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Interwar France and the Rural Exodus: The National Myth in Peril

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Abstract Interwar France saw itself as a rural nation. The First World War, won in the muddy earth of the trenches, elevated the image of the 'peasant soldier' to a symbolic height. But paradoxically, it was during this period that the urban population overtook the rural. Against this backdrop, references to the noxious consequences of rural migration increased in frequency and virulence. The condemnation of rural migration was part of the celebration of a French national identity rooted in the past, the earth and other key agrarian values, such as thrift, hard work and property ownership. French peasants are perceived to be the last bearers of this value set. In other European countries too, the same ideological debate was at play. In Italy and Germany, in particular, the regimes were faced with a similar dilemma, championing a racially pure, rural, identity rooted in the past, whilst embracing a modernising revolution. Their parallel attempts at aligning these two ideas are richly suggestive.

> It matters not that rejuvenated Nature, in spring,
> Opens its generous bosom from which life springs
> As it now knows that its work is ending
> And that its children, enticed by proud dreams,
> Will leave the country where their forefathers lie,
> To live, far from the fields, on urban manure
> Where man becomes dumb from labours he endures
> (Gaud, 1909)

Throughout the nineteenth century, in the major European powers, the concept of nationalism had been built on notions of territory and space. These two ideas were, in turn, associated with farming and the peasant class, both of which were identified as the fundamental basis of economic success and the guardians of cultural identity (Thiesse, 1999). The increasing role of industrialisation and urban growth in Europe at the end of the nineteenth century did not reduce this trend. Rather, they seemed to reinforce it, as testified by the close correlation between the growing industrialisation of the main European countries and the development of agrarian ideology. England, where rural depopulation accelerated notably from the middle of the nineteenth century was a partial exception (Saville, 1957). Elsewhere, the awareness of, and eventual opposition to, the rural exodus became mainstream in the 1890s. There was often a hidden agenda, as the farming crisis pushed 'agrarians' to lobby for tariffs, as was the case in Germany (Uwin, 1980). As the widely-used

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French phrase 'exode rural' indicates, rural exodus is more than just a migration. It refers to a series of losses: that of the nation's identity and the essence of its race, held by the peasant class. The term 'exodus' only became commonly accepted at the very end of the century, replacing the less loaded 'rural migration', used by the first generation of French demographers (Dumont, 1909), and retained in much of the literature.

France experienced a general process of industrialisation. However, its economic and social development took a unique path at the end of the nineteenth century. Industrialisation coexisted with a robust agricultural sector, largely made of independent smallholdings. The rural population declined against the backdrop of the twin fears of low birth rates and depopulation. The decline fed a body of literature which condemned, as early as the 1880s, the reduction in farmers' numbers and the growth of cities. The First World War and the 1918 victory reinforced the feeling of congruence between national identity and a numerous peasant class. No major ideological shift occurred in the interwar period. A continuing decrease in rural population and its corollary, the decline of agriculture in the French economy, led to heightened concerns in public debates about the country's standing in an era of rural depopulation. This concern spread across a broad spectrum of society: it was echoed by intellectuals, politicians and local community leaders, both republican and conservative. The 1930s depression hit French agriculture late but deeply, and amplified the debate. The issue of migration/exodus took centre-stage in the crisis of national identity, a crisis magnified by the arrival of the Front Populaire.

From an academic viewpoint, rural migration is now well understood. It has been researched by demographers (Rosental, 1999) and economic historians, looking to understand the link between population movements and economic growth. Geographers have also studied the phenomenon in depth (Pitié, 1987). The purpose of this study is to demonstrate that rural migration was at the heart of the French debate on national identity, especially during the hectic interwar years.

Before and after those twenty years, rural migration was a theme that permeated the entire political landscape, not just on the conservative side. The myth of rural France was at the centre of a strong *culture politique* (Lynch, 2006), that of the agrarian republic. The Vichy regime, by using peasant values as one of its dominant propaganda themes, prolonged the myth. Rural migration was therefore both a topic of consensus and one of partisan disagreement, especially during phases of tensions.

I. Rural migration: an old theme re-energised by the war

1.1. Migration on the increase and a change in perceptions

With the gradual acceleration of migration, evidenced by official censuses, and the growth of the urban population, especially in Paris, rural migration became a crucial political and social issue from the 1880s. This awareness had been heightened by the territory and population losses which followed from defeat at the hands of Prussia. After this humiliation, France's imperative was to rebuild its moral and physical strength. Demographic weakness and the accelerating decline of the rural population were threats not to be tolerated. The early years of the Third Republic had been worrying: between

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Table 1
Decline in Rural Population, 1846–1911.

	Decline in rural population
1846 to 1851	90 000
1851 to 1872	130 000
1872 to 1876	90 200
1876 to 1881	164 300
1881 to 1886	103 300
1886 to 1891	120 200
1891 to 1896	116 100
1896 to 1901	134 600
1901 to 1906	112 500
1906 to 1911	154 500

Source: Dupaquier, 1988: 181

1876 and 1881, rural population decreased by 164,000, more than during the twenty years of Napoleon III's reign (see Table 1).

However, awareness and condemnation of the phenomenon were not just driven by statistics. Rural migration was a worry because the perception of the peasant class had changed, especially among republicans, who came to power in 1880. After its political emancipation by the French Revolution, the peasant class seemed, in the first half of the nineteenth century, to have reverted to its traditional ignorance: it was therefore considered by the bourgeoisie as an obstacle to the economic and political development of the country. Economically, farmers kept rejecting the model for agrarian revolution proposed by the elite, and stuck to their collective rights. Politically, rural voters had favoured Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte in the December 1848 election, turning their back on the regime which had ensured their emancipation. Lambasted by part of the political class and a number of famous writers, from Balzac to Zola, the peasantry's image gradually improved in the second half of the century. Romanticism, based on the admiration of primitive forces, turned peasants into one of the pillars of the nation. Jules Michelet's description of the man from the country is a good example of this turnaround:

> There are many parts of France where the peasant has a fundamental right over the land: that comes from having made it. [...] Yes, man makes the land; that is true even in richer parts. Let us never forget, if we want to understand how passionately he loves the land. Let us consider that, over centuries, the sweat of the living, the bones of the dead, their savings, their food were entrusted to the land by many generations... This land, which has received the best of mankind, its essence, its effort, its virtue is truly a human land and man loves it as he would a person. (Michelet, 1846: 11)

The definitive establishment of the Republic, enabled in part by the peasant vote, marked a return to favour of the peasants. The new political majority, faced with the rise of urban, collectivist, factory-based socialism, looked for support to the peasant class, to which they attributed many new found qualities. And the same political elite worried when the population of the countryside declined.

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1.2. The emergence and crystallisation of the 'exodus' myth

In the 1880s, speeches, articles, conferences and books highlighting the consequences of migration and the swelling of urban centres proliferated. By the 'Belle Époque', the pros and cons of rural migration were well rehearsed. Local initiatives were taken, such as the creation in 1878, of the 'Society for the encouragement of the countryside in the Meurthe et Moselle'. 1902 saw the creation at the national level of the Société Française d'Emulation agricole contre l'Abandon des campagnes (French Society for Agricultural Development against Countryside Depopulation).

Economic motives were most often invoked to explain the departure of rural wage earners, forced away by poverty:

> Many are positively expelled from the countryside by poverty, the inability to subsist. [. . .] He must go, whilst large swathes of land are unused or under-cultivated. He is pushed out by the lack of capital, which prevents the exploitation of the land that used to feed him. (Dumont, 1890: 169)

From the early 1870s, there had been a concern in agricultural owners' circles about this trend (Carrière – De Brimont, 1872: 201–10), hardly offset by foreign immigration. With the economic crisis starting in 1890, the future of agriculture became an increasing concern.

It is however the social and moral dimension of rural migration which was at the forefront of the debate. Fewer peasants meant a demographically weaker nation. This is because urban populations were seen as weaker and less fertile (Lannes, 1895: 209). Generally, cities were labelled as places of corruption, both mental and physical. Rural folk, and particularly their children, were best kept away, as explained in a reading text book from the early years of the Republic:

> In our peaceful and isolated village, you have not been exposed to [. . .] vice. It won't be so in the city you are moving to. [. . .] You will see many examples of bad behaviours and bad words spoken [. . .] If you have the strength to resist those, you will keep a peaceful heart, the soft joy of innocence, rosy cheeks. If I ever see you again, I will know at first sight if you have kept a healthy mind and body.

Jules Méline was among the most active proponents of this viewpoint. Agriculture minister, architect of the protectionist response to the 1890 economic crisis (Barral, 1967), he described the rural migration thesis in his 1905 book *Back to the Land and Industrial Overproduction*. The main danger was the weakening of the race and of the nation:

> Isn't the regeneration of the rural race one of the most pressing issues of the current time, one of the most effective ways to fight against the desperate problem which weakens it and threatens its demise, the constant decrease in birth rate? Of all the ways to cure this disease, none is more effective than to spread by all possible means a strong race, with a rich blood, keen to multiply by temperament and by interest [. . .] This is why there are so many large families in the areas of small holdings. It is also where we used to recruit the most handsome men for our armies. [. . .] More than ever, going back to the land is linked to the conservation of our military might and is like the pivot of the national defence.'(Meline, 1905: 219)

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1.3. The decisive role of the First World War

The First World War marked a new stage in the consideration of the military consequence of rural migration. On the one hand, it undermined the accepted wisdom that an unindustrialised, therefore 'weaker' France could not match Germany. In fact, France had been able to stand its ground, especially in the first months of the war, when allied support had still been limited. On the other hand, the war years and the victorious outcome strengthened the agrarian myth of a triumphant rural France (Lynch, 2007), beating an over-industrialised Germany, whose example must not be followed:

> What is this industrial rush about? If you all start making machines, there will be too many! You can't eat machines! The American people, a new people in a new country, are making them. The Krauts, pretending to manufacture their scientists' inventions are building 'kolossal' machines. Will you try to compete? What for? Let us make in France all those required to exploit our land and its riches, on it and beneath it, no more! But let's stop there! Our destiny is not to all become factory workers. Let's be peasants! History screams it is our fate. (Mugnier, 1918: 174–5)

A clear lesson learnt from the war was that the preservation of agriculture, a national field of excellence, was an absolute imperative. This was what the legislation in support of ex-servicemen, including the disabled, returning to rural areas was about. In addition, the republican government sought to influence the future of farming by restructuring the agricultural educational curriculum and by supporting the regrouping of land. France was not alone: both Great Britain and Germany adopted legislation aiming to bolster agricultural performance, especially land ownership. However, such structural reforms did not end the peril created by the reduction in rural population. This was highlighted by many *deputés*:

> Rural migration and birth rate decline are the worst two calamities affecting France, and they are linked. You will only have a healthy generation and strong children if they are raised freely in the fresh air. That is to say when rural migration has stopped. It is not by undermining farmers and peasants that you will stop it.[1]

From this point on, the sacrifice of the peasant class during the First World War became one of the set pieces of any political speech related to agriculture, and a further reason to fight rural depopulation. The concept of the peasant fighter (Puymège, 1993) was at the heart of the allegory, as exemplified by Jean Molinié's intervention at the *Chambre des députés*:

> As you well know, the peasant is individualistic. He is the man who, seeing cheap bread, thought there would no longer be any shortage of wheat. So he stopped growing it, or sometimes he changed the crop, as I told you earlier. This peasant must be forewarned [. . .] This peasant, from Rouerge, from anywhere in France, I see him towards the end of his work day, in his field. He wears – is he wearing? – his blue workshirt or is he still wearing his blue army uniform? In any case, he has on his head the battle-faded military beret. In peacetime, he will save France, just like he contributed to her salvation during the war. (*Applause*).[2]

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II. Rural migration as a political battleground

2.1. Challenging the education system

Pointing out the role of education in rural migration was nothing new. Alongside military service, schools were regularly invoked as one of the factors aggravating rural depopulation (Chanet, 2007):

> Schools, which are useful in towns, are a nuisance in the country. There, they contribute to alienating the new generations from the countryside, whilst rendering them more or less unable to work the soil. Doing little, children grow weaker at school instead of growing stronger in fresh air and learning alongside their parents how to use the weighty tools of the peasant. (Michel, 1891: 705)

Debates were all the more incisive as state control of schools was at the centre of the political battleground. Fed by war losses and demographic weakness, the issue gained further prominence and attracted supporters within the state school system, shaping the notion of a different educational approach in rural areas. The key assumption here was that state schools were too generalist and did not cover agriculture enough when teaching country children. The schools, in fact, diverted the best rural pupils towards urban and intellectual careers. In 1928, under the slogan 'State schools against rural migration', a competition was launched by the Union des Intérêts Economiques, an industry body with a track record of funding conservative and moderate candidates. 1,200 state school teachers took part. The winning essay, by one Albert Marescal, published by the Union des Intérêts Economiques, described the positive attitude of teachers:

> Does primary education promote rural migration? Primary education is often accused of being the cause of deserted fields. Is this true? A number of esteemed polemists believe so, whilst others don't. I am with the latter. About forty years ago, gifted children would still be sent to town and, once their first certificate was obtained, they would not return to the countryside. The innocent victim would vegetate in the back room of some notary practice starting a hopeless career without even suspecting it. However, for a long time now, and mainly since the war, rural children stay in the country, even when their parents are well-off. They are groomed to take over from their fathers. In rural areas, manpower shortage is due as much to low birth rates as it is to migration. (Marescal, 1928: 6)

For some less subtle opponents, state education had, at its heart, the destruction of society and religion. Rural migration was one of its essential tools. Those taking this line of attack tended to support Catholic schools, believed to be free of anti-rural bias. With the Left back in power in 1924, the education debate restarted. Part of the argument was summarised in a report presented by Philippe de Las Cases, during the twenty-fourth conference of the *Semaines Sociales de France* (Social Week of France), dedicated to countryside issues:

> Truth be told, too often, the village school, at the threshold of which country children, in a highly symbolic gesture, leave their clogs, takes in a peasant and gives back a half-gentleman, lost to the countryside, sometimes a mediocre addition to the urban world. (Las Cases, 1924: 339)

The skirmishes were regularly reignited by the gradual transformation of the educational system. When the *Gauche Radicale* (Centre Left) put forward its proposal

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for a single school, including free and compulsory secondary education, the project was portrayed as a new threat for the countryside. Counter-proposals emerged, with a view to differentiate urban from rural schooling, in terms of curriculum and teacher recruitment.

2.2. Rural migration and immigration: the spectre of decadence

In the interwar period, demography remained a major concern in France. Of course, Alsace-Lorraine had been reunited. However, over 1.3 million young men had died in the First World War. The birth rate level was low and, as the 1930s approached, those reduced age groups were reaching adulthood. Only through massive immigration could the workforce shortages be eliminated, particularly in the countryside. However, this was also of concern. Urban immigration was already a source of tension; rural immigration squarely challenged the national myth of the irrevocable link between land, race and nation. It is in this context that the following memorandum, issued by the Minister of Interior to all the *préfets* must be read:

> My attention is drawn to the large number of rural holdings which appear to be bought or leased by foreigners, particularly since the armistice. So that I can better gauge the scale of this matter, I wish you to compile for me, without delay, a full list by *commune* of these holdings.

The situation was sufficiently alarming to trigger a new survey in 1924 (Hubscher, 2005: 172).

The example of Italian immigration to the south west illustrates these new tensions. In this region, demographic decline had worked in favour of the arrival of Italian smallholders, who took over abandoned farms. At the end of the 1920s, a press campaign attacking the colonisation of French soil took off. Emotions ran high as the campaign connected the rise of fascism and the Italian authorities' desire to maintain some degree of control over its population (Guillaume, 1988). Other, more moderate, voices were heard too:

> Around 40,000 Italians, of both sex and all age groups, are estimated to live in the *départements* surrounding Toulouse. This figure is not disturbing. It is no grounds for talking of an Italian peril, which would jeopardise the security of the country. It is vain and pompous to allude to an 'Italian conquest'. These inoffensive and often illiterate immigrants are no threat; and are hardly the ambassadors of Italy's greatness. (Lagardelle, 1929: 47–8)

Regardless of nuances, there remained one central issue: even though immigration was necessary, the integration of foreign populations inevitably caused problems. This is what Dr. Javal pointed out with regard to Polish workers:

> They have taught us to appreciate the blend of German insolence and Slav obsequiousness. [...] One could obviously not expect such an alien workforce to possess an instinct for the land and a desire for stability [...] It can be said that, as soon as two Poles are together, a Soviet begins to emerge.

So this essentially mobile workforce was contrasted with a part of the French rural population which still felt this 'instinct for the land':

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You can still meet French people who love agriculture for what it is, choosing it voluntarily over other more profitable occupations. It is the part of the population which is most attached to individual property and most opposed to communism. Another characteristic of the rural population is its honesty, when it would be so easy for them to be dishonest. Whoever works the land is generally respectful of others' property, on principle or by habit, rather than from fear of the authorities. (Javal, 1939, 197–208)

The agricultural crisis of the 1930s reenergised these concerns about the presence of alien groups in the countryside. A significant number of foreign workers were sent back to their country of origin. The 1936 farming strikes in the Paris region saw the involvement of foreign farm labourers, fuelling the debate (Farcy, Hubscher, 1996).

Ethnic and ideological considerations were closely intertwined: behind the decline of rural and farming communities, what was feared was the risk of revolution and national disintegration. The agricultural crisis of the 1930s put a stop to emigration and stabilised internal migrations. This came at the cost of reactivated ideological tensions, although as we shall see the Far Left had started to support the national myth.

III. Convergence and divergence: rural migration at the centre of party politics

3.1. The far left buys into the agrarian ideology

One of the First World War's ideological ramifications was the conversion of the far left to the agrarian myth. This was partly due to participation in the national unity government (*union sacrée*), and partly to some notable pre-war influences, such as that of Jean Jaures. Fully engaged in the Union Sacrée and the battle for production, the Socialists were vocal about the role of the man of the soil, a pillar of national identity and strength. In a March 1916 debate on the utilisation of abandoned fields, Compère-Morel, the *Section Française de l'Internationale Ouvrière* specialist on farming matters, had underlined the need to fight post-war rural migration by all possible means:

I make no distinctions [. . .] but it should not be the case that, having experienced the most terrible physical suffering and the worst moral misery in the bloody mud of the trenches, they come back home to find weakened crops and farms on the brink of ruin, sometimes fully bankrupt [. . .] they would turn to the appealing and growing cities from where the urgent calls of French industry will come, as it will need manpower and will call upon the countryside, already so overcrowded [sic] [. . .] Not voting in favour will accelerate rural migration, it will exhaust our most robust, our strongest, our healthiest sources of life. It will hit the most terrible blow to our country, eternal proponent of the rule of law and liberty, before it has accomplished across the world its mission for progress and civilisation. (*Applause on the socialist benches and on various other benches*.) [3]

A few years later, when the depression was being felt in the French countryside, another *Section Française de l'Internationale Ouvrière* member, Jean-Louis Chastanet, *député* for Isère, launched a formal appeal in favour of the return to the land:

The prime consequence of this policy, which tends to turn peasants into lesser workers, is rural migration. We can't overestimate this. Here is, on the topic, the expert view of Mr. Augé-Laribé, who is not a Socialist: 'If this trend continues, France will not be agricultural or industrial. She will be become a country of shopkeepers, of money-lenders and of circus artistes.' (*Various noises*.)

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To overcome the depression, French people needed to return to the land:

> The ideal solution, during this period of crisis, consists in giving back to the countryside the over-population of the towns, in enabling the transplanted rural folk – there are alas so many of them – who cannot earn a living in the city to come back to the land. It is an issue that can't be overlooked. There is much talk of rural migration and ever-growing cities. [. . .] During crises such as the one hitting us and which looks like worsening, I wish we had a serious campaign in favour of a return to the land [. . .] I am deeply convinced that we cannot go on living like this. Where are we going? That is what everyone, in this country, is wondering anxiously. Let us come back to a healthy and natural life. Let us work to re-create the balance between urban and rural areas. Let us maintain the status of France as an agricultural nation.[4]

The call for a balance between town and country was all the more pressing as the 1931 census showed, for the first time, that the urban population in France exceeded the rural one.

Such declarations did not represent the viewpoint of the entire far left, be it socialist or communist. The left was however influenced by contradictory ideas. On the one hand, there was the renewed attraction of a Soviet-like collective and proletariat-based model. On the other, due attention was given to the wishes of the peasant class, as the left needed to strengthen its footprint in rural areas (Lagrave, 2004). With the arrival of the Front Populaire, tensions between town and country were heightened.

3.2. The Front Populaire and ideological tensions

The great depression triggered the ideological debate that put the return to the land and the fight against rural migration centre stage. The clashes of 6th February 1934 and the electoral campaign of the *Front Populaire* reactivated the fight. Even before the *Front Populaire* came to power, the worsening political and economic crisis led to tensions. The following pamphlet, anti-parliamentarian and anti-Semitic, attacked the failed policies implemented by the Centre Left government installed in 1932, which aimed to protect the wheat market:

> The fight is now on, between a protectionist agriculture and a free-trade finance sector. [. . .] Behind the financiers, we find the faceless international, Jewish and free-Masonic consortium, manipulated by foreigners. It is therefore a mortal economic combat between rural France and alien forces. Let's make no mistake: from this battle, France will either be liberated, or it will be defeated, economically first, before, eventually, it is invaded.

Agriculture was more than a simple economic sector, it was the foundation of the country.

> It is a fact that all of France's organs are undermined. But, among all these organs, as agriculture is the most national one because it is the essence of the race built over the centuries, it is this last citadel of our eternal France that those who want the defeat of the country start to attack now.

Farmers, faced with increasing financial difficulties would turn to the banks:

> Farmers and peasants, in the last resort, go to the bank and take out a loan. From that day on, they have signed their own death warrant. Sooner or later, they will be evicted, they will be made to leave those fields where their fathers and their great-grand-fathers died, and where they laboured all

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their life. The German Jews will profit from the peasants' sweat and, to mark a definitive triumph, the Jews will destroy the tombs of the farmers' forefathers. (Des Forts, 1935: 105–7)

Rural migration was no longer a simple demographic event, driven by economic and moral factors. It was the ultimate avatar of a global conspiracy against civilisation, and was at the heart of the anti-Semitic propaganda, in full swing at the end of the 1930s.

With the coming to power of the *Front Populaire*, positions were radicalised further. The social conflict of the summer of 1936 and the measures agreed in the Matignon accords reinforced the perception that official policy was directly opposed to the countryside's interests. Conservatives underlined the mostly urban policies of the *Front Populaire*, the social legislation which favoured factory workers to the detriment of the countryside and the contribution to the acceleration of the desertion of the countryside. The new majority, meanwhile, criticised the conservative parliamentarians for opposing the extension of the social legislation to rural workers. Such an extension would have helped fight rural migration as Georges Monnet, the Socialist Agriculture minister, explained to the Assembly of the Presidents for Agricultural Organisations:

This is the way to resurrect the full confidence of the rural world in France, which will then cease to leave the countryside. I believe we are at a turning point in the evolution of society. I do not wish to claim as mine the declaration by an eminent senator, M. Joseph Caillaux, who used to say that France should not experience any further reduction of its agricultural population or economy. If we try to describe exactly and truthfully the contribution of the agricultural sector in the national economy, it is apparent that it can be qualified as capital. There is no national prosperity without agricultural prosperity. We are presenting a series of agricultural measures which is coherent, will put a stop to the appeal of cities and will give to each of our villages its true nature, its happiness, its tranquility.[5]

In spite of the premature demise of the *Front Populaire*, succeeded by a moderate government, the role of the countryside in France remained a critical issue. The Daladier administration, via the Family Code,[6] introduced a number of reforms aimed at keeping peasants in the countryside. However, the gap opened by the *Front Populaire* continued, as was clear from the pre-war essay written by senator Jacques Bardoux:

[The new order] is built on the network of individual homesteads and on the restoration of local life. How could sleepy provinces be re-born if villages die? How could family units thrive, if the rural class stops providing the most robust of those units? Let's look wider. A smallholding is a permanent negation of the Marxist doctrine; for totalitarian regimes, it is an insurmountable obstacle; for the revival of spiritual values, it is the only guarantee of strength; against the collective masses, it is the only chance for the individual. The new order is based on peasant land. It was ever thus, every time a builder, whether Capetian, Jacobin or the Emperor, has wanted to build for the long term in France.

The peasant class needed more help because it had been hit hard by the Marxist experiment:

Peasants have been hit: in their savings, land rental income and obligations, in their young workforce by the sudden imposition of the 40-hour week, in their professional freedom by centralist experiments. Between May 1936 and May 1938, the experiment of a Marxist majority has been implemented to the detriment of the peasants.

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Peasant property had to be freed and protected from taxation. The job of farming had to be reorganised on a professional basis. It also required an educational system that was tailored specifically to its needs. Moreover:

> Rural colonisation must be organised [. . .] in all the regions where the land is dying, it requires the creation of a rural colonisation service: the requisition of un-farmed lands and abandoned buildings, the regrouping of small holdings and break-up of large farms, the setting up of small farms managed by peasant families. (Bardoux, 1939: 179–183)

Such a manifesto was almost identical to the one implemented, a few months later, by Vichy's regime.

Even before the 1940 defeat, there was an ongoing, lively debate on the evolution of agriculture, the role of the countryside in France's national identity and a corresponding attack on rural depopulation. With war approaching, some ideological confusion occurred, with conservatives contrasting the figure of the pacifist peasant with the aggressive stance of Germany's opponents. However, the role of the land remained central to the myth of the French nation.

The French state set up by Marshal Petain would magnify the role of the land as the last resort. 'The land, it does not lie. It remains our recourse. It is the *patrie* itself. A field which is not used is a part of France dying. A disused field being ploughed is a part of France re-born' (Pétain, 1941: 23). What started as a propagandist attempt to mitigate the inevitable military retreat by couching it in terms of agrarian values, became official policy with the 'return to the land' legislation. The latter was to be a failure commensurate with the widening gap between agrarian ideology and the social and economic realities of the country.

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Notes

1. *Journal Officiel de la République Française*, Chambre des députés, débats, séance du 1er juillet 1920, p. 2611, intervention de Tixier.
2. *Journal Officiel de la République Française*, Chambre des députés, débats, séance du 12 mars 1920, p. 543.
3. *Journal officiel de la République Française*, Chambre de députés, débats, 22 mars 1916, p. 646.
4. *Journal officiel de la République Française*, Chambre de députés, débats, 13 février 1931. pp. 675–676.
5. *Le Populaire,* 4 février 1937.
6. The Family Code was a series of laws adopted in 1938 to encourage natality.

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