

The Conditions for Emergence of National Identity: The Narrative of Eugen Weber's *Peasants into Frenchmen*

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Eugen Weber's masterful *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914* has the ambitious goal of explicating "how undeveloped France was integrated into the modern world and the official culture – of Paris, of the cities" (pg. x). Since the Parisian culture would, in due time, come to be perceived as the essence of "French-ness,"¹ Weber's account can be leveraged as a case study of the conditions necessary for the emergence of a national identity. It is the purpose of this review essay to briefly (and incompletely) attempt this very task.

Before beginning, the reader might challenge the very premise of this endeavor: Perhaps nationalism is but a natural evolution of the political conception of community held by a homogenous group of people. Yet Weber immediately stresses that the "unity of mind and feeling" (pg. 95) required for a sense of nationhood (a concept characterized by Benedict Anderson as an *imagined community* in his landmark study of nationalism²) was scarcely present in France before the turn of the 20th century. French nationalism was not the product of longstanding social homogeneity – when it comes to 19th century France, "the reality was inescapable. And the reality was diversity" (pg. 9). France was far from being "our country, the most 'one' in the whole world" that Baron Hausmann, architect of the modernization of Paris and its iconic boulevards, would reference in his memoirs (pg. 9). Half of the French population in 1870 was composed of farmers and peasants, and not only were they perceived by their Parisian counterparts as 'other', they were 'imagined' as "[v]ulgar, hardly civilized, their nature meek but wild" (pg. 4). Worse still, despite the broad brushstrokes with which said insults painted peasants, the French countryside was characterized by significant heterogeneity. "[W]hile towns were becoming more alike," writes Weber, "country people continued to show a remarkable diversity from one region to another and even from one province to the next" (pg. 9).³ As a French economist writing in 1837 remarked about the Pyrenees, "Every valley [...] is still a little world that differs from the neighboring world as Mercury does from Uranus" (pg.

¹ As Weber writes, "Civilization is urban (civic, civil, civilian, civilized), and so of course is urbanity; just as polity, politeness, politics, and police spring from *polis* – the city again" (pg. 5).

² Benedict Anderson. 1983. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. New York: Verso.

³ One Frenchman noted that "Anyone who came from beyond the familiar radius of ten or fifteen miles [...] was still a "foreigner"" (pg. 49).

47). Adds Weber: “Villages hated each other from time immemorial, and all hated the gentlemen of the bourgeoisie” (pg. 47). It did not help that, as late as 1863, at least a quarter of the (predominantly rural) French population spoke no French: instead, they spoke a diverse array of *patois*, “the various languages, idioms, dialects, and jargon of the French provinces” (pg. 67). Nearly a century after the French Revolution, France could hardly be viewed as fertile soil for the emergence of a unified national identity.

In light of such diversity, Weber argues that the nation either had to be constructed by the French State (or, rather, by Paris), to be spurred by some exogenous shock, or, as in most cases, to develop through a combination of both. And, in almost all cases, linguistic homogenization and convergence upon French was the crucial precursor and causal variable of interest.

Let us begin with the key exogenous shock highlighted by Weber, namely the advent of the industrial revolution. Immediately, language is interwoven into the narrative: “Industrial development,” argues Weber, “worked for the linguistic unification of the polygot labor force that migrated to the cities. Market changes worked more slowly but to similar effect in the countryside” (pg. 86). Of course, as is implied by Weber’s emphasis on mobility, the impact of industrialization was bolstered by the growing state capacity to facilitate migration to and from cities and their respective markets. Even in Brittany, one of the staunchest holdouts against the linguistic homogenization spurred by Paris, “French marched through the Breton peninsula, moving slowly but surely along the highways, then the railways” (pg. 82). It is in this spirit that Weber shares the sentiment of many Frenchmen that roads had “cemented national unity” (pg. 220). Once migration to the city (where the influence of the French state, and, therefore, of its *langue officielle* was greater⁴) became a realistic possibility, the association of French with “mobility, advancement, economic and social promotion, and escape from the restrictive bonds of home” became almost inevitable (pg. 84). In short, the draw of industrialized French cities, combined with the growing state infrastructure facilitating the commute and migration to urban centers, rendered it lucrative for peasants to learn French in order to communicate with the diverse group of producers and consumers in the urban market.

But in order for peasants to also develop a conception of the ‘nation’ they first needed to realize that a world outside their farm not only existed – they needed to recognize that this world

⁴ To the point, Weber notes: “Politics (as opposed to village business) was done in French [...] Official business was done in French too [...] Rules, regulations, and consequently litigation were all exclusively in the domain of French” (pg. 85).

also mattered to them. Cities spurred just such an ideological transformation. Once in the city, Weber argues that peasants were exposed to a series of nationalizing institutions and interactions: “However small it was, the town had a few civil servants, shopkeepers, doctors, veterinarians, men of law; clubs or societies, perhaps a Masonic lodge; and a “press” put together in the café [...] all likely carriers of outside ideas” (pg. 261). In particular, one set of institutions that accelerated this ideological shift were the local taverns (“forums of political talk as for every other kind” (pg. 268)) and the *chambrettes* – rented rooms near taverns where peasants and city folk would gather, gamble, and talk politics (pg. 270). These institutions functioned as clubs which “[helped] to detach these men [peasants] from the old world, and [ease] their passage to a new French one” (pg. 269). By 1900, even peasants who remained in the country had been influenced enough by their interactions with urban populations to know that what happened in broader France was important: “They were not clear,” writes Weber, “on how economics, politics, law, and science worked, but they knew they were affected by them [...] they had passed from the realm of local consensus to that of national contention and debate” (pgs. 275-276). To borrow once more from Benedict Anderson’s phraseology, the peasants had gained the capacity to imagine a community beyond their farm – a community centered in Paris and stretching throughout the French countryside.

Finally, one would be remiss not to emphasize (as with most studies of French nationalism) Weber’s focus on the school, and education more generally, as essential to the development of national identity. According to Weber, schools help shape “individuals to fit into societies and cultures broader than their own and [to persuade] them that these broader realms are their own” (pg. 331). Recognizing this fact, in the late 1800s the French state doubled its budget for public instruction (pg. 309), built some 17,320 new schools (pg. 309) and new roads to reach them (pg. 320), made elementary education free (pg. 303), established kindergratens (pg. 314), and instituted reward schemes for teachers and pupils passing their examinations (pg. 329). The influence of teachers (who were increasingly state-trained) began to grow. Leveraging this influence, teachers reported back to Paris how they instilled in their students “those memories that attach our hearts to the fatherland” and images of “France strong and powerful *when united*” (pg. 333). Thus schools did not just teach French; they also implanted symbols in their pupils’ consciousness that would serve as “points of reference that straddled regional boundaries exactly as national patriotism was meant to do” (pg. 337). Once again, the exogenous

shock of industrialization largely incentivized peasants to send their children to school;⁵ but once in school, children did not just learn technical skills valued in the urban marketplace; they learned that “[t]he fatherland is not your village, your province, it is all of France. The fatherland is like a great family” (pg. 333). And the socializing impact of education was not limited to children; those too old to attend primary school chose to enlist in the military service instead, where the provision of a basic level of education and knowledge of the French language turned the army into “the school of the fatherland” (pg. 298).

To be sure, Weber has a lot more to say about the topic in his 496-page social history. Even the non-exhaustive summary provided here simplifies his general points in a way that might render him uncomfortable.⁶ But perhaps the basic conditions that allowed for the emergence of French national identity can come across nonetheless: the interaction of exogenous processes of industrialization with endogenous state interventions meant to harness the nationalizing potential of said transformations; the centrality of the French language and its diffusion for the construction of national consciousness; the role of institutions, from markets to taverns to schools to the military, in socializing peasants into the dominant culture of the capital; and the very slow, uneven, and far from unidirectional pace at which this transformation took place. Ultimately, the consequences of the social change charted by Weber cannot be overstated; by the dawn of the First World War, a majority of the hitherto disparate and separate rural population had come to imagine itself as part of the French nation. Peasants had evolved into Frenchmen.

⁵ Writes Weber: “People went to school not because school was offered or imposed, but because it was useful. The world had to change before this came about” (pg. 303). I take this change to largely be the promise of social mobility offered by industrializing cities, where knowledge of French and a basic level of education became necessary conditions for participation.

⁶ Particularly if we take seriously a quote by Augustin Thierry with which Weber begins Chapter 7: “The all-important perception we must instill in historians is the ability to distinguish rather than to confound” (my translation).