

# FRANCE



## 5 France, 1000–1750

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### 5.1 Ownership, power relations and the distribution of property

#### *Types of landowners and lords*

Peasant freeholding was of declining importance in northern France throughout the half millennium after 1000: the main landowners were the church and the lay aristocracy, whilst rich bourgeois acquired a growing proportion of the land, especially in the vicinity of towns. The church, as a whole, was certainly the main landowner throughout the Middle Ages. Its property included very old and large estates, such as those of Saint-Denis, Saint-Germain-des-Pr s, and Notre-Dame of Paris in the Ile-de-France. These had suffered losses over time but still formed huge territorial complexes originating in Carolingian times. Most of these estates consisted of a combination of land farmed directly in arable fields called *coutures* (Latin *culturae*), of peasant holdings, and of manorial rights. Other monastic estates were formed later with the foundation of new monasteries and churches, especially in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The most remarkable among these new estates were those of the Cistercians and the other monastic orders which managed their own lands and built large farms or granges. Chaalis, founded in 1136 not far from Paris, offers a good example of the endowment of the Cistercian abbeys, with its seven granges in 1151 and twelve in 1204. Most large estates were divided into farms corresponding roughly to an optimal area (like the Cistercian granges): this was about 150 ha in Ile-de-France at the end of the thirteenth century. The famous Cistercian grange of Vaulerent, in Ile-de-France, had 350 ha of ploughed fields in the 1260s; 200 years later, it had been divided into one farm of 200 ha and three smaller ones. The reorganization of the resources of Cluny (1132) assigned to the daily needs of the monks 18 granges. Ecclesiastical property continued expanding in extent in the last centuries of the Middle Ages, for the Church never sold (it might however grant perpetual leases), it still received gifts, and continued to buy land. At the end of the thirteenth century, a large abbey such as Saint-Denis spent several hundred pounds a year on acquiring land.

The rural aristocracy also owned an important part of the land, but many estates were threatened by the biological fragility of the families and by the disparity between their income and expenditure. Indebtedness was a recurrent problem for nobles, and it often drove them to sell their estates. During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, many aristocratic estates were transferred to newcomers enriched by trade, the king's service or careers in the law: most of these new families of landowners were sooner or later accepted into the nobility.

Throughout the period before the French Revolution, there was no complete or 'full' ownership, but rather a great variety of property rights on the land. In northern

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France there were very few *alleux* (plots free from all seigneurial rights) because the rule was one of ‘no land without a lord’. There were several individuals with an ownership interest in every plot of land. First, the lord held the *dominium directum* and was therefore entitled to various dues, including *corvées*. Secondly, the tenant or vassal held his land as the lord’s dependent, and exercised either *dominium utile* or the fief. But, third, other persons or institutions might have some rights in the land as well. For instance, if land was leased in perpetuity, the leaseholder received a perpetual rent that could be sold separately; if the land was sold, the descendants (*lignage*) had the right to redeem it, particularly in Normandy, unless they sold that right too. In Brittany property rights were extremely complicated under the *bail à domaine congéable*, a system that attributed ownership of buildings and trees to the leaseholder of the domain (Sée, 1906, Le Goff, 1989).

Sometime during the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries, a big change took place in the relative importance of *dominium directum* and *dominium utile*. From a juridical point of view nothing altered: the true owner was the possessor of the *dominium directum*, the landlord. The tenant only had the usufruct: he was forever a tenant. This did not trouble jurists in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. For the eminent jurists Dumoulin (1500–66) or Cujas (1522–90), tenants were not the true owners of the land. But slowly, and it is not exactly clear when, *dominium utile* became more important than *dominium directum*. In fact, for a long time the tenants, who were not always peasants, had been accustomed to sell, lease, mortgage and inherit plots without consulting the landlord, since the new owner paid a transfer tax (*lods et ventes*) and continued to pay the annual rents and dues. The tenants considered themselves to be the free owners of the land and behaved as though they were. As an illustration of their conviction, when during the Revolution, the Constituent Assembly decided that seigneurial dues could be redeemed, the tenants refused to purchase the seigneurial rights over land which they believed they already owned (Béaur, 2000).

At the end of the eighteenth century, the geographical distribution of *dominium utile* is fairly clear. According to the records of confiscated property (*biens nationaux*) sold during the Revolution, church property made up about 6 per cent of land in France as a whole, probably rather more in the north (possibly as much as 8 per cent). This proportion varied considerably. It could be very small: 1 or 2 per cent near Domfront, but it could reach 20 per cent in other parts of Normandy, 22.6 per cent in the District of Soissons, 25 per cent near Crépy-en-Valois (in the Ile-de-France), and even 40 per cent near Cambrai in the north (Bodinier and Tessier, 2000). Abbeys and chapters could own large estates: the cathedral chapter of Chartres had 8,500 ha (Vovelle, 1980). Nobles also had large estates, especially in the Beauce plains of the central Paris basin, in Champagne or Burgundy, more in some western areas, less in coastal Flanders (Farcy, 1989; Clère, 1988; Saint Jacob, 1960). A large proportion of these estates was kept as demesne (land not permanently ceded by the lord), such as the vast farms held on lease in the fertile plains of the Paris basin (100 ha. and more), or the smaller *métairies* (20 to 40 ha.) held under sharecropping in the west of France. There was an enormous gulf between the duc de Bourbon-Penthièvre, who had the third greatest fortune in France in the eighteenth century and owned several thousand ha, and the poorer landlords

who had only several hundred hectares or sometimes less, even though that was far more than was in the hands of the richest tenant farmers.

The bourgeoisie (merchants, lawyers and rentiers) tended to acquire land around the towns in which they were resident. The distance from a town that their estates extended varied according to its size. At Rennes, with 40,000 inhabitants, the land of wealthy townspeople fell within a radius of 20 km, at Chartres with 10,000 inhabitants within 10 km, at Fougères with 5,000 inhabitants, 5 km (Jarnoux, 1996; Farcy, 1989). It can be assumed that peasants held about 40 to 45 per cent of French soil on the eve of the Revolution, but less in some regions, so under 20 per cent around Paris, in Coastal Flanders and in Champagne, round 30 per cent in Beauce, Picardy, Cambrésis, Burgundy and 40 per cent in Artois. And, of course, there was a wide divergence among peasants, although it can be assumed that even the rich tenant farmers of the Paris basin (*laboureurs*), who took out leases on vast farms of over 100 ha. owned no more than a few hectares themselves (Goubert, 1960, Moriceau, 1994).

### *Changing social property distribution*

#### 1000–1500

Peasants were the main losers in the land market throughout the Middle Ages. Peasant property, which seems initially to have been quite extensive, began to decrease as early as the Carolingian period. Its loss continued throughout the last centuries of the Middle Ages with the transfer from small and medium-sized owners to the bourgeoisie and religious institutions. Regional monographs focusing on the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (on Picardy by Fossier (1968), Chartrain by Chédeville, 1973 and so on) include extensive analyses of this trend, stressing the role of the demographic growth which fragmented peasant holdings. Many former freeholders became tenants or day labourers, or sought work in the cities. Some peasants were able to take advantage of economic change in farming, credit and trade, and they acquired large estates and revenues. In the vicinity of Paris at the end of the fifteenth century, one could meet many well-off peasants who were resisting the growing hold of the bourgeoisie, and in Berry (as probably in other regions) the rebuilding after the Hundred Years War allowed the emergence of a prosperous peasantry.

Adalbero, Bishop of Laon (d. 1030–31), in his famous description of the society of his time (*Poem to king Robert*, 1025–27), gave a striking picture of the submissiveness of the peasants, who worked hard to provide warriors and clerics with food and luxuries. Most peasants were subordinate to a lord, to whom they owed duties and charges: some were serfs, tied to the lord by a personal bond, while others, *manants* or *vilains*, were subordinated to him only because of their tenure or of their residence on the seigneurie. The peasant was tried by the manor court, he was required to fulfil his *corvée* to maintain the castle. The lord also exerted many customary prerogatives: he might requisition food and other products, the tenants had to serve at the feasts at the castle, they supplied carts to transport the lord's crops to the town market, and so on. From the end of the eleventh century, they were also obliged to pay taxes in money, called *taille* (tallage) or *queste*, and they had to use – and to pay to use – the lord's mill, oven and wine press (the set of rights which would be later called *banal*). Many lords, for

instance the Parisian monasteries, continued to take a large part of the harvest, often a quarter, as they did in Carolingian times. The peasants also paid the tithe, which was in principle due to the parish church, but was in fact often diverted into the lords' hands.

The manor was therefore both the key to social domination – symbolized by 'gifts' and rituals of submission, which expressed together the ideology of protection and the violence latent in the relationship between lord and tenants – and a first-rate tool to transfer the profits of agriculture from tenant to lord, and to generate a surplus for the market (Bourin and Martínez Sopena (eds), 2004, 2007). The seigneurial levies were originally conceived as the means by which the lords and their knights could live at the expense of the peasants, but they later stimulated some peasants to produce for the market and take advantage of the commercialisation which was transforming the western economy (Duby, 1962).

From the twelfth century onwards, the manorial system became increasingly formal: it was now ruled by custom, which was increasingly recorded in writing. The demands it made of its peasant tenants were becoming lighter and it was increasingly possible to convert them into cash payments or even redeem them in all or part. Most of the lords were henceforth allowed to govern their tenants and to seize their surpluses only within defined limits, and they were more and more controlled by the king's courts, to which the peasants were allowed to appeal.

The northern part of the kingdom was one of the main regions in Europe for the *chartes de franchise* (charters of liberties) or *chartes de coutume* (custom charters), agreements between lords and their peasant communities which transformed the manorial system during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (Bourin and Martínez Sopena (eds), 2004). Between 600 and 700 charters made between 1120 and 1270 have been identified. Most followed a few precedent models such as the charter of Lorris-en-Gâtinais (drafted some years before 1155), which was copied by 80 other communities, the charter of Prisches (1158), or that of Beaumont-en-Argonne (1182), adopted by over by 500 villages. The main result of the charters was that the arbitrary power of the lord over the collection of taxes and justice was restricted.

By fixing the dates and the amounts of the manorial dues payable to the lords, tenants were enabled to plan and accumulate surpluses. Another common concession made by the charters was exemption from or the reduction of tolls and market duties. Henceforth the peasants were able to focus their production on the rapidly-growing market. Many charters also regulated the use of commons at a time when they were being reduced by enclosure. They also allowed for the autonomous management of the community. Some villages, as those around Laon and Soissons, even became communes with a high degree of self-government.

As for the serfs, they were tied hereditarily to a lord; they were therefore called *hommes de corps*, *hommes propres*, *hommes de poté* (Latin, *potestate*, power), and the old word *servus* itself was used again. The revival of the vocabulary of servitude in the thirteenth century reflected the revival of the notion itself. Peasants who had not been included in a charter of liberties were, in future, considered to be unfree, and the revival of Roman law strengthened that opinion, suggesting that they were *serfs de la glèbe*, bound to the place where they were born. The serf was identified by special duties: *chevage* (a head tax in money); *mainmorte* (the lord's right to seize a serf's goods on his death, usually reduced to a heriot); *formariage* (a fine for the serf who married a

woman belonging to another lord). From the thirteenth century, all peasants who had not been able to redeem their tallage, and still paid it *à merci*, at the lord's liking, were now considered to be serfs (Bourin and Freedman, 2005). Therefore in the fourteenth century large numbers of peasants were classified as serfs in Champagne, Vermandois (north of Paris) and Burgundy. On the other hand, many serfs took the opportunity to redeem themselves in the years from the mid-thirteenth century to the early fourteenth, especially in the Ile-de-France which became a land of general freedom as the king, the great Parisian abbeys and the chapter of Notre-Dame manumitted thousands.

## 1500–1750

Throughout the *ancien régime*, lords exercised power over their dependents and exacted charges from them, whether light or burdensome. Seigneurial demands were rigorous in two well-documented regions, Brittany and Burgundy (Sée, 1906; Saint-Jacob, 1960); they were more limited in areas of large-scale intensive farming (such as the clay plains of the Paris basin) where the lord was often an absentee. Peasants were however free, since serfdom had disappeared except in the east of the Paris basin, and survived in attenuated forms from Lorraine to Berry (where manorial restraints on marriage remained stronger) (Bressan, 1997).

Historians used to argue that the seigneurie was an economic structure which made profits out of the peasants by confiscating their surplus. This is not completely wrong, but contrary to this widespread and still valid opinion, a new conception of the seigneurie has recently emerged which considers it to be a legal structure for public utility. It was not opposed to royal administrative authority: it offered useful services to the rural community by, for example, providing local justice and organising communal farming (Antoine, 1994).

It has been widely assumed that the extent of peasant property was reduced under the assaults of the landowners: clergy, nobility and bourgeoisie. But there is no real evidence of a *massive* decline in peasant landowning, although they did lose some land during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The examples of the Hurepoix and the Beauvaisis near Paris support this conclusion (Goubert, 1960; Jacquart, 1974). Historians have shown that both the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy sought to consolidate their landholdings whenever they could, taking advantage of peasant indebtedness, whether due to war or bad harvests, or by the inheritance and division of peasant estates. They bought up land sold by smallholders, many of whom became day labourers with tiny cottages or no land at all. Engrossers, *Rassembleurs de terre*, people who slowly, plot by plot, built up an estate that was leased and handed down for generations, are found in all regions. Around Paris and other cities (Beauvais for example) the amount of peasant-owned land decreased greatly.

There is however evidence to support an argument that peasants maintained the possession of their property with greater resilience during the eighteenth century, and that peasant property may even have increased. The losses caused by recurring crises ought to have been counterbalanced by the gains registered as soon as prosperity returned, as is apparent around Maintenon or Janville in the Beauce (Béaur, 1984).



This is the impression gained, for instance, by measuring the cumulative effects of land sales round Lille and Chartres. It bears witness to the land hunger of the peasants, who strove to recover the land they had lost as soon as circumstances became favourable again (Table 5.1) (Béaur, 1984). Whenever peasant proprietors' losses and gains during the eighteenth century have been set against each other, the results have been shown to cancel each other or even to have led to an increase in peasant landholding.

Though day labourers were more or less excluded from the land market because they had nothing to sell and no money to spend, some smallholders, such as winegrowers, achieved a kind of equilibrium, while yeomen (*laboueurs*) found ways of acquiring all the plots that came on the market. These were not big estates, which were rarely offered for sale before 1750 or after, but small plots. Yeomen bought land sold by the bourgeois (for example, around Janville) except when the middle classes of nearby small towns (such as Maintenon) were competing with them (Béaur, 1984).

### *Systems of tenure*

#### 1000–1500

In the eighth and ninth centuries, northern France had been the cradle of the 'bipartite estate', characterised by a combination of land in direct cultivation and land farmed by peasant tenants. The tenants performed heavy *corvées* (one to three days a week) to cultivate the lord's land, and in addition paid him a part of their harvest as rent. Three

**TABLE 5.1: Land gains and losses by the peasantry in the land market in Flanders (near Lille), 1751–2 and in Beauce (near Maintenon and Janville), 1781–90**

	Flanders	Maintenon	Janville
	Thousands florins	Thousands of livres	Thousands of livres
Farmers, <i>Laboueurs</i> and <i>Meuniers</i>	+ 194	+ 57	+ 170
Winegrowers	no	+ 9	no
Journaliers	– 5	– 11	– 1
Others peasants	+ 43		
Rural bourgeoisie	+ 229		
Merchants and Artisans	+ 75 <sup>a</sup>	0	0

<sup>a</sup>artisans only.

Source: Vignerot, 2007: 276 and Béaur, 1984: 104.

centuries later, the system survived only in isolated places like Lorraine (on the margins of Germany, where it remained far more widespread), or in vestigial can be found. In most regions the notion of *mansus* was disappearing, *corvées* were often reduced to only a few days a year, and the system was generally no longer functional. However, on the large estates of the twelfth-fourteenth centuries, peasant obligations still reflected those of Carolingian times. They included a rent for the peasant's arable, consisting of a share of the harvest (*terrage, champart*), or a fixed amount of grain, or more rarely a sum of money. The peasants also paid a rent in cash for their house, for the meadows and sometimes for their vineyards, and small 'gifts' of poultry, eggs, or livestock.

The main tendencies from the tenth century onwards were the fragmentation of holdings (more and more fields were rented separately) and the replacement of perpetual or long leasehold contracts (often of three generations) by short and medium-length leases, lasting from a few years to 29. Historians have long believed that another major feature of this evolution was the replacement of rents in kind by rents in cash. Recent research, however, challenges the idea that this last trend was general (Feller, 2009). Indeed, the most prudent ecclesiastical landowners including the monks of Saint-Denis tried to increase their rents taken in kind.

Some owners gave up direct cultivation and leased out whole estates for an annual rent in cash, usually for a few years at a time but renewable. The best-known cases are those of the great monasteries and cathedral chapters, which granted their estates for short term leases as early as the second half of the thirteenth century. The accounts of Saint-Denis show that the new system could be profitable. Many Cistercian monasteries did the same with their granges when it became difficult to continue with direct cultivation. A good many farmers were well-off peasants; some of them were able to incorporate the leased estates into their own familial patrimony, and transmit them to their heirs. Some of these dynasties of big farmers continued for many generations, and became the backbone of rural society in the Ile-de-France, Artois and Picardy.

Other landowners chose to run their estates themselves, with the help of wage-earning workers, on a model inspired by the Cistercian granges that were cultivated by lay brothers. Many of the wage earners were small cottagers of the neighbourhood. Another option for the property owner was *métayage*, sharecropping, which involved his financial commitment to provide animals, seed, tools and the like in return for the division of the harvest and the increase of the livestock equally with the tenant. The owner contributed capital: the tenant his skill and labour, and he also maintained the owner's property. The tenant might also keep some lesser sources of profit such as poultry. *Métayage* spread throughout the western parts of France, where it became a major form of tenancy, and it changed the social structure because it led to the dependence of the tenant on his landlord. The *métairie* was the right size to support one family, which was able to live on its own produce, but it did not permit the accumulation of either land or capital by the tenant.

Landlords were concerned to manage their estates to increase their profitability. As early as the middle of the twelfth century two well-known abbots, Peter the Venerable of Cluny and Suger of Saint-Denis, were trying to adapt the productive system of

their estates to changing economic conditions. A classical example of the interest of some lay owners in their estates, and of their rational management, was Thierry de Hireçon (d. 1328), a rich cleric and landowner in Artois. He lived in a region and at a time especially favourable to market agriculture. The accounts of his two estates, which he managed himself with hired workers, show highly profitable corn crops, complemented by sheep-breeding.

## 1500–1750

When, after the disasters of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the reconstruction of the countryside began at the very end of the fifteenth century, long-term leases of up to 99 years or three lives were used to settle farmers and encourage them to invest. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries leases of this length become very rare even if they never quite disappear.

It was much more usual for a landowner who was not farming himself to make either short term leases of his property, or enter into sharecropping contracts with his tenants. Generally, the short-term lease with rent was widespread in the north and in the plains of the Paris basin, from Flanders to the Loire Valley, from Lorraine to Perche. In this area, sharecropping was unknown. By contrast, in the west of France, and in Berry, the *métairie* predominated in association with little farms or plots rented for money. In Burgundy, the ‘*granger*’ cultivated vines by sharecropping, like the ‘*closier*’ in a district of the Loire Valley (Touraine) (Saint Jacob, 1960; Maillard, 1998). Leases were generally made for three, six or nine years, sharecropping contracts for four, six or eight years. During the eighteenth century, the duration of leases tended to lengthen under pressure from farmers and sharecroppers: leases for rent became commoner and sharecropping contracts rarer (Antoine, 1994, 2009; Maillard, 1998).

After the Middle Ages, the surviving *corvée* (labour services) declined everywhere, and sometimes even disappeared totally, while rents in kind were often converted into cash. In some areas however, rents in the form of *champart* (where a part of the harvest was paid) continued to be collected and remained a heavy charge on peasant income. In some parts of Burgundy and in Lorraine, *corvées* were still demanded. By contrast, in the centre of the Paris basin, the seigneurie was less onerous. The *cens*, when taken as a cash rent specified in money, was undermined by inflation and became a token payment. Its actual payment depended on the rigour with which the seigneurie was managed. The ‘*Assises de fiefs*’ of the Bas-Maine were special sessions of the seignorial court, where the tenants were obliged to come and acknowledge their subordinate condition and allow the lord to verify that they had paid their correct rents. But the smallest carelessness in record-keeping or collection could be fatal for seignorial income (Antoine, 1994). The *cens* were less lucrative when they were calculated in money, but they proved the superior power of the lord and therefore gave him the right to claim other rights, such as the tax on land transactions, *lods et ventes* (usually a twelfth or an eighth of the sale price), or the dues for use of the wind or water mills, the bread oven or the wine press (*banalités*).

Peasants tended to evade these charges whenever they were not effectively policed. That is why throughout the eighteenth century many lords attempted to recover

forgotten rights and dues which had lapsed. This has been called a feudal reaction: its reality has been much debated by historians. It is not difficult to find seigneurs who tried to restore archaic obligations, who made new *terriers* to discover exactly who owned what, employed *feudists* to study ancient records and map tenant holdings, all ways of getting more land or more duties. This behaviour was not universal. What is certain is that attempts to reorganize the seigneurie were considered oppressive by the tenants because they were not prepared to recommence the payment of lapsed taxes and dues. Their refusal led to numerous conflicts.

Of course, no tenant had to pay all the numerous dues listed by historians. The range of taxes varied according to the seigneurie; in the same seigneurie each holding or family had different obligations. The peasant who did not go to law did not need to pay for a licence to do so, and the one who had no vines would not be charged for using the seigneurial wine press. But, taken all together, these duties represented a heavy burden, to which was added to the church's tithe, charged at widely varying rates. When we take into account the produce – grain, cattle and wine – that landlords received as rent and tithe, we can appreciate just how far they could monopolize trade and the provisioning of towns.

### *The economic and social value of land*

#### 1000–1500

It is extremely difficult to estimate the value of land with enough precision to allow geographical or chronological comparisons. Land could be sold, whatever its status, the main exceptions to this rule being the lands of the church, and also the fiefs, that is land held by the aristocracy that was regarded as conferring nobility. Not only owners, but also customary leaseholders, were allowed to sell their tenure. The landlord received a transaction tax, the *lods et ventes*, normally 8.33 per cent of the price. The registration of the *lods et ventes*, which became usual from the twelfth century, provides price series covering large areas of northern France including the regions of Chartres, Verdun, Reims, Picardy, Burgundy, Anjou and Normandy. It has been suggested recently that land prices cannot be studied without taking into account social and familial factors, and the personal bonds that the transaction was creating or enforcing. In this way, the economy of the land sales and of the creation of rents was not completely separate from the economy of the gift and from the creation of social bonds (Feller and Wickham (eds), 2005). A study of the land market in central France, from Brittany to Burgundy (Beck, 2005: 114), reveals features of general application. Sales, in a modern sense, were very rare up to the thirteenth century and did not form the majority of the transactions in the fifteenth. The seller always kept some interest in the land that he had sold, whether a church service, a fief, a rent, or some form of credit. These arrangements were shown by regional types of contracts such as the Burgundian *gageria*, the Chartrain *hostise*, or the *domaine congéable* of Brittany.

Although it is very difficult to put a figure on the evolution of the value of land, we may say that it seems to have grown until about 1260. It is usually held that the main

factor driving growth in this period was demographic pressure, which also caused an increase in the number of transactions. After 1260 most land prices stagnated or dropped. They were badly affected by the slowing of population growth, and also by the appearance of other investment opportunities elsewhere in the economy, whether in credit, trade, or craft industries. Thereafter land prices no longer mirrored the movement of corn prices or wages, except on the outskirts of the cities: for instance, a fiscal account of Reims (1328) shows that suburban land was assessed at two or three times the rate of rural property.

The economic value of the land was extremely variable: good land, especially if it was located near a city and a busy market like Paris (Fourquin, 1964), remained a very attractive investment throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Its return was inferior to that of international trade or even of usury, but it was more or less steady and without risk. Other desirable investments were vineyards in regions able to export, such as the Seine valley, from Ile-de-France to Burgundy. On the other hand, the church had granted a great deal of land for perpetual rents which no longer brought any significant income; some land which had been abandoned after the Black Death and during the Hundred Years War, was used for more extensive agriculture, especially pasture.

## 1500–1750

Land continued to be not only a secure, but also a rewarding investment. However land rent underwent many fluctuations during the three centuries before the Revolution. It rose sharply during the sixteenth century, was then stagnant, and then declined throughout the seventeenth century, before starting to rise again from around 1730 or 1740 (Table 5.2 a-c). It was at the end of the seventeenth century that rent hit its lowest point. It collapsed suddenly. When the big farmers faltered, landowners were either forced to agree to allow arrears to accumulate or to reduce the rent for the current and future years. These measures did not succeed in preventing some resounding failures amongst farmers. Only the strongest survived and they were able to take advantage of adverse conditions to increase their holdings, leading to a concentration of land in fewer hands (Moriceau, 1994).

After those troubles, rent probably doubled or even tripled between about 1740 and 1790 (Labrousse, 1933; Béaur, 1984). The rise was gradual until 1768, but strengthened in the 1770s, roughly doubling in 10 years (Table 5.2 (c)). The slowdown before the Revolution was clearly a symptom of economic malaise; however, it also demonstrated a misplaced optimism amongst farmers in the 1770s. After benefiting from lagging rents between 1740 and 1770, they agreed to pay higher rents because of the prosperity of the 1770s, but then had to confront the difficulties of the 1780s while paying these high rents. The price of land had kept pace with this movement. It had even anticipated it; so much so that it seems probable that the return from landed capital had declined. What was the rate of profit during the eighteenth century? It may have been between three and five per cent, with sharp local variations; it had probably been higher before that time (Béaur, 1984).

**TABLE 5.2: Illustrative land rents in northern France in the sixteenth-early eighteenth centuries**

(a) Land rent in Pays de Caux (sous/acre)

1530	1550	1570	1590	1610
43	73	170	214	202

Source: Bottin, 1983: 375, annexe C.

(b) Land rent in Ile-de-France (price in wheat and money (livres) per ha)

	1550	1600	1650	1700	1730
Wheat (hl)	3	2.6	3.6	3.3	3.3
Money (livres)	7.6	15.4	43.9	27	32

Source: Moriceau, 1994: 906–07

(c) Land rent in Ile-de-France : the crisis of the end of the seventeenth century (livres/ha)

1660	1670	1680	1690	1700	1710	1720	1730
42	29	28	40	27	37	46	32

Source: Moriceau, 1994: 906–07.

The price of land continued to vary from region to region. It was very expensive in Normandy and in the fertile plains of the Paris basin, but elsewhere rather cheap. It was higher near the towns where the demand for land was strong. Generally speaking meadows were more valuable than vineyards and vineyards more than arable land. Finally small plots commanded a higher price by unit of surface area than big farms. For social reasons, rent paid by small peasants (the so-called Rent II) was higher than rent paid by big farmers (the so-called Rent I) (Postel-Vinay, 1974). Farmers were able to resist the landowners' demand for higher rent, but the small peasants could not.

### *The cultural value of land*

#### 1000–1500

Landownership had a high symbolic and social value throughout the Middle Ages. Anyone who rose in social status purchased an estate; the lawyer, the petty merchant or the king's officer bought one or two farms, whereas the banker could afford a manor with a castle, forests for hunting and hundreds of serfs. The rural élites followed the same path at a lower level. The possession of the land allowed them to afford symbols of distinction such as living in a *manoir* or *maison forte* (an aristocratic-style house

with a tower, surrounded by a ditch), bearing a sword or other weapons or riding a horse. Paintings and manuscript illuminations show well-to-do peasants in comfortable houses, eating and drinking immoderately.

## 1500–1750

The struggle for land remained acute throughout the early modern period. Land provided income and social prestige, especially for the upper class. One of the best ways to enter the nobility was by purchasing a seigneurie, living exclusively from rents, and then usurping a title. There were few with money who failed to buy land, even if they drew their fortunes from trade or manufacture. On the other hand, rich or poor peasants did the best they could to increase their estates, although they faced a stagnant market, since much of the land (as we saw) was owned by the church, which never sold it, or by rich landowners.

## 5.2 The occupiers of the land

### *Peasant ownership of land*

#### 1000–1500

The general trends which transformed the peasant holding, between 1000 and the Black Death, were the erosion of peasant property rights and their claim to ‘full’ property and a reduction in the average size of their farms and their morcellisation into numerous plots scattered throughout the territory of the village. The estate surveys of the fourteenth century usually show a majority of peasants with very small holdings – often one ha or less – divided in several plots, which they cultivated with spade labour. In a typical village north of Paris in about 1300, 70 peasant families out of the 97 living there had less than half a hectare, and in a neighbouring village, 75 ha were divided into 271 plots, farmed by 171 people. By about 1350, most of the peasants had ceased to be landowners, as their ancestors had been at the beginning of the millenium: they were now tenants, often on a short lease, or they made a living from a small freehold property to which they added additional leased plots and wage labour. Holdings were larger on the poorer lands, where cattle-breeding predominated, so in many regions of western France. Holdings also tended to be larger in the less fertile parts of the village territories. Moreover, the size of a farm had a different meaning where intensive farming was practised, such as in wine-growing districts or the areas of market gardening which surrounded the larger cities.

The direction of change became much more confused after the plague and the damage caused by the Hundred Years War. The post-war reconstruction allowed many peasants to take over abandoned holdings on advantageous terms, and even buy land themselves. Monographs on regions like Berry, Ile-de-France, Anjou or the Bourbonnais provide detailed assessments of this phase of agrarian evolution. It was part of the general, century-long differentiation of the peasantry, which saw the emergence of a proletariat of smallholders and wage labourers and an élite of well-to-do farmers – the division being between those who had, and those who had not, a plough and its team.

## 1500–1750

In the early modern period there were three main models of land concentration.

In most of northern France, on the fertile plateau of the Paris basin, there was a progressive concentration of property, most of which came into the hands of rich landowners (the church, nobility, and increasingly the inhabitants of the cities and small towns). Some large scale farmers in the Île de France, Beauce, Brie, Soissonais, Valois, and Cambrésis managed to secure leases on parts of these vast estates because they owned the farm equipment (horses, ploughs, etc.) needed to run such farms (Jacquart, 1974; Moriceau, 1994). The biggest farmers also leased the right to collect tithes and seigneurial dues and therefore could dispose of huge quantities of grain, which they stored and marketed, and on which they could speculate.

On the other hand the vast majority of villagers had only tiny plots of land, which were not usually big enough to feed their own family and had little opportunity to extend their holding except by leasing tiny additional plots. These *journaliers* or *manouvriers* were hired by farmers as day labourers, especially when a large workforce had to be gathered, as at harvest time. Most of them struggled to find enough to live on (Goubert, 1960).

Peasant holdings were plentiful in valleys, around towns, or even in the towns, even though they covered only a very small portion of the land. There were market gardeners (*maraichers*) and nurserymen (*marchands d'arbres*) at Vitry, near Paris and winegrowers – such as those of Argenteuil near Paris – all of whom could make an adequate living from very small extents of land by selling their produce into nearby markets.

In other regions, particularly in western France, there were more medium-sized holdings. In Touraine and Anjou we find the *borderies*, holdings of five or six ha owned by peasants, which combined ploughland, vineyards and meadows (Maillard, 1998). In Maine and Poitou there also *borderies* or *bordages* of similar size, but without vineyards, and in Anjou and Touraine there were *closeries*, tiny holdings specialising in wine growing. However the *métairie* was the most typical holding in the west of France: a holding of 20 to 40 hectares held on a sharecropping lease, combining the cultivation of arable with stockbreeding (Antoine, 1994, 2009).

This did not mean that there were no small peasants in these areas; there were many small landowners surviving on small plots and with a few cattle. They earned wages working on *métairies* or in proto-industrial activities such as linen- or hemp-weaving in Brittany.

### *Communal land use systems*

## 1000–1500

The northern part of the kingdom of France lacked the vast mountain pastures and forests that backed the economy of many rural communities in the south. However, the eastern regions, Champagne, Bourgogne, Lorraine, had a relatively high proportion of communal lands – about 10 per cent according to modern land surveys – which reveals a situation probably not very different to that of the later Middle Ages. In the central



part (Ile-de-France, Picardy, Touraine, Anjou), all the land was private property, and most of it was cultivated. In the west, there were large uncultivated spaces, most of them moors, but they were not communal: a pattern of scattered settlements and communities which lacked internal cohesion and solidarity, made for a situation in which waste land was attached to individual farms rather than being held by the village in common.

The eleventh-thirteenth centuries were a period in which the extent of wasteland was reduced everywhere. The peasants of the high Middle Ages had used woods and moors for hunting and gathering, for cattle grazing, timber and firewood gathering, and for semi-itinerant cultivation. The picture was very different by the end of the thirteenth century: except in poor regions as the west, most land had been brought into cultivation, and the remaining commons were strictly delimited. The right to use them, especially for the grazing of cattle, provoked disputes between neighbouring communities or with the lords. The use of common land was generally granted by the lord to the inhabitants (or only to the property owners) for a rent; cutting wood, hunting, or letting sheep graze was severely restricted or forbidden. The grazing of less destructive cattle, the gathering of firewood and the picking of wild plants was allowed, which was greatly to the benefit of the poorer inhabitants.

A special kind of communal use of the land was *vaine pâture*, which spread from the thirteenth century onwards throughout every region of open field. After the harvest, cattle were allowed to graze on the open fields, a practice defined by custom which required strong community regulation.

## 1500–1750

Over a large part of the fertile openfield area around Paris, stretching from Flanders to the Beauce and from the Caen plain to western Champagne, communal land had disappeared by the thirteenth century. Some extensive pastures were created as response to depopulation caused by war, but this too had all gone by the sixteenth century. All that remained were scraps of communal ground although these might still be contested (Vivier, 1998). Where commons survived however, their use remained a matter of contention between adjoining communities or between commoners and seigneurs. Peasants were always trying to extend their land by encroachment onto common land whilst seigneurs attempted to seize it for their own profit. Rural communities generally argued that they were the true owners of these lands, to which the seigneurs invariably replied that the peasants only had the right of use. Lawsuits over these disputes were frequent and long-lasting; copious evidence of these is presented in Clère's work on the Haute-Marne (eastern Champagne). Rural communities often went into debt to uphold claims against their lords (Clère, 1988).

The main problem in the openfield regions was the survival of collective rights. Private property rights there were restricted by *vaine pâture*. This required there to be no barriers between fields, the opposite to the situation in the west of France. It also required a rotation of wheat → oats → fallow. There were often conflicts with seigneurs and some of the big farmers who tried to avoid the obligation to open their fields to the cattle of the entire community, but who wanted to keep the grass for their own cattle or sheep and the manure for their own fields. The situation differed from one

village to another, but it seems clear that in Lorraine, and probably in Champagne, the problem was acute as there was a great deal of communal land and the practice of common grazing on the fallow lands of the villages was general. It has, however been argued that there was a tendency to restrict these practices in the eighteenth century in the name of the 'fight for agrarian individualism' (Bloch, 1931), and indeed, some members of the village community did want to enclose fields to introduce new crops and protect them from livestock.

### *The exercise of power within the village*

#### 1000–1500

The exercise of power within the village went through important transformations during the Middle Ages. In a first stage (the eleventh to the first part of the twelfth century), a heavy seigneurial domination was exerted by the knights who were garrisoned in the castle and by the officers (*ministeriales*) recruited from amongst the peasant élite, in the Carolingian tradition: a mayor, steward, foresters. This system of domination is found throughout France and has been especially well-studied for the provinces of Picardy (Fossier, 1968), Vendômois (Barthélemy, 1993), Chartrain (Chédeville, 1973), Soissonnais and Valois (Brunel, 1995). In a second stage (in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries), more and more sophisticated and autonomous institutions were established in the village and custom was recorded in writing (Brunel, 1995). Numerous autonomous communities developed, especially in Picardy and the Ile-de-France, where large numbers of charters of liberties were granted. As the charters assigned a part of the administration to the community itself, they allowed the development of a peasant élite, which began to manage the community in collaboration with the seigneurial officers. These charters are the best source in which to observe the formalization of the village institutions, including the assembly of the heads of the households, an executive composed of a few notables, a treasurer, a clerk, and special representatives, *procurators*, for difficult causes.

Religious affairs had a place in the village's organization: one of the major tasks of the community was to maintain the church. It was often the only large building in the village, and served as a gathering place, and, if necessary, as a fortress. The vicar was, of course, one of the notables, and sometimes the only educated person. Tithe, no matter who received it, was an heavy charge on the peasant: one tenth of all crops and cattle. From the thirteenth century onwards, we also observe fraternities (*confréries*), voluntary associations that practised forms of devotion to such or such a saint, and often played a charitable role within the village: the relief of the poor, burial of the destitute, and the even foundation of hospitals.

#### 1500–1750

The wars of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries strengthened rural communities as self-help was their only protection against soldiers' depredations. The monarchy

was weak and the seigneurs unable to intervene. The communities became used to taking more and more decisions on their own, except when the seigneur was able to enforce his authority. In any event, the community of *manants et habitants* took decisions and carried out many functions on behalf of the village, but the seigneur generally had to give his authorisation for a meeting to be held and he either attended it in person or sent a representative (a *procureur fiscal*, *lieutenant* or *prévot de bailliage*). The assembly elected a syndic as a representative, sometimes a *maire*, a *procureur* to administer local justice, and wardens to protect vines and corn just before the harvest (*messiers*); but generally the seigneur had to approve their nominations. Finally the community had to collect and deliver the royal taxes, the *taille*, and two *asséurs-collecteurs* were elected from its members (Jacquart, 1974).

The parish council (*assemblée paroissiale*) had to look after the church buildings, the priest's house, the liturgical objects and even the books used in worship. In northern France the *assemblée paroissiale* was the same as the *assemblée des habitants*. *Marguilliers* were the representatives of the *assemblée* on the vestry council (*fabrique*), which actually managed matters relating to the church. They could come into conflict with the parish priest over a large range of practical, but also religious, matters (Jacquart, 1974).

From the mid-seventeenth century, the village was increasingly supervised by the provincial government. The monarchy created a strong local administration headed by the intendant of each region which increasingly supervised village government. So although village communities had a considerable amount of freedom from about 1480 to 1630, it had less and less autonomy from the mid-seventeenth century onwards. In particular the state intervened in village finances, establishing a system for the reduction of village debt (whilst prohibiting the sale of any property), forcing the community to seek authorization for any decisions it took and excluding the poor from the *assemblées*. It tried to replace the elected syndic by a perpetual syndic, who was expected to purchase the office. From the time of Louis XIV the communities were *sous tutelle* (in a state of tutelage), as Toqueville observed over a century ago.

## *Peasant organizations*

### 1000–1500

Throughout the Middle Ages, cooperation amongst peasants mainly took the form of the community of the village. Again, northern France differs from the south. The village communities of the north and north-eastern regions of the kingdom were not so wealthy as those of the southern mountains, but they normally possessed a charter of liberties, and, as we saw, they managed local administration. The role of the community was reinforced by the adoption of triennial rotations of crops in openfield regions in the thirteenth century. By contrast, collective solidarities were generally very weak in the west, except for the forms of organization associated with the construction of

water defences, such as those of the Loire valley and of the polders of the Aiguillon Bay, on the Atlantic coast.

## 1500–1750

There was little change before the eighteenth century. The village maintained its supervision of agrarian and communitarian practices: the management of collective land, allocation of access to wood, the appointment of guards to protect against crop thefts and religious associations as fraternities.

There were also sporadic anti-authority movements which may be considered as the first steps towards a specifically peasant organisation. The peasant code from the Breton *Bonnets Rouges* of 1675 reveals an attempt to regulate collective relationships within the peasantry (Bercé, 1973; Nicolas, 2002). In the eighteenth century, the rise of popular opposition to seigneurial and ecclesiastical impositions, encouraged the formation of landowners' *syndicates* to defend their interests; but these are better known from the south-west than the north of France. Here peasant defiance often took the form of *mauvais gré*, foot-dragging and non-cooperation by farmers, but it was not always collective or organized.

### *Forms of peasant resistance*

## 1000–1500

Peasant resistance to the lord's demands was certainly not unusual in the Middle Ages, but little is known of the forms it took in France, which lacks documentation comparable to the English manorial court rolls. We can catch a glimpse, here and there, in literary, legal, or administrative texts, of foot-dragging in the fulfilment of corvées, acts of insubordination when faced with the lord's orders, and fraud in the payment of taxes. The main expression of peasant rejection of seigneurial authority in the French case, is the charters of liberties, which show both a willingness to contest but also accept the seigneurial system provided that the seigneur's demands were moderate and in accordance with customary rules.

## 1500–1750

In the early modern period, even though seigneurial domination was on the whole accepted, there were recurring protests, either latent or open, against dues and tithes. The peasants did not understand why they had to pay for lords or priests who did not live in the village and no longer provided them with protection. However the main revolts did not take place in northern France, apart from a few instances like the *Nu-Pieds* (Bare Feet) in Normandy in 1639 or the *Bonnets Rouges* (Red-Caps) in Brittany in 1675. These disturbances were not really anti-seigneurial but aimed at state taxation after it sharply increased in the 1630s. The *Bonnets Rouges* was the last big rebellion and after 1675 there were only local riots, which mostly coincided with subsistence crises.

In these disturbances communities would use force to prevent grain from leaving a region during a shortage. In the name of what is now termed the ‘moral economy’, those buying bread claimed the right to impose limits on prices and attacked the speculators and monopolists, the *agioteurs*, who hoarded the grain, profited from price increases and were held to starve the people. This is the reason why farmers like Chartier, in the Ile-de France in the mid-eighteenth century, preferred to deliver grain to the market all year round instead of withholding his stock to maximize his profits (Moriceau and Postel-Vinay, 1992).

Resistance to the demands of the seigneurs usually took the form of sporadic violence against his agents, the judge, gamekeeper, estate manager, even the lord himself, who might be confronted by members of the community. It was mostly by fraud, inertia or passive resistance on the one hand or through judicial action on the other that peasants usually opposed his rights. They omitted to declare land purchases to evade paying transfer taxes (*lods et vente*), they neglected to pay annual dues which led to the accumulation of arrears and they avoided using the seigneurial mill or oven. In the eighteenth century at least, peasant communities launched many lawsuits in order to retain or recover their common lands. They disputed the rights of the clergy to levy tithes on types of crop where it had not been the custom to do so. They engaged in petty acts of deceit and insubordination to tithe collectors, often offering them the smallest sheaves.

### 5.3 Government and public policies

#### *State policies*

##### 1000–1500

The state began to play an important part in the economic and social life of the peasantry in the fourteenth century through taxes and war. In other areas of rural society, state intervention remained rather limited: the king and his officers could arbitrate between lords and tenants, and they were also able to intervene in the rural economy when they fixed the price of wheat in years of scarcity. But the main influence of the state upon rural society was in its demand for taxation, which began to be levied around 1300, and increased quickly from the mid-fourteenth century. Taxes weighed heavily upon the peasantry: in Normandy, direct taxes for the year 1347 can be estimated at nearly one month’s wages of a day labourer (Bois, 1976: 259). The beginnings of the royal state brought about another blight for the country: the Hundred Years War reduced whole regions to ruins. Its direct and indirect impact upon economic structures and society is incalculable.

##### 1500–1750

The fiscal demands placed by the state on the countryside continued to grow. The village community was the fundamental unit for the collection of the main royal tax, the *taille*, the major part of which was paid by peasants. In much of northern France,

it was a direct tax on individuals, divided first between parishes, and then between homesteads by local collectors, so that its allocation within the village was an important collective undertaking. Some provinces, only recently integrated into the French kingdom – like Brittany or Artois – retained their provincial assembly (*Etats*) which organized levies, according to local practice, for example the *centième* in Artois, a land tax inherited from Charles V. Indirect taxes were also numerous and varied from province to province, like the salt tax (the *gabelle*) which was heavy around Paris but unknown in Brittany. Taxes provoked the most frequent rural rebellions and marked out boundaries inside France, especially between territories of the ‘Five big fiscal farms’ – which became the General Farm in 1680 – and outlying provinces (Nicolas, 2002).

After a period of very heavy taxation from 1560 to 1590, there was a relative lull under Henry IV and then something like a doubling of the tax burden between 1620 and 1650. By the end of seventeenth century, new levels of taxation were reached and there were attempts to create more universal taxes, like the *dixième*, a land tax, or capitation that everybody should have paid according to a scale of 22 categories of wealth (Bercé, 1991). But these new taxes soon ceased to be inclusive as the nobility and clergy secured their exemption, so that any improvement in the peasants’ situation after 1710–20 was due to peace and the buoyancy of the economy as a whole.

Military burdens were not negligible either and could be crushing in times of war and in border regions. During the reign of Louis XIV, changes were introduced which had contradictory effects on rural life. The building of barracks reduced that burden of billeting, but the institution of the militia, in 1688, led to the hated systematic recruitment of soldiers in villages. The establishment of the royal *corvée* for road building was a further unwelcome burden placed on the village.

### *Changing government attitudes towards consolidation and enclosure*

The monarchy did not have any policy towards consolidation and enclosure before 1750, but it was concerned by the disappearance of commons. The troubles of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, wars, dearth and increasing taxes, had led to the communities of north-western France carrying a high burden of debt. In consequence, large parts of their commons passed into the hands of creditors. Successive *ordonnance* claimed the necessity to preserve them in order to ensure the payment of royal taxes (1579, 1629, 1659 and 1683). But on the other hand, the king seized some commons and *ordonnance* of 1677 and 1702 confirmed previous illegal sales on condition that the purchasers paid a fine to the Treasury of one-eighth of the value of the land. These contradictory policies show that ultimately the monarchy was more concerned to generate revenue than it was to maintain commons. Brittany differed from the remainder of the north since here all waste lands were the lords’ property.

### *Public regulation of the countryside*

The monarchy was only concerned with the forests: trees were considered to be very precious. As early as the twelfth century, the French kings appointed foresters. The

Forest administration was gradually elaborated until the important royal edict of *Eaux et Forêts* in August 1669 established it in its mature form. Whilst the state aimed at maintaining forests of mature trees to provide the Navy with timber, hunting was also a coveted privilege of king and aristocrats.

### *Government encouragement of trade*

By the end of the thirteenth century, royal officers and town councillors had begun to control the production and sale of the foodstuffs, especially corn, needed to feed the cities and to avoid dearth in bad years. A king of the early modern era, who claimed to be a lieutenant of God on earth, was obliged to be interested in the prosperity of his people, and so had to be concerned with agricultural problems and the food supplies of his subjects, if only to avoid public disorder. Three forms of intervention were used, the first of which was the mercantilist encouragement to production by land improvement (the draining of marshes for example) or support for agricultural innovation, of which the best known example is probably Sully's promotion of silkworm breeding. In fact state encouragement of improvement was of little significance in northern France. Second, monarchy could also regulate foreign trade, but before 1750, this had little impact on rural activities. The most frequent and influential intervention was the third, the regulation of the domestic grain market. The idea that the king was the father of his people was widespread and, added to the fear of revolt, led to the regulation of the market, the fixing of the price of flour and the management of bread or stocks of flour in bakeries. In fact, provincial and local authorities took responsibility for the implementation of this policy, apart from some distributions of foodstuffs organized by the king himself, for example by Louis XIV in 1661. Following the economist Pierre de Boisguilbert (1646–1714) and the rise of the idea that 'good prices' were the precondition for agricultural progress, these policies became a key element in debates on political economy.

### *Peasants as a political force*

#### 1000–1500

Revolts against the lords were infrequent before the fourteenth century, the exceptions being the rising of Norman peasants in 997 which was severely suppressed by the aristocracy, and the war fought (and lost) against their lords in 1177 by the militias of the villages around Laon. On the other hand, we are well-informed about the revolts that broke out throughout north-western Europe in the fourteenth century. In France it was the Jacquerie, a brief and violent movement which spread in May–June 1358 throughout the Ile-de-France, Picardy and Champagne. The context was a very peculiar one. The plague of 1348 had undermined social structure, the defeat at Poitiers (1356) and the king's captivity and ransom by the English had launched a period of uncertain authority. Currency fluctuated, Paris was rebellious; above all, the nobility, defeated by English archers, had lost its prestige and seemed useless: so

why should the tenants maintain such nobility with their rents? The upheaval was directed against the lords, and led by members of the peasant elite who we are able to identify from the royal letters of pardon (*lettres de rémission*) granted during the suppression of the Jacques. Their leaders were simple workers (*hommes de labour*), but also rural craftsmen, priests, petty royal officers and well-off property owners. As elsewhere in Europe, the insurgent regions were mainly the richer ones. It was not a revolt born out of misery and despair, but out of anger: the rebels rejected the system of domination and taxation, which looked resolutely obsolete; the addition of royal taxes – then rising sharply – to seigneurial taxes seemed to threaten the financial well-being of the rural elites. After some initial successes, the upheaval was quashed by the knights with great bloodshed: it was said that some 20,000 peasants were slaughtered.

Episodes of unrest continued to occur in the French countryside until the middle of the fifteenth century, but it is not always easy to be precise about what part a specifically peasant dissatisfaction played in it. The 5,000 or 6,000 serfs of the Laon cathedral chapter that refused to pay the tallage in 1337 were clearly rebelling against the manorial system. In the guerrilla warfare of the Norman ‘partisans’ against the English (1419–35), ‘patriotic’ motives were combined with anti-seigneurial demands, and this is probably why the rebels were abandoned to their fate by French troops (Bois, 1976: 295–308). The companies of discharged soldiers and mercenaries (*routier*) that plundered and terrorized the countryside throughout the kingdom doubtless included amongst their numbers dispossessed peasants who had been driven off the land; but the ‘true’ peasants were on the other side, in the village militias that fought against the *routiers* (and sometimes regular troops too) to defend their families and their possessions.

## 1500–1750

The fact that before the eighteenth century public affairs were mainly managed locally, by village communities, suggests we should be careful in using the word ‘politics’ to describe the collective behaviour of peasants. It does not mean that the peasantry did not have expectations of how the state should behave (Neveux, 2000). These, which are especially revealed during revolts, mixed three main components: the rejection of state interference in rural communities; the claim of the king’s protection; and a deep mistrust of the agents of the monarchy, specially fiscal ones.

Indeed, taxation crystallized these expectations: the loss, actual or feared, of fiscal privileges legitimated by tradition, was the most common cause of revolt. In Normandy in 1639, the *Nu-Pieds* were protesting against the threat of abolition of *quart bouillon* which reduced the salt tax, or in Boulonnais, *Lustucrus* stood up for *taille* exemptions. Men who personified the collection of tax were the first target of riots; the *gabelous*, salt-tax collectors, were depicted as monsters who devoured the people of the country. At the same time, the king’s person and power were above criticism; he was called upon by his people to aid them. The



conviction that the king was on the side of his peasantry was a key justification for the ‘moral economy’.

### *The social standing of the peasant*

#### 1000–1500

Through the Middle Ages, peasants, who formed the great majority of the population, remained an inferior social class, held in contempt by both nobles and town-dwellers. Some authors admitted, following Adalbero of Laon, that the exploitation of the peasants’ work was the basis of social organization. A few intellectuals of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Nicolas de Clamanges, Gerson, Jean Petit, Alain Chartier, stressed – mainly from a Christian point of view – the injustice which lay at the basis of the social balance.

The cultural inferiority of the peasants also played an important part in their representation. However, the countryside seems to have largely benefited from the spread of elementary education in reading, accounting, and even writing which is characteristic of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Women’s literacy was less general, but did exist: Gerson’s mother, a Champenois peasant, taught him the rudiments, and later she sent him didactic letters. Among the sons of the well-to-do peasants, some may have continued their studies in the colleges or grammar schools found in many small towns. The best pupils, such as Gerson, may afterwards have gone to university.

#### 1500–1750

In the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries the visions of peasantry split between three more or less contradictory perspectives. Henry IV’s reign was marked by Sully’s initiatives to develop agriculture as the foundation of the kingdom’s wealth and the publication of the first great agricultural work, *Le théâtre d’agriculture et mesnage des champs* by Olivier de Serres (1600) which established the vision which associated happiness in the fields with general prosperity. The king himself is supposed to have said that every family should enjoy a ‘boiled chicken’ on Sundays. The bucolic vision is regularly found in art, from Jacques Stella’s woodcuts glorifying work in the field to La Fontaine’s tales. On the other hand, the misfortunes of the wars of religion stimulated the opposite vision of the peasantry, in which they were portrayed as animals struggling for survival, fearful of death. Jacques Callot’s pictures showing the disasters of the Thirty Years’ War or the pitiful peasants in La Bruyère’s works are similar in character. However, in the seventeenth century, peasant destitution could take a more sacred meaning. The poor peasant became Christ incarnate and thus the subject of charitable care; Le Nain’s pictures – especially his famous ‘Peasant’s Meal’ (1643) – can be interpreted as an allegory of the sharing of the Eucharist.

To these symbolic visions, the end of the seventeenth century added a dimension that the mercantilism of Sully (1559–1641) and the economist Laffemas (1545–1612)

**TABLE 5.3: Land rent in Beauce before the French Revolution (livres/ha)**

	1760–61	1765–66	1770–71	1775–76	1780–81	1785–86	1789–90
Maintenon	20	20	25	33	33	32	27
Janville	12	10	15	20	20	30	20

Source: Béaur, 1984: 270.

had foreshadowed: state concern for agriculture and a concern for its improvement. Two attitudes can be distinguished. The first, embodied by Fenelon (1651–1715) or Vauban (1633–1707), was supportive of the peasantry and wished to improve peasant conditions; the other, associated with Boisguilbert (1646–1714), sought to increase agricultural product through the development of the market and farmers' incomes.

In the eighteenth century, many more authors wrote about countryside. A strong tradition associated peasants with rusticity and rudeness. The second edition of the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie* (1718) offered the definition '... We say about a man who is despicable and rude that he is a peasant'. Religious works, looking back to Eden, underlined the holiness found in peasant simplicity and the Enlightenment celebrated nature and the countryside in opposition to the corruption of towns. The Marquis of Mirabeau summed up this enthusiasm for the pastoral: 'What places would be better sojourns for innocence and happiness than the fields dedicated to peace and natural fertility?'.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Mémoire sur l'agriculture envoyé à la très-louable société d'agriculture de Berne* (1760), p. 12.

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