

Arthur Young and His Views of Pre-Revolutionary France

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Arthur Young's *Travels in France During the Years 1787, 1788, 1789*, paints a picture of France immediately before the Revolution. Not only does it give a first hand, detailed description of the life of peasants, both their possessions or lack thereof and the oppression under which they lived, but he also gives a contemporary commentary on the justification of revolutionary acts. Reading closely Young's diary of his travels and the appended commentary, we can come to understand not only the motives behind the rural part of the French Revolution, but also gain insight into the English Enlightenment that watched it happen.

Young's primary purpose in traveling throughout France was not to see firsthand the causes and effects of a revolution. Rather, each of the trips was an agricultural research mission. Young was a squire from Suffolk and a well-known gentleman farmer. As agriculture was his main interest, he sought to do what he could to improve agriculture in England. To do so, he sought to bring as many good ideas from as many places as possible. Pamela Horn describes this practice as one of the major schools of agricultural improvement in Young's day, a school that sought to replace the archaic, feudal ideas of farming with new ideas derived both from experimentation and from outside England.¹ Thus

Young decided to make several journeys with the intent of gathering agricultural knowledge, journeys that took him to both Ireland and France.

According to Benjamin Sexaur, England had been in a dynamic period of agricultural growth that was peaking around the same time Young made his travels.² Unfortunately, Sexaur also tells us, French agriculture had been relatively static during this period. This left the common French person in a poor situation, as agricultural technology was not developed enough to provide a large enough surplus of food. Sexaur comments that the average French peasant was too close to subsistence level to save for agricultural improvement.³ By 1789, John Markoff notes, conflicts and complaints based on subsistence were widespread.⁴

This unfortunate circumstance was compounded by several more unfortunate circumstances. First, due to the lack of surplus, agriculture for market use was scarce, only found around urban areas, particularly Paris, the only significantly large city. Sexaur claims that this lack of surplus influenced the improvement of agriculture or the lack of competition allowing farmers to be content in their mediocrity. Furthermore, the enforcement of seigniorial rights, or the rights of the local lord, kept peasants oppressed. John Markoff describes the things that, in feudalistic fashion, peasants were forced to use: the lord's mill, oven, and winepress. They were also forced to harvest on the date the lord set, have judicial cases tried in his court, and suffer the game that the lord would hunt to destroy precious crops.⁵ These rights kept peasants locked into the feudal system, keeping them tied to the lord and the facilities he provided, whether or not the lord himself was present. The final things that inhibited agricultural and economic growth in pre-revolu-

² Benjamin Sexaur, "English and French Agriculture in the Late Eighteenth Century," *Agricultural History* (1976), 491.

³ Sexaur, "English and French Agriculture," 498.

⁴ John Markoff, "Peasant Grievances and Peasant Insurrection: France in 1789," *Journal of Modern History* (1990), 473.

⁵ John Markoff, "Violence, Emancipation, and Democracy," *American Historical Review* (1995), 364.

¹ Pamela Horn, "The Contribution of the Propagandist to Eighteenth-Century Agricultural Improvement," *Historical Journal* (1982), 321.

tionary France were the heavy taxes and tithes the peasants were required to pay. The common people struggled to raise crops. Most of what they did raise was taxed away by the state, the nobility, and the church, leaving little for the commoner to live on, let alone save in order to improve the production of his or her own farming. Guy Lemarchand describes this as a society "administered for the benefit of the minority by an absolute monarchy, which was legitimized by a religious ideology and supported by the bishops of the Catholic Church."⁶ Finally, Sexaur asserts, those who were rich, who received the benefit of the taxes, who held most of the country's wealth, had no interest in agricultural improvement.⁷ Thus, French agriculture, the activity that produced the food upon which most peasants lived, was ignored, taxed, and oppressed into feudal mediocrity.

This was the France in which Young traveled. The France against which he reacted so strongly within *Travels*, both in the diary part and his commentary on the revolution. First in the diary section of the book in which Young records his travels, he indicts French poverty with several examples. Note that it is the poverty itself that Young indicts, not the impoverished. In fact, Young places the blame on others. One example of this is the lack of shoes and stockings Young sees in the people of Languedoc. Nor is this the only such description.⁸ Another such incident is one that Young himself describes as "a sign of poverty I observed."⁹ This vignette places women picking weeds, putting them in their aprons, and taking them home for fodder for their cows. It is a vivid illustration of the French peasants' lack of food, as they did not have enough good pastureland to provide their livestock with adequate food, let alone have the grain to provide them with quality meal. Sexaur notes that Young describes the quantity of sheep and cattle in France as "everywhere

⁶ Guy Lemarchand, "France on the Eve of the Revolution: A Society in Crisis or a Crisis of Politics?" *Science & Society* (1990), 268.

⁷ Sexaur, "English and French Agriculture," 498.

⁸ Arthur Young, *Arthur Young's Travels in Europe During the Years 1787, 1788, 1789* ed. Bertram Edwards, 4th ed. (London, 1892), 45.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 28.

trifling in comparison to what it ought to be."¹⁰ The final and most dramatic example of rural poverty is in the discussion he has with a peasant woman. He records what she tells him about the property her family owns: a morsel of land, one cow, and a poor little horse. He then describes the taxes she has to pay. To one lord she has to pay a *franchar*, or 42 pounds, of wheat and 3 chickens, and to another, four *franchars* of oats, and one chicken. Her body, Young says, makes her appear to be between 60 and 70 years old, yet upon her account she is found to be 28.¹¹ These descriptions, while not the only examples of peasant poverty in *Travels*, are dynamic examples of what Young saw on his three journeys.

From these three examples, Young's position on the poverty of rural France emerges. The very fact that these incidents are included indicates Young's perspective. Their inclusion demonstrates Young's recognition of the social strata, that the peasant's poverty was not necessarily a result of a God-given, and thus, immutable hierarchy. Furthermore, these examples do not attack the peasants themselves and are not included to demonstrate the pathetic nature of the peasant, a nature which would allow these peasants to sink into such a miserable state, as Young's commentary on the Revolution demonstrates.

Young's diary could be interpreted in an ambivalent way, supporting either the nobility or the peasants. His commentary can not. Throughout it, Young maintains that he could not justify the excesses of people as they took up arms. Yet he clearly understands and supports the motivation of the people. He invigils against many of the French institutions. First, he attacks those that held power in particular areas, adjusting taxes as they see fit, at the expense of the peasants, for the nobility and clergy. Young bitterly notes, are exempted from this tax.¹² He refers to seigniorial rights as a "horrible law"¹³ and calls the justice system "partial,

¹⁰ Young, as quoted in Sexaur, "English and French Agriculture," 286.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 197.

¹² *Ibid.*, 314.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 318.

venal, and in-famous."¹⁴ Young's ideals supporting the French people are summed up in one statement: "But is it really the people to whom we are to impute as a whole, or to their oppressors who had kept them so long in a state of bondage?"¹⁵ Thus, Young, seeing the tragedy of rural France firsthand, inveighed against the French nobility that had oppressed the peasants for so long.

Seeing this in Young, we can see a major difference between English and French societies before the French Revolution, derived, at least in part, from agriculture. Young, as with many of the other English gentry, were interested in farming and the dynamic development of English agriculture. With the gentry interested in agriculture, it became necessary for them to be concerned with the welfare of those working in the fields. Thus, as the gentry were involved in the English political scene, they acted to influence this well being in at least two ways. First, they opposed legislation that would inhibit the local farmer from being productive, or more importantly, progressive. Secondly, they were willing to act, as Young did, to improve agriculture in their country, the improvement of which would improve the welfare of those in the lower classes who were dependent upon agriculture for their financial and subsistence well-being. None of this was seen in France. The nobility was willing to live at the expense of the peasant.

Young condemns this lack of concern. He attacks the lack of justice, the nobility's exemption of taxes, and their failure not only to observe their oppression of the peasants, but to correct that oppression. In Young's *Travels*, we see an indirect yet strong case for civil rights. With the end of the medieval age and the fall of the ideal of the Great Chain of Being, and the rise of the humanistic, individualistic ideal, the value of individual people had risen and taken hold strongly in England. The oppression of the French peasant, as Young observed, was an offense to the more modern ideal. The nobility lived without qualm off of the hard work of the peasant. Such a way of life assumes that the

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 320.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 322.

peasants were given a certain lot in life, a poor lot, and that the hierarchy of the day was a natural, God-given one. Young's opposition to the results of this worldview proves the difference between the more modern English and the more feudal French views.

Furthermore, because Young does not attack the French ideal, but rather attacks the effects thereof, we can see an elementary difference between the medieval and modern worlds. With medieval scholasticism, the educated people debated in terms of philosophy, and while that philosophy was often rooted in reality and the mundane aspects of life during debate, the subject was held at a sort of intellectual distance. Points were debated with the intention of refuting the philosophy of the opponents. With Young we can see this start to change. He does not attack the archaic philosophy of the Great Chain of Being that can be seen in the attitudes of the French nobility. Instead, he attacks the actions and the cruelties that derive from this attitude.

In this, we can see two things. First, the spread of education becomes obvious. In the age of scholasticism, only a few outside the clergy were educated enough to write. Thus, any works we have of that time that attack a certain behavior are intent on attacking the philosophies that drive people to those behaviors. Young, however, is neither part of the clergy, nor someone who is attacking a philosophy. In that he is part of the gentry and attacking behavior rather than philosophy, we can see the fall of scholasticism and the rise of the educated laity. Secondly, we can see the influences of the Enlightenment in Young. As a result of the despiritualization of society that was such a strong force in the Enlightenment, Young never calls the nobility unchristian or attacks its spiritual state. More importantly, Young's major reason to support the peasants in their overthrow of oppression is that he believes that it was the oppression of the peasantry that was hindering the development of more modern agricultural processes in France. John Markoff suggests "that the innovative ideas of the Enlightenment helped influence the masses

The Jewish Diffusion of French Nationalism

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Nineteenth-century French nationalism was a force that united citizens under the mandate of homogeneity. This national unity generated beliefs of governmental loyalty and state brotherhood; however, this form of unity also created an environment in which the masses perceived non-French diversity as a threat to internal cohesion. National acceptance of French Catholicism further added to growing hostility since it justified the persecution of non-Christian people as a divine and civic responsibility. The unification brought about by nationalism offered France many positive rewards, but it also supported the alienation of citizens who refused to conform to new French ways. An example of this alienation occurred between the French people and the Jewish-French population. Many French citizens believed that willing submission to the ruling government aided in prosperity. Also, nationalistic French citizens believed France should receive priority in the lives of all its loyal citizens. Yet many French Jews refused to compromise their culture and became nonconformists to the bustling spirit of French nationalism. Unfortunately, the Jews encountered bitter resentment due to their growing affluence as well as their differing religion. The hostility grew so great that Theodor Herzl wrote *The Jewish State* to offer Jewish people a plan to create a refuge from centuries of disenfranchisement and anti-Semitic abuse. Herzl's experience with French nationalism, however, had positive repercussions as

to question the status quo."¹⁶ Young was obviously influenced by these ideals as well, being a proponent of progress, one of the main goals of the Enlightenment. In fact, the very reason he was in France was to bring new ideas to England, to help English agriculture to progress.

Thus, through Arthur Young's *Travels in France During the Years 1787, 1788, 1789*, we can see several things. First, we have a very specific, detailed, and first-hand view of not only the poverty of rural France, but the things that locked the impoverished in their condition, the poor agricultural conditions, the seigniorial rights, the heavy taxes on the peasantry, and the apathy of the nobility. Second, we see Young supporting the attack on the nobility due to their oppression of the peasants, something that lets us see not only the lack of medieval influence on Young as a representative of the English gentry, but the strong Enlightenment influence. Through Young, then, although his influence was strongly technically agricultural, we get a brilliant picture of the agricultural cultures of both France and England.

¹⁶ John Markoff, "The Social Geography of Rural Revolt at the Beginning of the French Revolution," *American Sociological Review* (1985), 766.