chief difficulty experienced by the historian who attempts a synthetic description of Western European society is the difficulty of extracting, from a limited number of case studies, an overall understanding of rural and urban life for which one could claim some general validity. I do not claim to have overcome this difficulty. Not a single one of the generalizations attempted in the pages that follow is to be viewed as more than tentative. This is as it should be.

In order to contain the narrative within reasonable limits, I was forced to make choices, the most natural of which has been the choice of chronological limits. If there is one general conclusion that emanates forcefully from the specialized literature, it is the conclusion that there is, in the history of Western European society, a reasonably well-defined period of time during which something like a system of social relations comes into being, a system which may be contrasted with earlier and later developments, a system which was peculiar to Western Europe and which was, within Western Europe, fairly generally established, in spite of local variations. Among the distinguishing features of this system we will find a demographic pattern whose most obvious component is the voluntary

limitation of births among the mass of the population by means of delayed marriage. The cautious marriage practices of western peasants and artisans, which have been understood only recently, are generally thought to have been conditioned by the catastrophes of the fourteenth century and the later recurrences of famine and disease which struck whenever the population reached a level of density incompatible with the fixed supplies of nourishment that could be drawn from the available land. Before the fourteenth century, there was still some room for population growth. After the eighteenth century, both the food supply and employment opportunities were to become more flexible, as a result of industrialization and global trade. It was only in the early modern period that a precarious balance between resources and consumption could not be upset without the gravest consequences. The density of settlement which had been reached in Western Europe by 1300 appears as the most fundamental trait of this society, governing its marriage practices, its family structures, its exceptional level of urbanization, its continued search for new markets and resources abroad, as well as the transformation of serfs into free men and of obedient subjects into quarrelsome rebels.

If the period of time under consideration may be defined as extending from the fourteenth to the eighteenth centuries, what of the territorial limits of Western Europe? On that question I have allowed myself some latitude. Instead of settling for a purely geographical border line, such as the Elbe River valley, I have, in effect, focused on the most densely populated and the most thoroughly urbanized regions: the Paris Basin, southeastern England, northern Italy, western Germany. One might almost say that "western" is used in this book as a social rather than a geographical expression, so that Italy appears more western by far than Portugal.

The choices I have alluded to thus far may create an impression of dutiful consistency on the author's part. This is an illusion. Far from trying to give each portion of Western Europe its due, as a textbook might—with separate chapters, say, on Scandinavia, the Danubian lands, and Flanders—I have made only feeble attempts to correct the imbalance which is the natural consequence of the history of historical scholarship. There is some deliberation behind my decision to use case studies, on occasion, which stake out exotic claims to an understanding of border areas such as the foothills of the Pyrénées, the Friuli region north of Venice, or the sierras of southern Spain. But the fact remains that the specialized literature is, at this writing, still dominated by French schol-

arship and that it is concerned with French data, primarily. Where recent monographs are available for regions other than France, they are not likely to be concerned with lands only marginally western: Florence, Genoa, Venice, Seville, Milan, Valladolid, Coventry, Frankfurt, Nürnberg, Nördlingen, Strassburg are among the cities represented in this newer literature. A glance at the reading suggestions in the back of the book tells the story. It is, of course, a partial story.

In sum, the social historian whose aim is synthesis cannot be expected to present a picture that is consistently thorough, since he is dependent on the specialized literature, which may be thinner for Norway or the Abruzzi than it is for Tuscany or Burgundy. But let us not jump to conclusions: poorly studied regions are not always the least densely settled or the most backward. No region in Western Europe ought to be of greater importance to the social historian than the Dutch provinces of the Netherlands in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Yet there is not enough material available, so far, to grasp the social history of the Netherlands in this period, at least to my satisfaction.² Another surprising weakness is the absence of studies devoted to very large urban centers. There are no books about London, Paris, or Amsterdam, for instance, that could stand comparison with published studies of Beauvais, Coventry, or Nördlingen. It is simply more difficult to reconstruct the dynamics of a city of half a million inhabitants than it is to lay bare the social structure of a city of 10,000.

To the unevenness of the historical literature, add the unevenness of the author's education—and you have to conclude that a method must be devised for writing about Western European society in general, while sticking close to a limited number of case studies, each of them as representative as possible of broader patterns of behavior. This is the approach I have opted for—and I will be the first to confess to its limitations.

The advantages of this method, however, are also clear. Not the least of these is the opportunity to recreate, in considerable detail, the life of one village, of one city, of one family. This is a general book about European society which, at the same time, draws the reader, as concretely as possible, into real villages and real cities. The adoption of this narrative device has the advantage of reminding the reader of the fragility of generalization in history: Here is how things were in a village in the Sologne, in the seventeenth century; here is how social groups coexisted in a city in Picardy; this is what a revolt was like in Dauphiné, and here is how it went in Franconia; this is what an elderly miller, respected in his

village in the Friuli, thought about morality and mortality, in the sixteenth century; and this is how domestic slaves were treated in Tuscany, in the fourteenth century. Throughout, I have worked hard at underlining similarities, constants, and variations. But nowhere is the reader lured into accepting as fact anything except the evidence of contemporary documents, which may be interpreted in different ways. When he comes to the end of this book, the reader ought to be saying: This has been an introduction—the time has come to move on to the specialized literature.

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I

THE ETERNAL VILLAGE

Let us begin by looking at an ordinary European village in the seventeenth century. This village, Sennely, which has been carefully studied by Professor Bouchard, has a claim to being considered typical.¹ A population of some 500 to 700 persons is typical enough. The village's reliance on grain for bread-making as its chief crop is more than typical—it is universal. The thatch-roofed, windowless farmhouses, with their two rooms, attic, barn, and cowshed, are certainly normal.

Sennely is relatively isolated, as are most villages. Not that the city is far away; it is close enough so that tenant farmers pay their rents to absentee landlords in the city of Orléans. But the outside world does not impinge on the daily life of the villagers. Like most villages in preindustrial Europe, Sennely was a community of subsistence farmers whose needs were supplied locally: the rye grain, for bread; the cattle and pigs; the orchards that supply apples, pears, plums, and chestnuts; the garden vegetables; the fish in the ponds and the bees kept for honey and wax. Sennely had a miller, an innkeeper, a smith. There were part-time shopkeepers and weavers in residence. A villager hardly ever needed to go abroad.

This small, self-sufficient world is typical in another respect. It is fragile. The balance between resources and population is an uneasy one. The land is poor in Sennely. Water drains poorly. Evaporation from stagnant pools and ponds creates permanent ground fogs. This is not good land for growing grain. The poor soils of Sennely may not be typical. What is typical is the constraint under which the farmers operated, inasmuch as they had to grow grain, even though they would have been better off if they had concentrated on raising cattle.

What Sennely had in common with practically all European villages before the mid-nineteenth century was the need to be self-sufficient. Underdeveloped transportation and commercial networks forced the

rural population to grow all essential crops, even those for which the land or the climate were unsuitable. Sennely could not buy grain and sell livestock in exchange. It was condemned to make do with its sandy soil. Unable to grow wheat, the preferred grain crop, Sennely planted rye. Poor yields were compensated for by the vast size of the village land, a good deal of it wasteland, swamps, and heath. It took about two hours to walk across the village's territory and half the farms were spread out at a considerable distance from the village center. This dispersed habitat, an adaptation to the poor soil, no doubt goes a long way toward explaining Sennely's lack of social cohesion. Although the village did possess a clear center, a street of houses, a square, a church, and a cemetery, most of the farms lay hidden in the distance, each of them screened by rows of oak trees.

Not surprisingly, travelers described the chief personality trait of the peasants of Sennely as suspicion. They seemed suspicious of outsiders and of each other and not much given to talking freely. Their physical appearance was remarked upon as distinctive. They tended to be stunted, bent over, and of a yellowish complexion. They were not born that way. The little children were said to be good looking, but by the time they had reached the age of ten or twelve, they assumed the generally unpleasant appearance of their elders. They did not look healthy. Their bellies were distended. They moved slowly, they had poor teeth, their growth was retarded. Girls reached the age of 18 before first menstruation.

What we have here, then, is a group of people living on the edge of deprivation. Malnutrition was normal in Sennely in the late seventeenth century. There are hints of better times in the past, but by the time the records become abundant enough for a clear analysis of this society, Sennely appears as a fragile entity, vulnerable to disease and, somehow, just barely, kept going in spite of the constant, threatening presence of death.

One third of the babies born died in their first year. Only a third of the children born in Sennely reached adulthood. Most couples had only one or two children before their marriage was broken up by the death of one parent. Women married late, at about age 23, on the average. Any given 100 women in Sennely would bear about 350 children in the course of their lives. Of these, only 145 would reach adulthood and marry in turn, 75 of them female. Allowing for 5 girls who would not marry, only 70 adult women were available to replace the 100 women of the preceding generation. Yet the population remained more or less constant. The villagers probably made up the deficit by marrying the daughters of

transient artisans and laborers. When death struck a household, no time was wasted; widows and widowers remarried right away. Most first marriages occurred in the wake of a parent's death, so that the farm and the family could continue to function with a normal complement of hard-working men and women.

Fragile in the face of its poor harvests, constantly threatened by hunger and disease, Sennely just barely managed to reproduce itself, to hold on to life behind its hedges. Yet, for all that, Sennely was not badly off when compared to other villages. The peasants of the nearby Beauce plateau, a prime wheat-growing region, looked down with contempt on sullen, watery Sennely. But when harvests failed in the Beauce, there was nothing to fall back on, since all the land was plowed for wheat. A succession of bad harvests was enough to transform the peasants of the Beauce into starving beggars. Having put all their eggs in one basket, they were helpless when the wheat fields failed them. They took to the road, begging for food. And it is on such grim occasions, when the peasants of Sennely open their houses to starving vagrants and feed them generously, that we notice the hidden strength of Sennely's economy. Although it lives on the margin of poverty, Sennely never faces an all-out famine. Its inhabitants must have learned long ago that their meager grain crops had to be compensated for by making full use of the heath and ponds. They depended on their pigs, their cattle and sheep, their vegetables, fruit orchards, and fishing. It is this diversity, together with a low population density, that kept catastrophic famines away.

Not that everyone in Sennely enjoyed an equal level of protection against hard times. This was not a society of equals. The better-off farmers owned a team of horses and a plow. They did not exactly own their farms. They leased them from absentee landlords, but their customary rights to the land were so ancient that they were not in danger of losing them. These leaseholders belonged to the European-wide category of rich peasants known as *laboureurs* in France and as *yeomen* in England. Their wealth, however, was entirely relative. Distinguished by their possession of the expensive team and plow, they nevertheless lived just this side of poverty. It is only when they are compared to less fortunate peasants that they appear rich.

The estates of the *laboureurs* of Sennely can be evaluated at somewhere in the 2,000 livres range. By comparison, the social category just below, that of the renters (*locataires*) who do not own horses and plows, was made up of families whose worth was only in the 600 livres range. These tenant farmers were constantly in danger of losing the land they rented

and of being reduced to the level of hired hands. Hired hands (*journaliers*) in Sennely owned nothing except, perhaps, the roof over their heads, a garden, a pig.

There was another category of villagers, that of the artisans who lived in the village center and owned no land. Their level of fortune lay somewhere in between that of the renters and hired hands. About half the peasant families in Sennely belonged to the better-off categories of leaseholders and renters, who had some property. The other half of the village's population was made up of the families of hired hands and artisans who had no land at all.

A little to the side of these ordinary peasants, living on the main street of the village, their houses marked with painted signs indicative of their profession, we find three successful entrepreneurs: the smith, the miller, and the innkeeper. These families were among the most prosperous and influential in the village community. Barely involved in working the land, they dealt in goods and money. The innkeeper was also a contractor and a moneylender. There were horses and cows in his barn, his sheep grazed in the pastures, but he also bought up the grain owed to the Church and sold it on the open market. A handful of part-time shopkeepers of lesser wealth and stature completed the picture. They had a shop, a house, and a garden on the main street, but they could not live from trade alone. They also farmed and they dealt in cattle, hides, and wool.

On the fringes of village society, linked to it only in the sense that they owned property here, were rich outsiders who constituted the local élite. The priest, to begin with, whose house was the most imposing in the village. The priest had a comfortable income from rents and tithes assigned to the Church. He had a garden and an orchard. His house was a mansion of sorts, complete with salon, parlor, library, chapel, butler's room, stable, bakery, barn, and servants' quarters.

Side by side with the priest who presided over the Church's real estate interests in Sennely, there were three or four other outsiders, substantial men of property: a notary, a business agent, and an estate manager. They represented absentee landlords, but they also had property of their own. The estate manager had two farms which he leased out, rents from a number of tenants, and a large herd of sheep. He lived in a six-room house and he had a servant.

On the outer fringes of Sennely's territory, there were three small châteaux, belonging to wealthy gentlemen who were seen only occasionally, as they lived in the city and resided in their country châteaux only in

summer or in the hunting season. The wealthiest of these gentlemen owned six farms locally, the others had three farms each.

Leaving the priest, the gentlemen, and their managers aside, we are still left with a village community marked by sharp contrasts of wealth and power. The landless peasants and artisans live in grim poverty. Their cottages are small, dark, and cold, they cannot afford firewood, they own only the clothes on their back and a pair of wooden clogs, their larders are often empty.

The more substantial farmers, meanwhile, are likely to possess reserves of bacon and cheese, wardrobes full of warm clothes, and much bedding to ward off the cold at night. In spite of these differences, there is no sign of strife in the village. This requires some explanation, especially since Sennely lacks most of the social controls one may find elsewhere. No resident lord provides leadership here, the priest's influence is thin. At most, he visits a family once in three years. As for family ties, they are too weak to provide cohesion.

Family relations, as revealed in the parish registers where births, marriages, and deaths are recorded, confirm the casual observer's view of the peasants of Sennely. Each family is on its own here. It is a bare-minimum family, consisting of a couple and one or two young children. For those who look back to the rural past with nostalgia, expecting to find large, noisy, heart-warming throngs of adults and children all living merrily under one roof, the evidence in Sennely is bound to prove a disappointment. These seventeenth-century peasant families are as isolated and as unstable as are modern families of wage earners living in impersonal housing projects on the periphery of industrial cities.

Grandparents are hard to find in Sennely, and so are aunts, uncles, or cousins living under one roof. The bread and bacon wrung out of each homestead cannot stretch to feed more than two adults and their babies. Bitter experience taught the peasants of Sennely to be calculating. They did not marry until death had cleared the way for the formation of a new family. Most young men and women waited until one of their parents had died before marrying and raising a new generation. As long as both parents were alive, the addition of another mouth to feed would have put a strain on the family's resources. As soon as one of the parents falls ill, however, the grown son or daughter must contemplate marriage to a partner who will replace the dying parent on the farm. There probably is not much sentiment involved in such matches. If the priest is to be believed, his parishioners marry only out of calculation. They do not

worry about the bride's pretty face, they ask only how many sheep she will bring into the family. Sexual need probably does not influence the decision very much either, since promiscuity at an early age is a trademark of Sennely's young. Outsiders comment on this, some expressing shock. The boys and girls of Sennely, it seems, do not need to wait for marriage. They pet and kiss and fondle each other freely. Marriage, in this perspective, is business rather than pleasure.

The new family, founded in the shadow of death, is a partnership established for the purpose of continuing the timeless battle against hunger and solitude. It is not a very solid partnership. It will be broken up by the death of one of the partners within ten years or so. Just time enough to have a baby in the first year and several others, at two year intervals—four or five children in all. One or two of these will die of a contagious disease, aided by chronic malnutrition and unsanitary surroundings. When the mother herself dies, often in her early thirties, and usually from complications following childbirth, the widower is left with two or three orphaned children in his care. Almost instantly he finds a new wife. Half the recorded marriages in Sennely are second marriages of this kind. Should both parents fall victim to one of the recurring waves of murderous food shortages accompanied by illness, the children will be taken care of by the village. Orphaned children are not so much absorbed by relatives as by legal guardians appointed by the community. Unless the orphaned children are very young, they may not experience their parents' death as a profound dislocation, since it was the custom, anyway, especially among the landless families, to hand children over to more prosperous neighbors when they reached the age of seven or eight. They were old enough, by then, to become servants, apprentices, or shepherds. By the time they were 14, they were able to give a full day's work to their masters, so that caring for an orphaned child was not necessarily a losing proposition.

Few could afford the luxury of sentiment in Sennely. This was a society on a perpetual war footing, mobilized against the inroads of death, closing ranks in the aftermath of catastrophe. The men and women of Sennely were too much concerned with making a bare living and burying their dead, to lavish feelings on each other. Parents were not in a position to care for their children beyond their early years, nor were children prepared to come to the aid of destitute or sickly parents. Orphans were taken care of, not so much out of pity, but because they were human capital. A reasonably healthy orphaned girl, after serving some years as a kitchen maid in her guardians' household, could look forward to a