

These administratively inconvenient millions belong to French history as much as American Indians belong to the history of America. Not all of them were mud-caked field-hands. They were provincial aristocrats and tribal chiefs, mayors and councillors, migrant workers, merchants, magicians, hermits, and even local historians.

When they murdered the young geometer on Cassini's expedition, the people of Les Estables were acting ignorantly but not irrationally. They were defending themselves against an act of war. If a local sorcerer had shown them on the surface of a pond or in the flames of a bonfire their home as it would appear in the twenty-first century – a second-rate Nordic ski resort 'on the confines of three attractive regions', 'thirty kilometres from the nearest hospital', 'waiting to seduce you with its hospitality and its customs' – they would have been amazed at the mysterious forms that their punishment had taken.

## The Tribes of France, I

AT THE SOUTHERN END of one of the lovely flat valleys that spread out from the Pyrenees like the rays of the sun, when the cloud is not too low, the hamlet of Goust can be seen on a rocky platform fifteen hundred feet above the chilly spa of Eaux-Chaudes. Until the early twentieth century, it was considered to be an autonomous republic. The smallest undeclared nation in Europe consisted of twelve granite houses and about seventy people, who were ruled by a council of old men. There were no beggars, no servants, and, to the envious delight of the travellers who discovered this spartan Shangri-la, no tax-payers.

The hamlet-nation of Goust had been known to the outside world since at least the fifteenth century, but the people were left to their own happy devices, 'an entirely isolated tribe, which has conserved its simple, primitive customs'. The frighteningly steep, rubble-strewn road that leads up to the hamlet was built less than forty years ago. In 2005, Nathalie Barou, the great-granddaughter of one of the women in the photograph of 1889 (figure 1), showed me the medieval door-lintel that bears the original name of her family: Baron. A Baron of Goust is known to have existed in the sixteenth century. One of his ancestors, impoverished by the crusades, may have sold the land to his serfs, who never saw the need to join the confederations that would one day form the province of Béarn and eventually become part of France.

The people of Goust had no church and no cemetery. When someone died, the coffin was attached to ropes and lowered to the valley below. In fine weather, the living clambered down the mountain

to sell milk and vegetables, to have their children baptized or to look at the ladies who came to take the waters at Eaux-Chaudes. When a road was dynamited through the gorge below the hamlet in 1850 and the skimpy wooden 'Bridge of Hell' was rebuilt in stone, Goust became a picturesque excursion for a few bored invalids and travel writers. Without them, it might have passed into oblivion like the hundreds of other 'autonomous republics' that once existed within the borders of France.

Goust was an exception mainly because it was relatively well known and because geographical force majeure held it in its patriarchal pose well into the steam age. Compared to other small, remote places, it was really quite well connected to the outside world. Its seventy inhabitants, some of whom were said to have celebrated their hundredth birthday, could hardly have thrived in total seclusion. Their communal treasury contained wool from Barèges and ribbons from Spain, and their genes too must have contained mementos of trips to the world beyond. Even the dead of Goust were comparatively well travelled. Their counterparts in high Alpine villages, if they gave up the ghost during the six or seven months of isolation, were stored on the family roof under a blanket of snow until spring thawed the ground, releasing the body to the grave and allowing a priest to reach the village.

Spectacular sites like Goust came to play a vital role in the creation of a French national identity. For the postcard-buying public with return tickets to modern civilization, tribes belonged to remote places – the further from the city, the further back in time. Teetering on the rocky perimeter of France, villages like Goust in the Pyrenees or Saint-Véran in the Alps were the national parks and reservations of the educated imagination. The truth was soon forgotten when cheap travel and national newspapers had telescoped the country and erased the old tribal divisions. Goust was in many respects a normal community in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century France. As the economist Michel Chevalier told the readers of a Parisian journal in 1837 after a visit to the eastern Pyrenees and Andorra:

Each valley is still a little world which differs from the neighbouring world as Mercury does from Uranus. Each village is a clan, a kind of

state with its own form of patriotism. There are different types and characters at every step, different opinions, prejudices and customs.

If Chevalier had travelled from Paris on foot, instead of taking a high-speed coach on a modern road, he might have found that his description fitted most of the country.

Visiting these clans and tiny states involves a long journey into undiscovered France, from towns and villages to hamlets and other forms of settlement that are not so easily defined. France itself will begin to look like an almost arbitrary division of Western Europe. Later, nationwide patterns will appear and the inhabitants will turn out to have something more than geographical proximity in common, but if the historical road signs of later generations were allowed to dictate the journey from start to finish, most of the country and its inhabitants would remain as obscure as the origins of Goust.

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BEFORE THE RAILWAYS blurred the landscape and reduced its inhabitants to faces on a platform and figures in a field, travellers were often bemused by sudden changes in the population. On fording a stream or turning at a crossroads, the occupants of a carriage could find themselves among people of radically different appearance, with their own style of dress and architecture, their own language and their own peculiar concept of hospitality. The colour of eyes and hair, the shape of heads and faces and even the manner of watching a coach go by could change more abruptly than the vegetation.

When the differences were exaggerated by speed, tribal frontiers were often startlingly obvious. On the left bank of the river Adour, in the Chalosse region east of Bayonne, the natives were said to be tall, strong, well fed and welcoming. On the right bank, they were skinny, miserable and suspicious. Climate, water and diet, ancient and modern migrations, clan rivalries and all the inexplicable variations of habit and tradition could turn the smallest area into a maze of unmarked borders. Even supposedly civilized regions were carved up like provinces after the fall of an empire. In Burgundy, according to Restif de la Bretonne, the neighbouring villages of Nîtry and Sacy were so dissimilar (respectively courteous and brutish) that a certain

Comte de S\* 'chose them especially so that he could see a lot of country without travelling very far [about three miles] and thus produce an abbreviated description of rural life throughout the entire kingdom.' Restif's own mother was always treated as an outsider in Nitry because she came from a village on the other side of the river Cure, ten miles to the west. 'According to custom, her children-in-law disliked her, and no one took her side in the village because she was foreign.'

It is easy to imagine the bewilderment of wealthy urban travellers who set out to discover their country only to find a crazed human landscape of tribes and clans. Even a brief journey through northern France could make it impossible to form a clear impression of 'the French'. At Dieppe, the Polletais or Poltese fisher-folk spoke a dialect that was barely recognizable as a form of French. Cross-Channel tourists, who bought their ivory carvings and gawped at the women in their bunched-up petticoats and knee-length skirts, wondered why they looked so different from the rest of the population. (No one knows to this day.) Further up the coast, at Boulogne-sur-Mer, the suburb of Le Portel had a separate population numbering about four thousand, remarkable for its height and its handsome, vigorous appearance. In 1866, an anthropologist suggested that the people of Le Portel were of Andalusian origin, but his study of the heads, hands, feet and breasts of the female population (the male population was out at sea) proved inconclusive. Thirty miles inland, at Saint-Omer, the 'floating islands' to the east of town were farmed by a community which had its own laws, customs and language. They lived in the low canal houses in the suburbs of Hautpont and Lysel, which still look like a Flemish enclave in a French town.

To many travellers, the various populations of France seemed to have little in common but their humanity. There were doubts even about this. Even at the end of the nineteenth century, there were reports of distinct, autonomous tribes on the borders of Brittany and Normandy. On the Côte d'Azur in the hills behind Cannes and Saint-Tropez, wild people were said to descend into market towns wearing goatskins and speaking their own incomprehensible language. In 1880, in the forest around Villers-Cotterêts (Alexandre Dumas's birthplace, forty-five miles north-east of Paris), an anthropologist

discovered 'some out-of-the-way villages whose inhabitants are of a completely different type than those of the surrounding villages and who seem to bear the mark of a particular race, predating the Cimmerian invasions with which our historical era begins'.

Now that another century has passed and the Villers-Cotterêts forest is a well-publicized excursion for Parisians, forty-five minutes from the Gare du Nord, its 'prehistoric' population will remain forever mysterious. As far as French anthropology is concerned, prehistory did not end until the Revolution. Before then, the state took no interest in the cultural and ethnic diversity of the masses. Statistics are scarce until Napoleon and unreliable even then. Sciences that made it possible to analyse populations according to physical and cultural traits evolved only when the tribes they hoped to study were turning into modern French citizens. But the troubling question was at least asked by inquisitive travellers: who were the inhabitants of France?

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IN POLITICAL HISTORY, the answer seems quite simple. The people of Dieppe, Boulogne, Goust and Saint-Véran all belonged to the same nation. They were answerable to provincial *parlements* and ultimately to the King. Most of them paid taxes – in money, labour (maintaining roads and bridges) and eventually, when systematic conscription was introduced at the end of the eighteenth century, in human life. They had locally appointed officials – an agent to collect taxes and a guard to police the community. But laws, especially those relating to inheritance, were widely ignored and direct contact with the central power was extremely limited. The state was perceived as a dangerous nuisance: its emissaries were soldiers who had to be fed and housed, bailiffs who seized property and lawyers who settled property disputes and took most of the proceeds. Being French was not a source of personal pride, let alone the basis of a common identity. Before the mid-nineteenth century, few people had seen a map of France and few had heard of Charlemagne and Joan of Arc. France was effectively a land of foreigners. According to a peasant novelist from the Bourbonnais, this was just as true in the 1840s as it was before the Revolution:

We had not the slightest notion of the outside world. Beyond the limits of the canton, and beyond the known distances, lay mysterious lands that were thought to be dangerous and inhabited by barbarians.

The great cathedrals of France and their numberless flock of parish churches might appear to represent a more powerful common bond. Almost 98 per cent of the population was Catholic. In fact, religious practice varied wildly. (This will become quite obvious later on.) Heavenly beings were no more cosmopolitan than their worshippers. The graven saint or Virgin Mary of one village was not considered to be the same as the saint or the Virgin down the road. Beliefs and practices centred on prehistoric stones and magic wells bore only the faintest resemblance to Christianity. The local priest might be useful as a literate man, but as a religious authority he had to prove his worth in competition with healers, fortune-tellers, exorcists and people who could apparently change the weather and resuscitate dead children. Morality and religious feeling were independent of Church dogma. The fact that the Church retained the right to impose taxes until the Revolution was of far greater significance to most people than its ineffectual ban on birth-control.

The smaller divisions of the kingdom paint a different picture of the population that turns out, however, to be just as unreliable. For a long time, the provinces of France were widely thought to be the key to understanding the national identity. The idea was that these historical, political divisions corresponded to certain human traits, like the segments of a phrenologist's head.

There are some good examples of this geo-personal approach in the travel accounts of François Marlin, a Cherbourg merchant who treated the naval-supplies business as an excuse to explore his native land and covered more than twenty thousand miles between 1775 and 1807: 'The people of Périgord are lively, alert and sensible. The people of Limousin are more sluggish and constricted in their movements.' Commercial travellers supping at the tavern in Auch could easily be told apart like different breeds of dog:

The *Lyonnais* acts high and mighty, talks in a clear and sonorous voice, is witty but also arrogant and has a filthy, impudent mouth. The *Languedocien* is gentle and courteous and has an open face. The

*Normand* spends more time listening than speaking. He is suspicious of other people and makes them suspicious of him.\*

However, as Marlin discovered, even if the assumptions were flattering, most people refused to be identified with such large areas. They belonged to a town, a suburb, a village or a family, not to a nation or a province. The common cultural heritage of certain regions was more obvious to outsiders than to the people themselves. Brittany would have to be subdivided several times before an area could be found that meant something to the people who lived there. Bretons in the east spoke a dialect of French called Gallo or Gallot; Bretons in the west spoke various forms of Breton. The two groups almost never intermarried. In the west, the people of Armor ('the Land by the Sea') had little to do with the people of Argoat ('the Land of Forests'). And in Armor alone, there were sub-populations so diverse and antagonistic that they were assumed by various writers to have their origins far beyond the granite coast, in Semitic tribes, in ancient Greece or Phoenicia, in Persia, Mongolia, China or Tibet.

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SINCE FRANCE HAD BEEN pieced together by treaties and conquests, and since two-thirds of the territory had been French for less than three hundred and fifty years, it is not surprising that there was no deep-rooted sense of national identity. Before the Revolution, the name 'France' was often reserved for the small mushroom-shaped province centred on Paris. In Gascony and Provence, anyone from the north was a 'Franchiman' or a 'Franciot'. Neither term was registered by the official dictionary of the Académie Française. However, there was little sense of regional identity either. The Breton, Catalan, Flemish and Provençal populations of France developed their political identities only much later, in reaction to the national

\* These moral maps of France are still quite popular today, and even more implausible than they were in the eighteenth century. For example, in the 1997 *Guide Bleu*: 'The Norman's measured replies are perhaps an effect of the unpredictable climate'; 'The Bretons once wore round hats [an allusion to an insulting song], and they are still hard-headed'; 'In the land of bullfights and rugby [Languedoc], passions always have the last word'.

identity that was imposed on them. Only the Basques seem to have been united against the outside world, but the figures of hate in their public *masquerades* were not Frenchmen or Spaniards but gypsies, tinkers, doctors and lawyers. Inter-regional games of pelota aroused greater passions than the victories and defeats of Napoleon.

The propaganda of French national unity has been broadcast continuously since the Revolution, and it takes a while to notice that the tribal divisions of France were almost totally unrelated to administrative boundaries. There was no obvious reason why these people should have formed a single nation. As Hervé Le Bras and Emmanuel Todd wrote in 1981, referring to the extreme variety of family structures in France, 'from an anthropological point of view, France ought not to exist'. Ethnically, its existence was just as unlikely. The Celtic and Germanic tribes who invaded ancient Gaul and the Frankish tribes who attacked the ailing Roman province had almost as many different origins as the population of modern France. The only coherent, indigenous group that a historically sound National Front party could claim to represent would be the very first wandering band of pre-human primates that occupied this section of the Western European isthmus.

The Cherbourg merchant, François Marlin, eventually found that the best answer to the question, 'Who are the inhabitants of France?' was no answer at all. He wanted his travel accounts to be an antidote to all the useless guidebooks written by armchair plagiarists and so tried simply to observe the physical differences that mirrored the changing landscape. If his observations were combined with those of other travellers, the result would be an unpublishable map of France divided into zones of ugliness and beauty. Basque women were 'all clean and pretty'. 'All the cripples, one-eyed people and hunchbacks seem to have been shut up in Orléans.' 'Pretty women are rare in France, and especially here in the Auvergne; but one does see a lot of robust women.' 'The most beautiful eyes in the provinces can be found in Brest, but the mouths are less attractive: the sea-air and a great deal of neglect in that department soon tarnish the enamel of the teeth.'

This would hardly satisfy a historical anthropologist, and it gives only the vaguest idea of the social geography of France. No one

could tell whether these physical differences were signs of ancient ancestry or simply an effect of the trades people practised and the food they ate. But at least Marlin had seen the population (or the part of the population that lived near a road) with his own eyes:

I quite like the way in which women and children come running up to see a traveller pass. This enables a curious man to see all the beauties of a place, and I could tell you exactly how many pretty women there are in Couvin.

In Marlin's mind, this was the kind of eye-witness description that could usefully be kept in the leather pockets of the diligence. The other guides, with their bogus erudition, could be left under the flapping canvas on top of the coach to be soaked by the rain and blown away by the wind.

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AN EXPEDITION INTO tribal France could begin almost anywhere and at almost any time. A hilltop in the Aveyron, for instance, where the limestone plateaux of the Causses turn into a crumpled map of rocks and gorges. The year is 1884. The priest of Montclar has found an exciting diversion from the monotony of life in a small town. His telescope is trained on a battlefield in the valley below. An army of men, women and children, wielding cudgels and lugging baskets of stones, is advancing on the village of Roquecezière. But scouts have been posted. Another army has already emerged from the village and is preparing to defend its territory.

On the bare rock that towers above the village, turning its back to the battle, is a colossal cast-iron statue of the Virgin Mary. The statue has been funded by public subscription – something of a miracle in this impoverished region – and has recently been placed on the rock to commemorate a successful mission.

Incensed to see the sacred effigy pointing its bottom at their village, the invaders have come to turn it around. The battle rages for hours. Several people are seriously injured. At last, the Roquecezièrain lines are breached and the statue is worked around to face the other village. To prevent a full-scale war, the Church authorities find a compromise. The Virgin is rotated ninety degrees, supposedly so

that each village can see half of her face. However, she now looks east-north-east, towards Saint-Crépin, which contributed more than half the cost of the statue, and still has her back turned to the little clutch of houses at her foot.

The Battle of Roquezezière, like thousands of other tiny conflicts, is not mentioned in any history of France. Village wars had no perceptible effect on national security and their causes were often ancient and obscure. Yet they were a normal part of life for many people well into the nineteenth century. A 'very fat file' in the archives of the Lot *département* describes village brawls between 1816 and 1847: 'bloody scenes, combats, disorders, serious wounds, treaties of peace and rumours of war'. Villagers settled their differences in pitched battles rather than waste their time and money in court. Half-forgotten insults and territorial disputes culminated in raids on neighbouring villages to steal the corn or to carry off the church bells. Sometimes, champions were appointed and their battles entered local legend. Usually, a single battle was not enough. The Limousin villages of Lavignac, Flavignac and Texon were at war for more than forty years. Texon ceased to exist as a *commune* in 1806, but this bureaucratic technicality did not prevent it from behaving as an independent state.

Caesar's famous description of Gaul as a country 'divided into three parts' must have struck many travellers as a breezy oversimplification. Caesar, however, went on to observe that Gaul was also subdivided into innumerable tiny regions: 'Not only every tribe, canton, and subdivision of a canton, but almost every family is divided into rival factions.' The basic division was the *pagus*, the area controlled by a tribe. Two thousand years after the conquest of Gaul, the *pays* (pronounced *pay-ee*) was still a recognizable reality. The word *pays* – usually translated as 'country' – referred, not to the abstract nation, but to the tangible, ancestral region that people thought of as their home. A *pays* was the area in which everything was familiar: the sound of the human voice, the orchestra of birds and insects, the choreography of winds and the mysterious configurations of trees, rocks and magic wells.

To someone with little experience of the world, the *pays* could be measured in fields and furrows. To a person far from home, it might

be a whole province. The term has since acquired a more precise and picturesque meaning. It was revived in the 1960s to promote local development and tourism: 'Pays de la Loire', 'Pays de Caux', 'Pays de Bray', etc. These geographical areas are larger versions of the 'Petites Régions Agricoles' which were devised in 1956 to serve as a basis for agricultural statistics. The National Institute of Statistics currently lists 712 of them. The Brie, for instance, is divided into 'wooded', 'central', 'Champagne' (three zones, distinguished by postcode), 'eastern', 'French' (two zones) and 'humid'. The part of Champagne once known as 'pouilleuse' (flea-bitten or beggarly) no longer officially exists.

This was the puzzle of micro-provinces that General de Gaulle had in mind when he asked, 'How can one be expected to govern a country that has two hundred and forty-six different kinds of cheese?' This famous phrase, now usually inflated to 'one cheese for every day of the year', has become part of an unofficial catechism of national pride. It is often recited to foreign visitors, even in regions that are dominated by a single, economically buoyant cheese. But it was a puzzle that any modern-day marketing-board official could easily solve. In earlier days, no one could have put a figure on the *pays* of France. Even in 1937, when publishing a very long list of *pays* in his nine-volume *Manual of Contemporary French Folklore*, Arnold van Gennep warned that the list was incomplete because 'some *pays* are still unknown'. Throughout the nineteenth century, functionaries at every level complained of this fragmentation of the territory with no trace of irony. The *pays* rather than the state was the fatherland of the benighted peasant.

Secret army reports of the 1860s and 70s show that 'patriotism' on a national level meant very little to natives of a *pays*. In most of the Auvergne, the army could obtain help only 'by payment, requisition or threats' (1873). In a town near Angers, the men would fight only if they were close to home: 'They are still Angevin, not French' (1859). 'The peasants of the Brie are timorous and have little guile, and all resistance on their part would be easily put down' (1860). Spies returning to Caesar's camp on the banks of the Saône in 58 BC must have delivered very similar reports.

WITH DIFFERENT MAPS and sensors, it is still possible to explore the labyrinth of tiny regions without getting lost. At certain times of day, even if the boundaries are invisible, the approximate limits of a *pays* can be detected by a walker or a cyclist. The area in which a church bell can be heard more distinctly than those of other villages in the region is likely to be an area whose inhabitants had the same customs and language, the same memories and fears, and the same local saint.

Bells marked the tribal territory and gave it a voice. When the bell was being cast by a travelling founder, villagers added heirlooms to the metal – old plates, coins and candlesticks – and turned it into the beloved embodiment of the village soul. It told the time of day and announced annual events: the beginning and end of harvest, the departure of flocks for the high pastures. It warned of incursions and threats. In the 1790s, recruiting sergeants marched across the Sologne through overlapping circles of sound to find, when they arrived in each village, that all the young men had disappeared. Bells were thought to dispel the thunder and hailstorms that destroyed the crops, which explains why so many people were electrocuted at the end of a bell-rope. They chased away the witches who piloted storm clouds and summoned angels so that prayers said while the bell was ringing – as in Millet's painting *L'Angélus* – were more effective than at other times. In foggy weather, rescue bells were rung to guide travellers who might be lost.

The number of bells and the size of the bell tower often give a fairly accurate measure of population density. Hardly anyone complained about excessive ringing, but there were countless complaints about bells that were too faint to be heard in the outlying fields. When migrants talked nostalgically of their distant native *clocher*, they were referring not only to the architectural presence of a steeple in the landscape but also to its aural domain.

A map of these spheres of audible influence would show the tiny size of tribal domains far more accurately than a map of *communes*. A study of *communes* in nineteenth-century Morbihan (southern Brittany) appears to show that the population was quite adventurous. By 1876, more than half the married people in Saint-André had been born in a different *commune*. In almost every case, however, the

*commune* in question was adjacent. According to the study, 'sentimental determinants' (love) might have played a role, but most people married in order to consolidate inherited land rights, even if it meant marrying a first cousin. The choice of partners was guided by the ancient system of hamlets whose frontiers – banks of earth, ditches and streams – have either disappeared or become unnoticeable. Official boundaries were scarcely more significant than garden fences in the territories of birds.

The same agoraphobic settlement of the open spaces of France can be seen all over the country. As late as 1886, over four-fifths of the population were still described as 'almost stationary' (living in the *département* where they were born). Over three-fifths had remained in their native *commune*. But even the expatriates in other *départements* had not necessarily strayed from the local group of hamlets: the neighbouring hamlet may simply have lain on the other side of a departmental boundary.

Some communities were forced by low numbers or by local feuds to look further afield, but even they were unlikely to travel far. The widowed ploughman in George Sand's *The Devil's Pond* (1846) is appalled at the thought of finding a new wife three leagues (eight miles) away in 'a new *pays*'. In an extreme case, the persecuted *cagots*, most of whom lived in scattered hamlets (see p. 43), might find a husband or a wife more than a day's walk from home, but this was very unusual. Records of six hundred and seventy-nine *cagot* couples from 1700 to 1759 show that almost two-thirds of the brides came from within shouting distance of the bridegroom. The others were close enough to cause little inconvenience to the wedding guests. In Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port, all but four of the fifty-seven women had married less than five miles from home. Only two of the six hundred and seventy-nine were described as 'foreign'. This was not a reference to another land. It meant simply, 'not from the region'.

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EVEN WITH STATISTICS and a proper sense of scale, descending into the land of a thousand *pays* is a disconcerting experience. The broader patterns that will eventually appear are not much in evidence, but nor is the expected anarchy. Many places turn out to be fully

functioning jurisdictions with their own parliaments and unwritten constitutions. Nearly every village had a formal assembly of some kind, especially in *pays d'état* such as Burgundy, Brittany and Provence, where royal influence had always been weak. In the south, where taxation was based on land, the need to measure and record holdings had given rise to some quite sophisticated village institutions that not only regulated the use of common land but also managed assets and ran a budget. When agents of the Revolution came to administer the kiss of life to the supposedly moribund towns and villages of provincial France, they found the body in surprisingly good health.

Some of these towns and villages were flourishing democracies when France was still an absolute monarchy. François Marlin ran into such a place on his journey through Picardy in 1789. The conspicuously clean and tidy village of Salency, he learned, was governed by an old priest. The children were never sent away to become servants, and they were not allowed to marry outside the parish. There were six hundred people with only three surnames between them. All were considered equal, and everyone worked the land, using spades instead of ploughs. As a result, their harvests were abundant, their children – even the girls – were taught to read and write by a salaried schoolmaster and his wife, and everyone was healthy, peaceful and attractive. 'The very notion of crime is unknown to them ... The story of a girl who sinned against modesty would sound to them like a tale invented by a liar.'

This is a fairly typical account of a self-governing village. The chief, as in Salency, was often a priest, acting as an administrator rather than as an agent of the Catholic Church. On the Breton islands of Hoedic and Houat, the priest, mayor, judge, customs officer, postal director, tithe collector, teacher, doctor and midwife were all the same man. The arrival of two deputy mayors in the 1880s – one for each island – made no difference whatsoever. Some places were run by councils that were perfect miniatures of a national administration. The town of La Bresse, in a valley of the western Vosges, had its own legislature and judiciary until the Revolution. According to a geographer writing in 1832, 'the judges of this town, though clumsy and common in appearance, showed a great deal of common sense'. A

visiting lawyer who quoted in Latin in his speech for the defence was fined by the court 'for taking it into your head to address us in an unknown tongue' and was ordered to learn the law of La Bresse within a fortnight.

Some village states covered many square miles. A clan called Pignou occupied several villages near Thiers in the northern Auvergne. They even had their own town, which apparently boasted all the comforts of modern civilization. A leader was elected by all the men over twenty years of age and titled 'Maître Pignou'. Everyone else was known by their Christian name. If the Maître Pignou proved inept, he was replaced. There was no private property, and all the children were brought up by a woman known as the Laitière because she also ran the communal dairy. Girls never worked in the fields but were sent instead to a convent at common expense. People who married outside the clan were banished forever, though they all eventually begged to be readmitted.

If so many tiny places declared independence at the time of the Revolution, it was because they were already partly independent. Their aim was not to develop the local economy and become part of a larger society. Change of any kind generally meant disaster or the threat of starvation. The dream of most communities was to sever ties, to insulate the town or village, which is partly why measures varied from one village to the next: standardization would have made it easier for outsiders to compete with local producers.\* They wanted to refine and purify the group. The boast that no one ever married outside the tribe was as common in France as it is in most tribal societies. Local legends often referred to a special dispensation granted by the Pope (or, more likely, the local bishop) that allowed them to marry close relatives. Prudent management of village

\* Even after the introduction of the decimal system in 1790, a 'pinte' was just over a litre in one Limousin village and well over two litres in another. The Nord *département* had thirty-five different measures of capacity, all bearing the same name. Travellers from the north found their 'leagues' getting longer as they headed south. Some parts had still not adopted the older systems that the decimal system was supposed to replace. In 1807, Champollion, the decipherer of Egyptian hieroglyphics, found that the country people of the Isère 'have retained the custom of using Roman numerals'.

resources could prevent the population from abandoning the tiny fatherland. Sometimes, daughters as well as sons were paid to remain. The 'Chizerot' tribe on the banks of the Saône in Burgundy had a communal fund that was used to give poor girls a dowry so that they would not have to look for a husband elsewhere.

Self-government was not an idle dream. It was the unavoidable reality of daily life. People who rarely saw a policeman or a judge had good reasons to devise their own systems of justice. Hard-pressed provincial governors had equally good reasons to turn a blind eye. By most accounts, local justice was an effective blend of psychological manipulation and force. In Pyrenean villages from the Atlantic to the Mediterranean, claims were settled in a series of three meetings, at the first of which both parties had to remain silent. Cases rarely reached the third meeting. In Mandeure, near the Swiss border, when something had been stolen, a meeting was called on the main square. The two mayors held a stick at either end and the entire population of several hundred people would pass underneath to prove their innocence. No thief had ever dared to pass under the stick: 'Had he done so, and was later found out ... he would have been shunned like a wild animal and the dishonour would have redounded on his family.'

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THESE LOCAL SYSTEMS of justice might explain the apparently bizarre fact that, according to some nineteenth-century criminal statistics, France had an almost entirely law-abiding population. Crime in some *départements* seemed to have died out altogether. Sometimes there were 'white sessions', when courts sat but heard no cases. In 1865, in the Aveyron *département*, where the Battle of Roquecezière took place, there were eight convictions for crimes against the person and thirteen for crimes against property. In the Cher *département* (population: 336,613), the figures were three and zero. Nationally, excluding Paris, the 1865 figures suggest that it took eighteen thousand people to produce one criminal.

It does not take a cynic to suspect that most descriptions of village republics are a misty image of the truth. Thieves, murderers and rapists did, of course, exist. François Marlin had picked his way

through too many dung-obstructed, priest-forsaken places not to be impressed by Salency, but its cleanliness and the absence of crime were the public face of a necessarily despotic government. The self-proclaimed virtue of the people of Salency must have wrecked the lives of many people – 'foreigners', homosexuals, 'witches' and, perhaps more than any other category of undesirable, unmarried mothers. About ten times as many illegitimate children were born in Paris than anywhere else, not because Parisians were more promiscuous but because girls who 'sinned against modesty' were often forced to leave their *pays*.

Village justice was not always benign or fair. Slight deviations from the norm – a man or a woman who married a younger person or who married for a second time, anyone who married a stranger, a man who beat his wife or allowed himself to be beaten by her – was likely to be punished with a 'charivari': a noisy, humiliating and often bloody serenade or procession. According to an anthropologist, adulterers in Brittany were 'the object of insulting vegetable bombardments'. A cart containing the victim would make the rounds of neighbouring villages, turning him into an object of ridicule throughout the known universe. Bad roads prevented produce from leaving the region, but they also prevented fear and envy from evaporating into a wider world.

In the eyes of the educated minority, there was no real difference between village justice and mob rule. When a 'witch' was burned to death in 1835 at Beaumont-en-Cambrésis, in the industrial Nord department, with the collusion of the local authorities, it seemed as though the Middle Ages had never ended. But to people who lived their whole lives in a small town or village, French imperial justice could be just as shocking and incongruous as it was to the people of colonial North Africa.