

## Introduction: The State, the Peasantry, and the Revolution

In the thinking of historians about France in the eighteenth century, or indeed any century since the tenth, it is axiomatic that the power of the central state grew. Probably none would disagree. But a corollary to that proposition—one might call it the Tocqueville corollary, though it has been advanced by others—is perhaps more doubtful. This is the view that all growth in the power of the center had to be accomplished at the expense of power exercised locally; that is, centralization necessarily undermined the autonomy of long-established corporations such as the villages. It is to test the validity of that corollary that this book was written. Its subject is villages in eighteenth-century Burgundy and their relations with the state, but it was not intended as a comprehensive history of the peasantry, agriculture, or local administration. However, this study will perhaps have implications for broader issues and will, I hope, at least call into question certain important assumptions about social, economic, and institutional development, as well as the background of rural revolution.

Historians and social scientists usually discuss the state's relationship to the village in the following terms. Organized to

protect the peasant's welfare, the villages were bastions of the precapitalist culture. Village institutions were designed to provide insurance from destitution and even subsistence for the inhabitants; they reflected the peasantry's archaic preference for equality and self-sufficiency. But in the eighteenth century, the state, to modernize and to prepare for the transition to capitalism, laid siege to the precapitalist organization of the village. State officials, collaborating with capitalists, attacked the village's communal lands and practices and attempted to dismantle the age-old, corporate villages. The peasants protested this attempt to destroy their ancient communal culture; their protests culminated in revolution.

It is this view of the relationship between the French state and the villages that I seek to reinterpret. I wish to suggest that instead of dismantling these communities, the increasingly active state actually strengthened them. In Burgundy, communal property rights were upheld and communal tax collection and self-governance were encouraged by agents of the state. Royal officials concerned with administrative control and efficient tax collection had reasons to protect communal institutions. The consequences of that protection would be great.

Questions concerning the relationship of the peasantry to markets and to capitalism are not central to the thesis of this book. Nevertheless, because the debate about the origins of capitalism has become a reference point for most discussions of the peasantry under the Old Regime, I will attempt to situate this study within that broader debate.<sup>1</sup> In the analysis of a number of influential scholars, state building and capitalism are linked to the decline of communities, and commercial agriculture is assumed to have expanded at the expense of communal property, thus threatening the peasants' general welfare. In Burgundy, however, village institutions did not level social inequalities, nor did they insulate the village from the external market economy. The preservation of common rights did not result in a redistribution of wealth, but rather maintained and increased inequality and social

1. By capitalism I mean an economic system that includes (1) market exchange of both products and factors of production, with private markets for land and labor; and (2) capital accumulation to secure, reproduce, and expand the means of production.

stratification.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, there was not an implicit contradiction between communal property and production for the market. The commercialization of communal lands during the eighteenth century seems to have contributed to the strength of the village.<sup>3</sup> State officials favored more commercial and market-oriented villages in Burgundy as well as stronger corporate and communal rights. Nevertheless, an economic price was paid for the preservation of common rights. Communal agriculture could accommodate commercialization and capital accumulation, but it retarded the application of new, more efficient technologies and methodologies. French agriculture did not realize its full potential in the eighteenth century because of political arrangements that reinforced communal property rights.

The experience of Burgundian peasants also has implications for the study of rural revolution. Peasant unrest in Burgundy left little evidence of a confrontation between a collectivist peasant community and a rival culture of bourgeois individualism. Nor do Burgundian records support the thesis that the state became the object of rural protest because it had unleashed the forces of capitalism. On the contrary, state officials encouraged peasants to improve their economic condition by disputing in court the legal basis of feudal dues they owed to their lords. Peasants were not acting to prevent the development of the market economy in bringing those suits. They were using a state-sanctioned form of protest, the court case, to escape the power of the seigneurs and

2. AN, H-1486/284. Responding to an administrative inquiry concerned with the possibility of abolishing communal property rights, the *procureur général* of Provence wrote: "One often argues that common pasture rights were established for the benefit of the poor who do not own enough pasture to feed their animals. It is absolutely false in Provence. Common pasture rights were established principally in favor of the rich who can buy and maintain large flocks and who could not feed them if they were kept on their own lands, given the infinite division of our land into a multitude of small properties." This administrator's argument may have been implausible, but the important point is that communal rights did not result in a redistribution of wealth, but rather served the interests of wealthy farmers. Ripert Montclar to M. Parent, *premier commis* of controller general Bertin, 10 July 1766.

3. Efforts to prevent those properties from falling into the hands of seigneurial agents did nevertheless provide a basis for cooperation between rich and poor in the village. On cooperation, see Chapter 5. See also Robert Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation* (New York, 1984); and Michael Taylor, *Community, Anarchy, and Liberty* (Cambridge, 1982). Russell Hardin, in *Collective Action* (Baltimore, 1982), examines the incentives that motivate groups to take action.

to enable themselves to compete more fairly for the benefits of the market. Before presenting my argument in detail, I shall examine some other interpretations of the state's relationship to the peasantry.

### OTHER INTERPRETATIONS

Tocqueville is one of the scholars who have made an essential contribution to an understanding of the relationship between the central state and local communities under the Old Regime. He postulated what is still the generally held opinion that centralization undermined local autonomy, although today few sympathize with his fear that in France more democracy would mean more domination of society by the centralizing state. Tocqueville argued that the village assemblies, once the arbiters of local government, became in the eighteenth century "an empty show of freedom; [they] had no real power." After reading the records of village meetings in the district surrounding Tours, he remarked:

It will be noted that this parish assembly was a mere administrative inquiry, in the same form and as costly as judicial inquiries; that it never led to a vote or other clear expression of the will of the parish; that it was merely an expression of individual opinions, and constituted no check upon government. Many other documents indicate that the only object of parish assemblies was to afford information to the intendant, and not to influence his decision even in cases where no other interest but that of the parish was concerned. . . . The government preponderates, acts, controls, undertakes everything, provides for everything, knows far more about the subject's business than he does himself.

Tocqueville was persuaded that centralization was equivalent to sterilization.

Tocqueville was concerned that in the transition from an aristocratic to a democratic society, local autonomy would be sacrificed. "How could it be otherwise? Noblemen take no concern for anything, the bourgeois live in towns, and the community is represented by a rude peasant." Centralization, because it removed the nobility from the countryside, left the peasants defenseless against the bureaucratic tyranny of the state. "Since most of the wealthier or more cultivated residents had migrated to the city, . . . the [country] population was little more than a

horde of ignorant, uneducated peasants, quite incapable of administering local affairs." Tocqueville concluded that the tradition of local government, dating back to the Middle Ages, was lost in the eighteenth century.<sup>4</sup>

In interpreting the Revolution, historians since Tocqueville have continued to concentrate on the peasantry's relationship to the state under the Old Regime, but they have added a further consideration—capitalism. More concerned than Tocqueville with the economically determined structure of society, many of them have argued that peasants acted in the Revolution to protect their precapitalist culture and the village organization from the capitalism foisted upon them by the centralizing state. France's foremost historian of the Revolution, Georges Lefebvre, was the first to advance that proposition. He argued that during the Revolution, which marked the coming to power of the bourgeoisie, there was an autonomous peasant revolution that was anticapitalist and traditionalist, aimed at preserving an "economic and social world that was precapitalist." The peasants, Lefebvre argued, were opposed to the capitalism for which the French Revolution had cleared the way, and they responded defensively to the triumph of the bourgeoisie. They acted to prevent capitalism from destroying traditional communal institutions. During that revolution, the peasants "opposed with all their force the capitalist transformation of agriculture. In their spirit there was much more conservatism and routine than zeal for change. It was with elements from their past that they wanted to construct their social ideal." The peasants had a keen sense of social rights and social justice. In contrast to the bourgeois assertion of the inviolability of private property, they claimed that "superior to the rights of property are the just needs of the community in which all the inhabitants have a right to live."

The precapitalist organization of the village was not socialist,

4. Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, translated by Stuart Gilbert (New York, 1954), pp. 45–51, 252, 255. The Burgundian evidence reveals that, just as Tocqueville had suspected, royal officials encouraged village democracy as a means to increase their control over local politics. Although he accurately predicted how democratic forms of government might facilitate greater bureaucratic supervision, Tocqueville underestimated the vitality of peasant politics during the Old Regime. Making village government more bureaucratic had unexpected results. The problem of villagers' participation in governance is discussed at length in Chapter 3.

Lefebvre insisted, because the peasants did not constitute a class; they possessed divergent economic interests. In addition, the peasantry was more concerned with the distribution of wealth than with organizing a system of production. "They dreamed of enclosing themselves in their time-honored routines and stopping the progress of capitalism. It was the division not the production of wealth that interested them." Rather than socializing the means of production, such as tools, livestock, or land, the peasants "wanted only enough land, in property or lease, to provide for their families." Lefebvre nevertheless asserted that modern socialism owes much to the peasants' commitment to social justice. The notion that socialism can be traced to these rural communities has been unquestioned since Lefebvre. His claim that the institutions of the precapitalist village were morally superior to those of modern capitalism has also gone largely unchallenged.<sup>5</sup>

Albert Soboul, Lefebvre's successor as France's foremost historian of the French Revolution, carried the latter's interpretation one step further and posited the existence of a direct connection between peasant culture and socialism. He integrated the history of the French peasantry directly into a larger debate concerning the transition from feudalism to capitalism. However, his interpretation differed from that of Lefebvre in one important way. Soboul perceived the community as a "natural" premarket economy that feudalism could accommodate, whereas it could not accommodate capitalism. Capitalism required cheap proletarian labor, which in turn required the elimination of the communal practices that sustained the peasant small holding. Soboul claimed that a fundamental antagonism existed between capitalism and the community. The traditional community had to be suppressed so that an essential distinction could be made between labor and capital in order for the transition from feudalism to capitalism to occur.<sup>6</sup>

5. Georges Lefebvre, "La Révolution française et les paysans," in his *Etudes sur la Révolution française* (Paris, 1963), pp. 338–68. This article is the most complete statement of Lefebvre's philosophy. In it he implies that by bringing their communal tradition to the cities, peasant immigrants contributed to the growth of socialism in nineteenth-century France (p. 349).

6. Albert Soboul, "The French Rural Community in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," *Past and Present* 10 (Nov. 1956):78–96.

Soboul's principal concern was the relationship of feudalism to capitalism. That the state assaulted the communal traditions of the village to facilitate that transition is a notion that has been discussed most explicitly by American sociologists. Charles Tilly in particular has explored the state's collaboration with the capitalists during the eighteenth century to bring about the demise of communities.<sup>7</sup> To establish the primacy of capitalist relations of production, the crown "generally acted to promote [the land's] transformation into disposable property, to strengthen the rights of owners, to discourage multiple-use rights on the same land. Customary hunting became poaching. Customary gleaning and gathering became trespassing. Customary scratching out a corner of the wasteland became squatting." Thus, "for France's ordinary people, the eighteenth century fused the costs of statemaking with the burdens of capitalism." Tilly found support for this view in royal edicts that "favor the shipment of local supplies whenever merchants could get the highest price, a strenuous effort to break monopolies of workers over local employment, an encouragement of bourgeois property in land—all features of government action that forwarded the interests of capitalism." The most articulate government spokesman for the emerging capitalist order was Turgot, since "he self-consciously advocated the accumulation of capital, the elimination of small farmers, and the spread of wage labor in agriculture and industry." In the process, "all French governments of the later eighteenth century trampled the interests of ordinary people." The state played the capitalist game, Tilly reminds us, for fiscal reasons—"to maintain the crown's sources of credit and to generate new taxable income." In this zero-sum game, what was of benefit to the capitalists was harmful to everyone else.

Charles Tilly's emphasis on the growth of markets and on the impact of state formation has opened new areas for scholars to research and has produced new theories to be tested in future studies. For Tilly, even more than for Lefebvre, rural protest was

7. For an alternative view of France by a scholar of historical sociology, see Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions* (Cambridge, 1979). Skocpol argues that the state can be autonomous of the dominant class. It can be a partner or a competitor but always acts to perpetuate itself. Thus, in her model, states are actors who are as important as classes.

a defense against capitalism. Social revolutions commonly follow the introduction of capitalism. The peasants protested when noncapitalist property relations were threatened. They clung to communal traditions and resisted capitalism because it would lead to the loss of communal property, to expropriation, and to proletarianization. "Holders of small capital fought off their manipulation by holders of large capital, workers struggled with capitalists, and—most of all—people whose lives depended on communal or other noncapitalist property relationships battled others who tried to extend capitalist property into their domains." As the state's commitment to the capitalist program increased, so did the opposition. Alliances between capitalists and state officials aroused the opposition of the common people, who wanted "food at a feasible price, equitable and moderate taxation, checks on speculators, and guarantees of employment." Nevertheless, economic expansion continued by undermining communal rights and the consumer-oriented economic regulation upon which these people depended for their survival. "France's government did not cause these evils on their own; the capitalists were the real offenders. By collaborating with those capitalists and authorizing their profit-taking, the French monarchy took on the stigmas of their misdeeds. King Louis and his agents paid the price."<sup>8</sup>

Barrington Moore has also argued that in 1789, the precapitalist peasantry wanted to prevent France's transition to a modern capitalist democracy. Like the other scholars discussed here, Moore believed that in the eighteenth century "the modernization of French society took place through [efforts of] the crown." Those efforts to modernize were hindered, however, by the emphasis on peasant property rights, which was a carry-over from earlier state policies. Beginning in the Middle Ages, the kings of France had attempted to consolidate their political authority by protecting peasant property rights. The crown reinforced those

8. Charles Tilly, "Statemaking, Capitalism, and Revolution in Five Provinces of Eighteenth-Century France," Center for Research on Social Organization Working Paper no. 281, pp. 14, 15, 15, 15, 8, 18, 52; now collected in *The Contentious French* (Cambridge, Mass., 1985). See also Tilly's introduction to *The Formation of National States in Western Europe* (Princeton, N.J., 1975).

rights to establish a counterweight to seigneurial authority. Later, with its property rights firmly established, the peasantry wielded enough power to determine how far the Revolutionary government would go in the direction of capitalism. Moore argued, as Lefebvre and Tilly had, that the peasants opposed the Revolution because "as a pre-capitalist group, peasants frequently display anticapitalist tendencies."<sup>9</sup>

To summarize, there is a convergence of opinion between French Marxists and American sociologists on the subject of the role of the peasantry during the French Revolution. The ideas of Lefebvre, Soboul, and Tilly overlap. All three asserted that the peasants wanted to protect traditional values from the disruptive influences of capitalism. Tilly made explicit the implication of Soboul and Lefebvre that the state was an agent of class exploitation. Lefebvre's interpretation was a point of departure for Barrington Moore, but Moore's principal concern was the kind of political regime that results when agrarian societies become modern industrial ones. Tocqueville concentrated on the politically determined structure of society under the Old Regime. That the royal administration destroyed aristocratic institutions was his greatest regret. Tocqueville linked the excesses of the Revolution, and of France's movement toward democracy in general, to abolition of the nobility's role as intermediary between the king and the nation.

What is common to all these interpretations of long-term political change is the belief that the state was the winner and communities were the losers: The progressive, modernizing

9. Barrington Moore, Jr., "Evolution and Revolution in France," in *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Boston, 1966), pp. 40–108. Moore's analysis of the relationship of the Old Regime state to the peasantry differs from the one presented in this book. He emphasizes that the monarchy built its political base in alliance with individual peasant proprietors. The point made here is that the state did not have the administrative capacity to work with individual peasants. That is why it dealt with the community instead. Robert Brenner, in his study of the agrarian class structure of the French state ("Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe," *Past and Present* 70 [Feb. 1976]:30–75), also emphasizes an alliance between the crown and the peasants as individual producers. In this study I argue that it was not the strength of peasant proprietors but the strength of village communities that hindered agricultural development in France.

state gained authority by eliminating the traditional communal institutions. In this book I provide an alternative view of the impact of state formation on village organization during the Old Regime.

### THE BURGUNDIAN EXAMPLE

The documents from Burgundian villages do not support the theory that precapitalist villages were destroyed by the forces of state building and capitalism. In Burgundy, the corporate structure of the village was more developed in the eighteenth century than it had ever been. Royal administrators had promoted collective ownership of property and collective responsibility for debts in order to extract goods and services from the peasantry. As a result of this state policy, the corporate village became a vital component of the centralized state structure.<sup>10</sup>

The experience of Burgundian peasants raises doubts that communal institutions provided more security for the average peasant than did capitalist institutions. In Burgundy, collective agriculture, collective tax responsibility, and egalitarian participation in village assemblies seem not to have ensured the redistribution of wealth or the leveling of inequalities; nor did they guarantee subsistence. Communal property relations were not predicated upon preference for subsistence over market production. Peasants actually exploited collective rights so that they could produce more effectively for the market. Thus, there seems to have been no fundamental conflict between village customs and capitalist practices.<sup>11</sup>

Historians have described the French state and its bureaucracy as agents of modernization. Under the Old Regime, the state took great efforts to identify itself and its policies with the

10. In this book "the state" is synonymous with the interests of the king as defined by his council. The term is interchangeable with king or crown and does not include provincial estates or parlements. They are viewed as representatives of the society.

11. Even the poorest peasants were able to find important commercial uses for common rights. Land-poor peasants might use their rights to the commons to pasture sheep for town butchers. The butchers provided the livestock and the peasants kept a percentage of the profits. See Françoise Fortunet, *Charité ingénieuse et pauvre misère: Les baux à cheptel simple en Auxois aux XVIIIème et XIXème siècles* (Dijon, 1985).

most modern ideas regarding economic development. It supported academies, funded competitions for new ideas on how to reform the economy, and provided employment within the administration for the advocates of new ideas. In the twenty years that preceded the Revolution, the crown issued extensive legislation that incorporated the ideas of the reformers. In policy statements, the king reiterated a commitment to transforming the society and the economy. Beyond the governmental pronouncements, however, lay a different reality. The state had to conduct an extensive publicity campaign to persuade opponents that its intention was to modernize precisely because bureaucratic practice differed radically from the rhetoric.

In this study, I attempt to determine what this reality was—that is, how provincial administrators exerted their control over the villages. I will examine the mechanisms developed by the crown to monitor village tax collection, the monarchy's dependence upon credit operations, and the village's importance to the kingdom's credit structure. When the royal budget was finally made public a few years before the Revolution, many contemporaries were shocked by the magnitude of the state debt and by the fact that more than 50 percent of current revenues was being used to finance that debt. I will argue that the size of the royal debt and the survival of the villages were closely related.

I chose Burgundy as the focus of this study, first, because its judicial and administrative archives on communities under the Old Regime are more extensive than those of the other provinces, and second, because another historian, Pierre de Saint-Jacob, had already completed a comprehensive analysis of the province's population, economic situation, and seigneurial system—one of the most oppressive in the kingdom. Publication of this pioneering study of the eighteenth-century Burgundian peasantry, based on his thorough analysis of notarial archives, fiscal rolls, and seigneurial accounts, allowed me to concentrate on pursuing an institutional and political analysis by researching the administrative and judicial archives. Though it was not his primary focus, Saint-Jacob considered the role of the intendant. His conclusions parallel the findings presented here. He also found that the intendant's policies contributed to the survival of

the community and that the communities increasingly initiated litigation against the lords.<sup>12</sup>

Agriculture in eighteenth-century Burgundy consisted primarily of grain growing in the open fields of the Northeast; wine growing south of Dijon; and cattle rearing in the South. This study concentrates on the villages in the northeast—in what is presently the department of the Côte-d'Or. It is not concerned with the wine-growing area south of Dijon or with the Brionnais (southeastern Burgundy), which was then converting to cattle production to supply markets in Lyon. The distinction of economic variations in Burgundy, and in France itself, is not within the scope of this study. When more is known about the state-community relationship that existed in other parts of the country during this period, we will perhaps be able to generalize that certain kinds of agriculture generated certain forms of communal organization. In the absence of such information, this book can only present some conclusions about eighteenth-century France, based on the correspondence of the Burgundian intendants and the court records of Burgundian villages. Nevertheless, such a regional study does enable us to distinguish the main processes and structures that have shaped both the past and the present.<sup>13</sup>

This study confirms Tocqueville's argument that the central government had replaced the seigneur as the primary political force. However, unlike Tocqueville, I have concluded that establishment of a strong central government actually increased the power of the community. Tocqueville claimed that the power of the community, like that of the seigneur, was declining. One reason for these different conclusions could be that an extensive collection of administrative archives on Burgundian communities has survived. Tocqueville consulted the administrative archives of Tours, where village records had all but disappeared.

12. Pierre de Saint-Jacob, *Les paysans de la Bourgogne du nord au dernier siècle de l'Ancien Régime* (Dijon, 1960). "It must be said that the policies of the intendant promoted the survival of these ideas [referring to the peasantry's "attachment to collective customs and properties"] by maintaining intact his old mission of protecting village communities. He fought against their dissolution until the end" (pp. 517–18).

13. Charles Tilly makes a similar point about regional monographs in *Big Structures, Large Processes, Huge Comparisons* (New York, 1984).

There is also evidence that the crown's authority was strongest in Burgundy. At the end of the Old Regime, Burgundy had thirty-four royal subdelegates—more than any other province.

Royal officials were adept at concealing their administrative weakness and the extent of the king's debts. I found no document that explains the state's credit structure or the involvement of the province in the national financial networks. Nor does the correspondence of administrators include statements of general principles. I have attempted to reconstruct these networks by analyzing thousands of decisions made at the local level.

### Royal Administration in Burgundy

Fiscal pressures in the seventeenth century led royal officials to encourage corporate methods of tax collection, stimulate broad participation in village meetings, and protect collective property. Since these administrators had to operate with a limited number of personnel, they concluded that enforcing collective liability was the most efficient way to collect taxes. Although they claimed to have the power of coercion, the crown's representatives did not possess the means by which to measure, monitor, or enforce compliance with royal policies.<sup>14</sup> Administrators sought to avoid the costs that attended direct supervision of individual taxpayers. In the eighteenth century, the state's administrative capacity had not increased sufficiently for local royal officials to abandon the old policies of collective coercion. Therefore, collective restraints remained the crown's only method to compel compliance with its tax policies and to avoid incurring these costs. Collective responsibility helped cut the costs of tax collection in an additional way. Fiscal authorities could estimate the income of a village more accurately than they could the income of any particular taxpayer in the village. To over-

14. See Margaret Levi, "The Predatory Theory of Rule," *Politics and Society* 10 (1981): 431–65. Reprinted in Michael Hechter, ed., *The Microfoundations of Macrosociology* (Philadelphia, 1983). Margaret Levi attempts to construct a theory of the state to explain why different revenue-raising policies are generated by different political economies. She treats the ruler as a decision maker and views the evolution of institutions as an outcome of bargaining between rulers and private agents.

come the difficulties they faced because of their inadequate means of monitoring compliance, royal administrators persisted in using methods that political economists of the eighteenth century considered retrograde.<sup>15</sup>

The Burgundian evidence suggests that the structure and development of the state financial system prompted state officials to uphold communal property rights in the seventeenth century and to resist agrarian reform in the eighteenth century. If modernization means the creation of a society based on competition and individualism, on the destruction of corporate bodies, and on the institution of private property, then the state of the Old Regime did not play a modernizing role. The state at that time depended on the financial and political support of corporate bodies, such as the village.<sup>16</sup> If royal policies had not been predicated on fiscal needs, the corporate characteristics of the village might have disappeared before the eighteenth century.

Most historians argue that peasants organized communities to protect themselves from oppression, and that communal organization was an expression of an immemorial peasant culture. Furthermore, they point out that communities existed before either the seigneurie or the crown became a political force in the countryside. Communal rights may have evolved, in part, as the peasantry attempted to defend itself against predatory feudal lords, tax officials, and capitalist merchants. Seigneurial and, later, royal officials nevertheless had their own reasons to uphold communal property rights. By upholding those rights, authorities could more easily extract goods and services from the peasantry. Long before the commune was recognized by the crown, feudal lords had insisted on the collective organization of the village, for such a system simplified estate management and tax collection. Only later did the commune make its appearance

15. Robert H. Bates, "Some Conventional Orthodoxies in the Study of Agrarian Change," *World Politics* 36 (Jan. 1984):234-54. Using examples from colonial Africa, Bates argues that many of the communal characteristics of African villages were a result of the encounter with agents of capitalism.

16. David Bien claims that the early modern state was not in effect a precursor of the modern state but a distinct historical and cultural entity whose institutions and imperatives originated in its baroque structure and heritage. See his "The Secrétaires du Roi: Absolutism, Corps, and Privilege under the Ancien Régime," in E. Hinrichs, ed., *De l'Ancien Régime à la Révolution française* (Göttingen, 1978), pp. 153-67.

in royal jurisprudence, because the crown used it to counterbalance local seigneurial authority.

In eighteenth-century Burgundy, the crown attempted to restrain seigneurial power by restricting the lords' supervision of village assemblies. To do so, the king needed the support of strong communities. An instance in which the state decided a conflict between a lord and his village over the right to choose a village school rector is discussed in Chapter 2. Once the state had successfully eliminated seigneurial supervision of village assemblies, all that remained of the lord's authority was the collection of feudal dues. State officials wanted this function eliminated as well because it competed with the collection of royal taxes.<sup>17</sup> To achieve its fiscal aims and to eliminate this last vestige of feudalism, the state once again relied on the communities to resist seigneurial authority.

### Communal Institutions and Peasant Welfare

During the eighteenth century, village institutions did not guarantee the majority of Burgundian peasants equality, or provide them with subsistence or insurance against calamity.<sup>18</sup> Membership in the village was carefully restricted to ensure that communal rights were not extended to outsiders. Court cases that sought to enjoin outsiders from enjoying village rights were common. The system of collective tax responsibility, in which the wealthy inhabitants were held personally responsible when the village defaulted, did not redistribute income since the rich, in turn, sued the village to reclaim their confiscated property. Rather, it was a method that enabled the state to promise tax

17. For an example of and discussion of this competition, see Pierre Chaunu, "L'Etat," in Fernand Braudel and Ernest Labrousse, eds., *Histoire économique et sociale de la France*, vol. 1 (Paris, 1970).

18. Samuel L. Popkin, *The Rational Peasant* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1979). Popkin did not analyze Burgundian evidence, but in the first two chapters he notes that the existence of collective institutions need not imply a collective rationality. He argues that in colonial and premodern European societies, villages were often organized to serve the interest of the state rather than that of the peasants. In proposing an alternative to the moral economy model of the premodern village, Popkin argues that markets do not necessarily make peasants economically worse off.

collectors that the village would pay its taxes. Gleaning rights provided subsistence to the poor but also made subsidized labor available to the rich. This practice kept the poor in the villages where their labor could be employed by the wealthy during the harvest.<sup>19</sup> When times were hard, many of the poor left the countryside for the cities, where they hoped to find the subsistence guarantees they could not find in the villages. Political authorities in urban areas at least provided cheap bread to avoid riots that might weaken the stability of the government.<sup>20</sup>

The welfare value of village membership varied in reverse proportion to needs; the wealthy benefited most.<sup>21</sup> Wealthy inhabitants had the greatest use for the undivided common fields and common grazing rights because they had the largest herds. In Burgundy, therefore, the poor generally advocated division of the common lands, whereas the wealthy championed their preservation.<sup>22</sup> Efforts to deny the local seigneur village forest rights in the late eighteenth century also indicate that the sense of community benefited the wealthy. Beginning in 1750, those rights were assigned in proportion to tax payments (thus unequally); consequently, villagers who paid the most taxes began to monopolize wood allotments. Thereafter, opposition to seigneurial forest rights increased substantially.<sup>23</sup>

19. Gleaning was done after the harvest and did not compete with harvest work. Thus, village laborers received an additional margin of subsistence at no direct cost to property owners. In this sense, gleaning rights helped reduce the costs of village labor to the well-to-do. The community as a whole, not the individual property owners, bore the cost of this welfare mechanism.

20. See Steven L. Kaplan, *Provisioning Paris* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1984).

21. Kathryn Norberg provided evidence regarding the tendency of wealthy inhabitants to dominate communal resources in "The Struggle over the Commons," paper presented at the 12th Annual Meeting of the Western Society for French History, Albuquerque, New Mexico, 1984. For a more general discussion of why village elites might prefer open fields as a means to realize scale economies in the use of pasture, see Carl Dahlman, *The Open Field System and Beyond: A Property Rights Study of an Economic Institution* (Cambridge, 1980).

22. See Alfred Cobban, *The Social Interpretation of the French Revolution* (Cambridge, 1964), pp. 113–19. Cobban's research confirms that the tendency for the better-to-do peasant farmers to defend common rights existed throughout France. This study owes much to the criticism of traditional interpretations launched by Cobban.

23. Court cases to dispute seigneurial forest rights (*triage*) proliferated when the rules governing village forest rights were changed. Traditionally, wood had been divided equally among all inhabitants, but in the eighteenth century officials began to insist that the rights be distributed in proportion to tax payments—see Chapter 4.

The thesis that peasants revolted to restore the justice that had existed in the precapitalist community and to protect village institutions from commercialization, and more generally from capitalism, can be disputed on several grounds. First, there is little evidence to suggest that the peasants' general welfare was better served in closed corporate villages than in capitalist society. I have already noted that village institutions were not efficient in their attempts to provide subsistence, or to restrain involvement with external markets.<sup>24</sup> Second, long before the eighteenth century, French peasants were familiar with the market exchange of both the products and the factors of production; they were aware of the existence of private markets for labor; and they knew that capital accumulation was necessary to secure, reproduce, and expand the means of production.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, French peasants became landowners, and gained their freedoms, because access to the market allowed them to buy land and freedom. They became citizens of the king's nation by paying his taxes. In short, the peasantry had bought its entitlement to property, liberty, and citizenship. In court cases they brought against their lords during the eighteenth century, peasants demanded freedom from feudalism, not capitalism. Perhaps a number of them wanted to escape from, rather than to restore, institutions that prevented capital accumulation. Finally, in the eighteenth century, as a result of bureaucratic intervention, the growth of the market and of capitalism actually resulted in stronger, more independent peasant communities and more clearly defined communal property rights. If indeed those communal property rights were precapitalist, it was the bureaucracy, not the peasantry, that was restraining capitalist expansion.

24. Jonathan Dewald notes in *Pont-St-Pierre, 1398–1789: Lordship, Community, and Capitalism in Early Modern France* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1987) that "the pace of land sales during the late Middle Ages seems not to have been qualitatively different from that in the late eighteenth century" (chapter 2). As further confirmation of the thesis being presented here, Dewald points out that during the Revolution "it was the village, not the market town, that had accepted the free market economy, in both its possibilities for profit and its difficulties" (chapter 4).

25. A new trend in Marxism is emerging that also emphasizes the capitalist orientation of the poorest peasants. See Albert Soboul, "A propos d'une thèse récente sur le mouvement paysan dans la Révolution française," *Annales historiques de la Révolution française* 211 (1973):85–101. See also Florence Gauthier, *La voie paysanne dans la Révolution française* (Paris, 1976).

Burgundian documents reveal no fundamental incompatibility between communal rights and commercial agriculture in the eighteenth century. Communities found that they could lease communal property to the highest bidder to gain additional revenue. By auctioning rights to use communal property, the village forced its wealthiest inhabitants to pay for the use of property that they might otherwise have used at no cost. That royal officials encouraged such auctions is further evidence that the state protected communal properties. Villages could borrow funds on the basis of the revenues they anticipated from leasing collective property. The villages' involvement with the market and with national financial networks increased the value of communal properties, and the commercialization of communal lands provided the villages with needed income and credit. Thus, commercial agriculture and common rights were not incompatible and might have complemented each other. By the same token, administrators never saw themselves as having to choose between purely fiscal and social improvement explanations of their policies.

Supporters of the "precapitalist" argument assert that on August 4, 1789, the Constituent Assembly eliminated feudal dues in response to peasant protests and that the Revolutionary government acted to ensure peasant welfare. But the records of the debates in the Constituent Assembly and the correspondence between Paris and the provinces suggest that the administrators had other worries. Most of their correspondence concerns tax collection and provisioning the cities. Abolition of feudal dues was a way to reduce bread prices in cities and to make it easier for peasants to pay state taxes.<sup>26</sup> By 1794, the leaders of the Revolution had turned their backs on reforms that had earlier been instituted to promote agrarian capitalism. That too, we are told, represented a concession to peasant welfare brought about by peasant protest. But the administrative correspondence during the Revolution that is concerned with the need to limit agrarian reform focuses on the link between village solvency and

<sup>26</sup> AN, AD18<sup>B</sup>7. Reports and mémoires from the Constituent Assembly, 18 July to 11 Aug. 1789.

tax collection.<sup>27</sup> Peasant unrest might have had little influence on the course of agrarian reform during the Revolution.

Historians generally claim that the abolition of feudal dues in 1789 and the elimination, in 1794 and 1796, of laws designed to encourage agrarian individualism were concessions made by the national assemblies in response to peasant demands to ensure the communal welfare. Historians beginning with Georges Lefebvre have often asserted that an autonomous peasant movement determined how far the Revolutionary government would go in the direction of capitalism. The administrative correspondence and the records of the debates in the Revolutionary assemblies, however, provide little proof that the peasants had forced the state to yield precipitously to their demands. The same concerns that dominate the correspondence of administrators under the Old Regime (state debt, tax collection, and war) also dominate the correspondence of administrators during the Revolution. The same fiscal weakness that, in 1793, led the Revolutionary government to abandon hopes of transforming agriculture had, under the Old Regime, prevented the state from eliminating communal property. It was the structure of state finance that determined how far the French government would go in the direction of agrarian capitalism, both under the Old Regime and during the Revolution.

### The State and the Revolution

Even if attempts at state building did not incite reactionary protests of the peasants against capitalist expansion, they did have the result of involving the peasantry in national politics in new ways. During the eighteenth century, the state codified the decision-making functions of the village assembly. Collective decisions of the village were thenceforward recognized as a legally binding statement of the village's general will, thus making it easier for peasants to organize and to influence governmental decisions. These ad hoc assemblies became an integral part of the nation's political system. The result was that peasants increas-

27. See Chapter 7, "Financing the French Revolution."

ingly asserted their independence from both the seigneurs and the state. One indication was the increase in the number of court cases initiated by peasants against the seigneurs over payment of feudal dues.<sup>28</sup> Recognition of assembly decision making also gave the village greater access to credit. Contractors, creditors, and merchants could count on state officials to guarantee that the village would fulfill commitments noted in village assembly records. By integrating the village assembly into the state's political structure, the crown had also integrated the village economy into the nation's financial structure.

French politics became triangular as a consequence of the growth of the state bureaucracy. Because the peasants were no longer dependent on the lords for representation before the king, politics now consisted of the interaction between three groups: the state, the peasants, and the lords. Integration of the village assemblies into the state's political structure provided peasants with at least the illusion of having a range of political options that they did not have when their primary link with the king was the seigneur.

As the state's intervention in local administrative matters became more frequent, an escape from political isolation by means of coalition politics became possible for the peasantry, as did increased access to external markets, limitation of seigneurial dues, just decisions by the king's courts, and more direct access to national authorities. The promises of benefits were many, but the tangible benefits were few. The parliamentary judges under the Old Regime heard the claims of lawyers who promised the peasantry that feudal dues could be abolished by the courts. The judges, however, generally sided with fellow members of the landholding nobility, and the peasants lost case after case. The state's intervention in grain markets continued to be unpredictable and was often prejudicial to rural interests. Export restric-

28. The court cases reveal a striking irony about state making and peasant contention during the Old Regime. The growth of the state provided the peasantry with the capacity for collective action. First, state officials undermined the dependence of the village on the local landlord. Then, to help the community mobilize against seigneurial domination, administrators protected the communal properties. As a result, the community had the revenues it needed to challenge seigneurial dues in court. The crown's agents actually encouraged reluctant communities to sue. In the end, however, the state became a target of the weapons it had provided the village. See Chapter 5, "Challenging the Seigneurie."

tions and price controls resulted in market distortions that benefited the city rather than the country. The peasants' hopes of escaping from seigneurial domination and overcoming their political inferiority were not fulfilled. By integrating the village assemblies into the state's political structure, the crown had aroused among the peasants expectations of better government that it did not, and could not, satisfy.<sup>29</sup> Thus, the growth of the state gave the peasantry both the capacity to protest and new reasons to do so.

29. Robert Forster makes the same point in assessing rural revolution in Burgundy. "Historians have perhaps overestimated the importance of bread prices and rising taxes as the twin ingredients of open resistance to the old establishment." Forster points out that the peasants were called vassals by the seigneurial agents but citizens by the king. This different treatment "must have affected the self-esteem of more than one villager. The later appearance of an equalitarian vocabulary in village cahiers and petitions was not imposed entirely from 'outside.'" See Robert Forster, *The House of Saulx-Tavanes* (Baltimore, 1971), pp. 207–8.