IN FOCUS

Agrarian Crisis and the French Peasantry in the Late Nineteenth Century

John Harriss*

Emile Zola, *La Terre* ("The Earth").[1]

> Wheat sells at two and half francs a bushel and costs over two francs to produce. If it drops any more we're ruined. And America is increasing her production of cereals every year. They threaten to flood the market. Then what will become of us? (Zola [1887] 1980, Part 2, Chapter 5, p. 152)

> . . . our small farmers . . . They've lost confidence, the old men trudge along their ruts like broken-down animals while the young men and girls think only of getting away from looking after cows or getting their hands dirty with a plough and go off as soon as they can to the towns. . . . (*Ibid.*, p. 154)

French agriculture was in crisis in the last twenty years of the nineteenth century. Never mind that Emile Zola transposes events that were taking place in the mid-1880s, the time that he was writing his novel about peasant life, to the 1860s, the period in which the action of the novel is set. The sense of an agrarian economy in crisis provides the context for a story that is set on the plains of the Beauce, a rich agricultural region in northern France. Sometimes described as the granary of the country, producing large amounts of wheat, the Beauce surrounds the small city of Chartres with its magnificent Gothic cathedral. Zola describes it at the beginning of the novel, when one of the central characters, Jean Macquart, is sowing winter wheat, "his heavy shoes [sinking] into the rich, thick soil which clung to them as he strode along, rhythmically swaying his body."

> The low walls and the brown patch of old slate roof seemed lost at the edge of the plain of Beauce which reached out towards Chartres, for beneath the late October sky, vast and overcast, the rich yellow farmland, bare at this time of year, extended for a score of miles or more, its broad stretches of arable alternating with green expanses of clover

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[1] In this essay, I refer to the 1980 Penguin Classics edition of Emile Zola's *The Earth*, translated by Douglas Parmee. I give page numbers for quotations from this edition, but I also give Part and Chapter numbers in case readers are consulting other editions.

and lucerne, with no sign of a hillock or a tree as far as the eye could see . . . (*Ibid.*, Part 1, Chapter 1, p. 21)

The Beauce, at the time of the novel, had a variety of farmers, including both absentee landlords and big, would-be capitalist farmers – both represented in the book – as well as tenant farmers and peasants struggling to make a living from a few acres of land. The latter, the principal characters in Zola's novel, probably accounted for about 80 per cent of the land.

La Terre, usually translated into English as "The Earth" or sometimes as "The Soil," published in 1887, was Zola's only "rural" novel. It was the fifteenth in a cycle of, eventually, twenty novels, about five generations of a fictional family, the Rougon-Macquarts. Through the series of novels Zola aimed to write "the natural and social history of a family under the Second Empire" (the name given to the regime of Louis Napoleon in France, from 1852 to 1870), and by this means, to describe and analyse the changes taking place in French society. Influenced by positivism, Zola wanted to develop a "scientific" analysis of French society through his writing. He was the leader of the movement of naturalism in literature, looking to tell life, so to say, "as it is," and he wrote in the period of realism in art and literature, when painters and writers sought to depict the lives of the lower classes. Probably the best known of the novels in the cycle of the Rougon-Macquarts is *Germinal*, Zola's story of a strike in a coal mining community in northern France, published just two years before *La Terre.* For the writing of both of the books Zola undertook a good deal of research, as he always did, reading, talking with experts, and spending time in "the field." He was fairly familiar with rural life from his own experience, and his mother came from a family living on the borders of the Beauce. Before writing *La Terre* he spent time there in May 1886; and it is generally recognised by historians that Zola provides an accurate account of peasant life. The book was hugely controversial, however, at the time of its publication, for some critics thought that it presented the peasantry in an unfavourable light, representing their lives as sordid and even bestial. But the seasons are powerfully evoked, drought and storms and baking-hot summers; and all the agricultural operations: ploughing, manuring, sowing, harvesting, hay-making, sheep-shearing, and, perhaps most memorably, the harvesting of grapes for wine-making.

Jean Macquart, whom we meet sowing on the plain of the Beauce in the first chapter, has already been introduced, though not as a prominent character, to readers of the whole cycle of Zola's novels. He figures dramatically later in the series as a heroic defender of France against the Prussian invaders in 1870. But in *La Terre*, he is an outsider in the village of Rognes, where most of the story takes place. Described as having a "slow, equable temperament" and in his late twenties (so seen by the girls of the village as quite an old man), he is from Plassans (actually, Aix-en-Provence), far away in the south of France. Sometimes called "Corporal," Jean had arrived in the Beauce on leaving the army after fighting in Italy. Trained earlier as a carpenter,

he at first took up wood-working jobs, but, as he says, he got fed up with it and turned to agricultural work on the big farm of the area, La Borderie. This farm, of more than 500 acres and with a big, square farmyard "enclosed on three sides by cowsheds, sheepfolds and barns," is owned by Hourdequin. His father, though of peasant stock, was a townsman and an excise officer who had purchased the estate at the time of the French Revolution, having outbid as he did so a peasant farmer, Joseph-Casimir Fouan. He and his son had thus earned the enduring resentment of Fouan and his family. "Townsfolk always do us down, don't they?" says Fouan's son, Louis. But Hourdequin, like others in this epic novel, meets a tragic death, and La Borderie is destroyed.

The story of *La Terre* centres on the family of Joseph-Casimir – his daughter Marianne, known as "La Grande," a fiercesome, ruthless old woman with "a gaunt face like that of a bird of prey," her brothers Michel, known as "Mouche," and Louis (referred to always as "Fouan"), and a younger daughter Laure, who trained as a dressmaker but became, with her husband Charles, the owner of a very successful brothel in Chartres. Mouche, lazy and the least successful of the family, and who has lost some of the land he inherited – occasioning the authorial remark, "The man makes his land, as they say in Beauce" – has two daughters, Lise and Francoise. Louis, old Fouan, married to Rose, has three children. The eldest, a former soldier who had fought in North Africa but who now lives mainly for drinking and playing cards, dissolute but good-natured, and whose real name is Hyacinthe, is known to everyone, because of his appearance, as "Jesus Christ"; then a daughter called Fanny who is married to a stolid farmer called Delhomme, a man said to be "worthy of consideration" as the owner of some 50 acres with a hired hand; and finally the younger son Buteau, headstrong and ill-tempered (as his name suggests, in French), who "even as a lad had never been able to get on with his parents," but who still possessed "his father's ruthless greed and sagacity, aggravated by his mother's cheese-paring meanness."

Zola introduces Fouan and his family in the second chapter, when they meet at the office of the local lawyer to settle the division of the old man's land between his three children and the pension that should be paid to him. Fouan "had adored his land" but he can't manage it any more. There is clearly a great deal of tension among all the members of the family about the division of the land, and the tragedy of old Fouan comes to recall that of Shakespeare's King Lear. Fouan, after the death of his wife, like Lear after he has given up his kingdom, always resentful of his loss of his land, shuttles between his children's homes, finding comfort and ease in none of them. There is an episode, too, in which he, like Lear, suffers exposure in a violent storm. The division of the land is agreed upon in front of the lawyer and the plots are then surveyed, but Buteau, accusing the others of cheating him, initially refuses to take his third share. He also refuses to marry his cousin Lise who is carrying his child. Later, however, following the death of Lise's father, Mouche, Buteau finds advantage in marrying her, so as to acquire the ownership of her

fields, adjacent to his share of his father's land. And this has gained in value because of the construction of a new road:

> So now at last Buteau had his share of the land on which he had been casting such covetous eyes for two and half years, even while obstinately refusing to accept it in a frenzy of mingled longing and resentment. . . . Ever since his acceptance, his passion had been satisfied in the fierce joy of owning his land; and his joy was increased by the thought that he had got the better of his sister and brother, for now that the new road ran alongside his land, his share was worth more . . . And that was not all. He was also delighted at his long delayed marriage, which had brought him another five acres, adjacent to his own. (*Ibid.*, Part 3, Chapter 1, p. 199)

This brings about the further great tragedy of the novel, because Buteau also acquires the share of Mouche's land that should go to Francoise, who is still legally a minor – and "the thought that it would be necessary for the two sisters to share out their inheritance never entered his head." Buteau wants to possess both young women sexually, and their land, and this sets off a bitter struggle between him and his former friend Jean, who has become enamoured of Francoise. In the end the outsider, Jean, loses out in every way and he decides to go back to soldiering – "since he no longer had the heart to plough this old land of France, by God, he'd defend it!" The novel is about the cycle of the seasons and of cultivation, about the cycle of life, and the interplay of life and death, and it ends where it began:

> As he left he cast one final glance at the two grassless graves [those of Fouan and Francoise] and at the infinite expanse of the rich plain of Beauce swarming with sowers, swinging their arms in the same monotonous gesture. Here were the Dead, there was the Seed: and bread would be springing from the Good Earth. (*Ibid.*, Part 5, Chapter 6, p. 500)

There is much in the novel about sexual passion, and a great deal of (rather obvious) sexual symbolism – this is one of the reasons why it was controversial – but it is the passionate desire for land and for making it productive that is more important. Part of the difference between Jean and the people of Rognes is that he looks for loving relationships. He is described as a "big, tender-hearted young man . . . [and] . . . having been brought up in the town, his heart melted at the thought of rustic happiness" (*ibid.*, Part 1, Chapter 5, p. 95). His village friends are unmoved by a story that he reads to them, that touched him quite deeply – "the others remained glum" (*ibid.*). The lives of the peasants of the Beauce are perhaps such that they cannot afford tenderness, and there is little trace of love and affection between the old patriarch Fouan and his children. His love is his land, and he spends his old age wandering around, to gaze upon it even after he has given it away. He is described as becoming ever more bent, and so seeming to be joining the earth. Buteau is driven to extremes of evil as he struggles to hold on to his ownership of land. To be able to make the land productive and secure his limited wealth, he wants no more children – "when you were married, you had to take things seriously, he'd sooner be gelded like a cat than have another [child]. No thanks!" (*ibid.*, Part 3, Chapter 1,

p. 203). He is bitterly resentful when Lise conceives a second child. And Hourdequin, driven to distraction though he is by his need for his young mistress, the coquettish Jacqueline, is described as having a more important mistress in his land. After his quarrels with the young woman,

> he would throw up the sponge and go away sick at heart to seek the only consolation he could find, the sight of his wheat and oats, a sea of green stretching out to infinity.

The text continues:

> God, how he had come to love that land, with a passion which went far beyond the grasping avarice of a peasant, with a passion that was sentimental and almost intellectual, recognising in it the Great Mother who had given him life and substance and to whose bosom he would return. (*Ibid*., Part 2, Chapter 1, pp. 111–12)

And the land is the cause of conflict. Zola's account of peasant life recalls ideas put forward by G. M. Foster in a classic article, based on anthropological fieldwork in Mexico, about what he calls the "cognitive orientation" of peasants. Foster describes the cognitive orientation of the peasants he studied as characterised by an "image of limited good":

> a peasant sees his existence as determined and limited by the natural and social resources of his village and his immediate area. Consequently . . . if "Good" exists in limited amounts which cannot be expanded, and if the system is closed, it follows that an individual or a family can improve its position only at the expense of others. (Foster 1965, pp. 296–97)

Fouan's and Buteau's ideas about their land seem to reflect just such an orientation, and it is very hard to imagine that the peasants of Rognes could ever have been capable of collective action. The village is portrayed as being riven by sentiments of greed, envy, and jealousy. It is more of a "back-to-back" than a "face-to-face society," exactly as the eminent sociologist M. N. Srinivas once described the Indian village.[2] The implications of these ideas and attitudes for their action also recall Marx's famous words in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, written thirty years before, about the French peasantry in the period of the Second Empire:

> The small-holding peasants form an enormous mass whose members live in similar conditions but without entering into manifold relations with each other. Their mode of production isolates them from one another . . . Thus the great mass of the French nation is formed by the simple addition of homonymous magnitudes, much as potatoes in a sack form a sack of potatoes. (Marx 1852, Chapter 7)

Marx went on to argue that though the French peasantry constituted a "class-in-itself," the peasants were

> incapable of asserting their class interest in their own name . . . They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented. Their representative must at the same time

[2] I have no source for this statement, but I have heard it said by several scholars who knew Srinivas personally.

> appear as their master, as an authority over them, an unlimited governmental power which protects them from the other classes and sends them rain and sunshine from above. (*Ibid.*)

This is very much how Zola describes the relations between the people of Rognes and their representatives. Early in the story, the deputy to parliament who represents Rognes is Monsieur de Chedeville, the owner of a large estate in the area – though he has "squandered his substance on women." He campaigns, but only after a fashion, because he is confident that he will be re-elected since he is the official candidate. He is a protectionist – "What's ruining us," he says to Hourdequin, "is this free trade that the Emperor is so keen on" – and his opponent is a free-trader. But in the next election the free-trader, Monsieur Rochefontaine, is the official candidate, the policies of the government having become increasingly inclined to free trade, and he is elected in his rural constituency in spite of the policies that he advocates. In a public argument with Hourdequin he says, "We'll force the peasant to feed the workers," and Hourdequin determines to oppose him even though he knows he will be defeated, because Rochefontaine is the government candidate.[3]

Arguments over free trade were questions that divided France at the time that Zola was writing – reflecting the classic conflict between the interests of landowners and peasants in high prices for their crops, and those of industrialists like Rochefontaine and the working class in cheap food. Zola describes it as "the frightening problem of the day, an antagonism that was pulling the framework of society apart" (*ibid.*, Part 2, Chapter 5, p. 152). There was also an argument going on, clearly reflected in *La Terre*, about the clash between *la petite propriete* and *la grande propriete,* that is, over the relative merits of small-scale and of large-scale property in agriculture. In nineteenth-century France, debate went on over the division of the land that had resulted, in the first place, from the Revolution. The debate is shown in Zola's account of the division of old Fouan's few acres. The surveyor, Grosbois, is said to have been

> won over by progressive ideas . . . When you had plots of land no bigger than a pocket handkerchief, didn't it make movement and transport ruinously expensive? Was it proper farming when you had little garden-sized plots where you couldn't use the right rotation or machines?

But when he suggests not dividing Fouan's land into excessively smallholdings, the idea is furiously resisted by Buteau (*ibid.*, Part 1, Chapter 3, p. 53).

Monsieur de Chedeville, the deputy, defends the smallholder in a conversation with Hourdequin, repeating official ideas of the time about the importance of small-scale agriculture for social order and prosperity:

> He trotted out all the fashionable ideas: the smallholder, born of the Revolution of '89, protected by the law and destined to regenerate agriculture; in a word, everyone

[3] See Zola (1980), Part 4, Chapter 5, on local politics.

> becoming a landowner and using his intelligence and energy in the cultivation of his own small plot of land. (*Ibid.*, Part 2, Chapter 5, p. 155)

In response, Hourdequin launches into a tirade about the merits and disadvantages of small-scale agriculture that is becoming ever more significant. This is because:

> For some time now almost all the day-labourers, the ones who hired themselves out to the farmers, had been buying up small pieces of land when the big estates were broken up and cultivating them in their spare time.

That division had gone too far was recognised in a policy of encouraging exchanges of land by offering tax relief. Hourdequin refers to the advantages of the smallholding (of up to about 50 acres in extent) – it "produced proportionately more and of better quality, since the owner devoted all his energies to it." But the superior production of the smallholding "was the result of excessively hard labour; the father, mother and the children had to kill themselves with work." It was almost impossible for them to take up modern farming methods. Hourdequin is a "progressive farmer" interested in raising the productivity of his land through the use of chemical fertilizers, and by mechanisation. He is frustrated because of the difficulties of raising sufficient capital; by the poor quality of chemical fertilizers that were then available; and by the reluctance of farm labour to use his machines even if they did not actively resist mechanisation (*ibid.*, pp. 155–57). As Hourdequin travels with the deputy to meet the Rognes council, they encounter exactly the problem that he has described:

> Although it was a Sunday, he had sent one of his farm-hands to toss some lucerne which needed doing urgently, and had provided him with a mechanical tedder of a new type. . . . And the unsuspecting farm-hand, failing to recognise his master in the unfamiliar vehicle, was poking fun at his piece of machinery with three villagers whom he had stopped as they were passing by . . . The peasants were grinning and examining the tedding machine as if it were a queer malevolent beast. . . . (*Ibid.*, p. 159)

By the end of the novel Hourdequin, in spite of all his investment and effort, is ruined. The success of capitalist agriculture in the Beauce of the later nineteenth century was far from assured. Big farmers and smallholder peasants alike confronted hard times: "Catastrophe was looming round the corner, to put an end to the age-old struggle between the smallholder and the big landlord by destroying them both" (*ibid.*, Part 5, Chapter 4, p. 458). In these circumstances, it is hardly surprising that there are those who want to leave the land. Jesus Christ offers the counterpoint to his younger brother's obsession:

> "The land," he bellowed. "The land doesn't give a brass farthing for you. You're just a slave to it, you bloody fool. It takes away all your strength, your whole life . . . It doesn't even make you rich. . . ." (*Ibid.*, Part 3, Chapter 3, p. 233)

He goes on to refer to the constant tendency for the land to be divided up, "It comes and goes, gets larger and smaller – and especially smaller. You even think it's wonderful to

have six acres when Father had nineteen." Meanwhile, as the shouting match between the brothers proceeds, some of the youngsters of the village are dancing, among them Fanny and Delhomme's son Nenesse:

> Young though he was, Nenesse already had a yearning for city slickness and he was sheathed in a suit . . . the sort of tight reach-me-downs turned out by the hundred by cheap Paris tailors; and he was wearing a bowler hat to show his contempt and loathing for village life. (*Ibid.*, p. 229)

Later, Nenesse – the son of a rich peasant – does go off to town, to work in a "restaurant with a dance band." His story reminds me of the son of one of the rich farmers in the Tamil village in which I lived in the 1970s, who – though he inherited what in the village was a really decent-sized holding – was desperate to go off to be a bus conductor. This seemed to him to be so much more exciting and rewarding a way of life than staying in the village. And in India, since that time, many young people have sought to leave their villages and to leave the land, even in areas of high agriculture comparable with the Beauce.

The time of the action of *La Terre* was at the beginning of the period that is described in the historian Eugen Weber's classic work, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernisation of Rural France 1870–1914* (1976). In 1870, Weber tells us, France did not correspond with the idea of a nation. It was neither morally nor materially integrated. What unity it had was less cultural than administrative – as we see in Zola's story of the local council of Rognes, and especially in the peasants' responses to recruitment to the army. Fighting to protect your own was seen as one thing, but not going away to fight other people's battles:

> Delhomme produced the old argument that everyone should defend his own bit of land. If the Prussians came to the Beauce, they'd soon see that people there weren't cowards. But to have to go and fight for other people's bits of land, that wasn't funny at all. (*Ibid.*, Part 5, Chapter 4, p. 452)

The first chapter of Weber's book, in a section entitled "The Way Things Were," has the title "A Country of Savages," and in it Weber shows how rural people were treated by elites and city people more or less like 'natives,' with condescension. They were, he says, subject to a kind of colonisation, and he refers to that passionate voice of colonised peoples, Frantz Fanon, in speaking of the condition of the French peasantry. What we see clearly in *La Terre* is the resentment felt by village people against the townsmen who disparage them and exploit them.

Over the period that he studied, Weber finds that ways of life and thought changed. Mentalities changed, and popular and elite cultures came closer together as a result of people sharing experiences with each other, through the greater possibilities and frequency of travel, changes in occupations, and the development of the capitalist economy, and perhaps especially through education. Weber emphasises the importance of the village school in "the passage from relative isolation and a

relatively closed economy to union with the outside world through roads, railroads and money economy." Railways don't figure in *La Terre*, but the construction of a new road that plays a part in the story is a significant development, improving the connection between the village and the town: "the famous direct road from Rognes to Chateaudun . . . was going to save some five miles" (*ibid.*, Part 1, Chapter 4, p. 73). There is also a mention of a line of telegraph posts stretching across the countryside. The money economy is clearly starting to penetrate agriculture. And the village school is important: "housed in a former barn, whitewashed and provided with an extra floor" (*ibid.*, p. 64). The schoolmaster, Lequeu, is

> a country boy, who through his education had become imbued with a hatred for his class. He used to brutalise his pupils, who he called savages, and beneath his ceremonious correctness toward the priest and the mayor he concealed progressive ideas. (*Ibid.*, p. 67)

These he reveals towards the end of the novel when he lets fly, pouring out his scorn for his neighbours. The progress of education is slow, but it still seems that the younger generation in the village is probably literate, unlike the older people to whom Jean reads early in the story. And Hourdequin expresses the two sides of the contemporary debate about education:

> . . . the worst thing is that education, do you remember, that wonderful education that was going to be our salvation? Well, all it does is to speed up this emigration and depopulation of the countryside by making children stupidly conceited and obsessed with material comfort.

The cure, he thinks, "would be to have other kinds of school, a practical education of graduated courses in agriculture" (*ibid.*, Part 2, Chapter 5, pp. 154–55).

Zola's novel gives readers a vivid sense of the tensions in French rural society in the later nineteenth century, and of the enduring problems of farm size, of peasant farming versus capitalist agriculture, and of the relations between agriculture and the rest of the economy. He describes a society, too, that is on the cusp of the changes that Eugen Weber analyses in his historical study. But above all – and this is what gives the novel its epic quality – Zola depicts the human obsession with land, and the contradictions in the relationships we have with "Mother Earth."

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