A New Direction in Community Studies: One French Village—Three Books

Hervé Varenne

Marie-Claude Pingaud. *Paysans de Bourgogne, les gens de Minot.* Paris: Flammarion, 1978. 300 pp. FF. 88, paper.

Yvonne Verdier. *Façons de dire, façons de faire: la laveuse, la couturière, la cuisinière.* Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1979. 345 pp. and appendices. FF 95, paper.

Françoise Zonabend. *La mémoire longue: temps et histoire au village.* Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1980. 314 pp. FF 68, paper.

Of French anthropology, many Americans know little beyond the figure of Lévi-Strauss, a lonely beacon on an empty sea. Some know of the work of a few persons whose names have reached various specialists, such people as Dumont, Griaule and his students, Godelier, Bourdieu and a few others perhaps. But this is far from exhausting what is being done in France. Particularly ignored is the fact that, since the early fifties, a series of community studies has been conducted on French villages by two generations of scholars, many of whom were specifically trained in anthropology (or *ethnologie,* as it is still often called in France)[1] There is the early work of Bernot and Blancard on a village from the Ile de France, *Nouville: un village français* (1953). There is the work of a large team on a village from Brittany which led to two books: *Commune en France, la métamorphose de Plodémet* by E. Morin (1961) and *Bretons de Plozévet* by A. Burguière (1975). There is the more impressionistic account of life in Brittany by P. J. Helias, *Le Cheval d'Orgueil: Mémoires d'un Breton*

du Pays Bigouden (1975, English translation: 1978).[2] And there are the three books on Minot, a village in Northern Burgundy which are the main subjects of this review.

I am focussing on these latest books both because they are the most recent and because they explore the furthest possibilities opened in the preceding studies and can thus offer most to an American audience. Indeed, they incorporate traits that characterize all this work and differentiate it from most Anglo-American community studies: like the others, they are the product of the joint effort of several researchers with various interests and a multidisciplinary training (even when one discipline dominates); they are the product of a field experience spread over many years for longer and shorter periods; they are profoundly committed to giving a historical dimension to their accounts.[3] They also have the tendency to draw back from making the type of midrange generalizations about social organization or cultural pattern that allow for an easier use of the work in cross-cultural comparison. As has been noted before (Richards 1967), the model of the single researcher spending a year and a half in some village to come back and paint a broad brush generalizing picture is not a very popular model in France. Burguière writes that "close to 100 researchers" (1975:17) spent time in Plozévet over six years. Thirty-four titles are listed as constituting the bibliography of the study. In Minot, four women worked over seven years and their study is but a part of a larger study of the whole region (the Châtillonais at the northern boundary of Burgundy).[4]

The books on Minot are interesting for four main reasons which are worth developing separately. First, they are the work of three women (the fourth one, T. Jolas, has yet only published papers but no monograph) who entered the community through the women and construct their report from their point of view. The treatment of the creative role of the women in the village's life is superb, and I know of few books that do this so well in any setting. Second, the books are all about the same village. The same basic facts are dealt with and reappear in all three books, but the different personalities of the authors, the variety of their orientation and of the details which they choose to emphasize, give back to Minot some of the depth which monographs necessarily reduce. As a whole they go further than most American works towards fulfilling Redfield's requirements for a successful community study (1956). Third, the books are heavily influenced by the social scientific movement known in France as *la nouvelle histoire*, the new history of mentalities and ways of life best

known in the States through the works of Ariès (1965) or Le Roy-Ladurie (1979). There is here an interesting case of cross-fertilization, since these historians openly credit sociology and anthropology for their inspiration. Finally, the books represent the realization of a type of research inspired by Lévi-Strauss's structuralism that is all but unknown in America but which could contribute towards a more accurate representation of this structuralism.

An Anthropology of Women

One of the best things about these books by women about women, and also—up to a point—about men, is that they are not overly self-conscious about the fact. They are not defensive. They do not claim to be creating a special, feminine anthropology. It is the coming of age of a type of work that anthropology needs but only as long as it remains integrated within it. Pingaud's book, being the work of a geographer-cum-ethnologist is in fact unmarked from the point of view of feminism. Zonabend focuses on time and memory as a central concern of the people of Minot, and it is only indirectly that one realizes that most of her informants were women. Only Verdier's book can be considered to be a specific contribution to the feminist literature in its presentation of the culture of Minot through the prism of the three categories of women (the helping woman, the seamstress, and the cook) who, precisely because of their extraordinary status in the village (they are the women whom one encounters at times of liminality—birth, adolescence, marriage), can best summarize dramatically the place of all the other women, the wives of the farmers, artisans, and shopkeepers. This mode of presentation of femininity in the village will appear most convincing to those who appreciate the structuralist techniques: the focus on minutiae set in both their symbolic and practical contexts, the decision to see whatever is separated as pieces of a larger whole which the very act of the distinction reveals in its nature, the search for transformations, homologies, redundancies, etc. But even those who will not follow Verdier in some of her analyses of details of feminine practices (and I must note here that Verdier totally eschews structuralist vocabulary and stylistic paraphernalia; this makes her book surprisingly readable) will acknowledge the depth or "thickness" of her presentation. A more conventional approach (one that can in fact be found in the other two books) would not have done full justice to the women. But

this acknowledgment of the value of Verdier's work does not necessarily mean that it will prove necessary to accept one of her major conclusions. Verdier writes:

> The feminine universe is not defined negatively in relation to the world of the men. It is defined from the interior and by itself as a universe organized by and submitted to its own laws, a place of sovereignty and autonomy of the women themselves. (my translation 1979:338)

Verdier acknowledges that she did not study the men. But this is not an excuse. The men are always present even at times when the women are most themselves as the non-male different. For example, it is something specifically feminine—menstrual blood—which prevents women from entering the basement storage place where pig's fat and bacon—the basic source of protein for the family for several weeks—are kept in a state where it is in constant danger of spoilage. And yet, the practice is one that concerns the whole family. Indeed, at the time of their wives' period it is the men (in the absence, one would imagine, of an unmenstruating woman in the rest of the household) who must perform what is otherwise a feminine task. In a certain sense the substantialization of the feminine on which Verdier closes her book is a faltering of her structuralism. Her work does demonstrate that women are active cultural agents. They are not passive objects of men's matrimonial exchanges. Their activity is an integral part of the symbolic life of the village quite as much as it is an integral part of its practical life. But to complete the task of giving women their rightful place, it will be necessary to replace them in their context, in relation to the men who complement their activity.

One Village, Three Women

Pingaud, Verdier and Zonabend write about different aspects of Minot's reality. They also have a very different sensibility to the people. And yet, the three books are anything but disparate. The authors are all more interested in what brings the people together than in what pulls them apart. They have found an order, an order that is threatened by modernity—indeed they acknowledge at times that modernity is a new order—an order that sometimes leads to painful family dramas, but a definite order. Furthermore, it is the same order. It is not three different villages that the authors paint for us. It is obvious that they have talked extensively together, that they work on the same source of field notes, and that they have reached a

certain consensus. A piece of information that one may miss from one book will probably be found in one of the others presented in a manner compatible with the orientation of the first book. Each analysis reinforces the others and provides the missing context. All of this has the unavoidable correlate that all three are blind on the same points. None of the books, for example, seriously considers the relationships of Minot to the larger French society, even though its economic development is directly dependent on what happens there and even though most villagers have close kin ties with emigrants to Paris. The three books are *one* community study and fulfill many of Redfield's requirements for the success of such an enterprise. They deal with Minot as a whole set in an ecological niche with a social structure. They sketch typical biographies, kinds of people, life views. They summarize the recent history of the village and they deal extensively with the difficulties the people have. But beyond these commonalities of standpoint, variety reestablishes itself.

Pingaud comes to anthropology from geography, and to the later discipline she brings an interest in the material base of life in Minot, particularly in the relationship to the land as the environment on which most people there exercise their activity. Her book contains most of the economic statistics on the organization of agriculture. From her training in anthropology, Pingaud brings a greater awareness of the fact that it is people who work the land and that their attitudes toward their activity are an integral part of their material practice. Her pages about the personal reaction of the men to the introduction of modern machinery are exemplary and ring true to the observations I made in Southern France.

Zonabend's work is organized around the tendency of her informants to differentiate between "then" and "now." She has no difficulty showing that the differentiation is operated within every aspect of everyday practice. Some time around 1950, her informants all agree, everything changed, every *thing* (the objects and the associated practices) and every custom. This observation led Zonabend into a study that is determinedly historical and in which she attempts to reconstruct how it was and how it has changed, both through her informants' memory and through archival material. Her main emphasis is family life and its various aspects—from the organization of the house to the accomplishment of the life cycle; in general terms and through an extended look at the history of one family. All this leads Zonabend to produce a monograph which respects the fact that lived time, particularly perhaps in a modern society, is circular, repetitive

(the seasons, the life cycle), *and* linear: the advents of running water, electricity, tractors, freezers are not part of cycles; they are singular events. But this creates a problem which Zonabend does not address squarely: how are we to differentiate between what is, in the minds of her informants, the simple account of historical happenstance, and what is the result of a structuring of memory by an overwhelming cultural mechanism? This does not seem to be problematical to Zonabend, but it is a central issue, particularly for cross-cultural comparison. One example of something that, we are told, has changed: the education which grandmothers give their grandchildren. Informants (most of whom had to be grandmothers, since they experienced both "then" and "now") say that "then" such education was an important part of a child's development. "Now," it would have all but disappeared. Can we give faith to this statement as a historical fact? These women are reminiscing and, above all, they have changed position in the intergenerational conversation. Undoubtedly, they have a very strong consciousness of change. But the presence of a consciousness is no evidence for its constitution. Could it be that what is important here is not the indubitable fact of modernization but rather the deliberate, conscious focus on change that provides the concrete representation of the unidirectional passage of time? To test this hypothesis (and the opposite one), it would be necessary to examine carefully what the women who were grandmothers in 1900 had to say—not what they are remembered by their now grandmotherly granddaughters to have said. It is certain that the events that followed World War II gave fuel to these women's perception of change. But Zonabend's interest is the women's consciousness, and one may wonder whether the organization of this consciousness has itself changed.

Verdier deals with much the same material as Zonabend: the development of the life cycle as it is remembered to have been in the dialogues, conversations, and other talks that they had with the women. As with Zonabend's book the line between Verdier's observation and the reminiscences of her informants is not sharply drawn. But in her case, the methodological problem is less acute, since her interest is not specifically historical. It is, in American terms, "symbolic." That the memory of her informants should act as a sieve may indeed be an advantage, for it allows her to see the cultural order with a clarity that is all the greater because her corpus (her tapes or field notes) is not filled with insignificant details that pure observing, unguided by informants' interpretation, would necessarily include. This, obviously, has the danger of producing an extremely "biased"

picture, one that emphasizes order and cultural patterning at the expense of the shadings and statistical aberrations of historical existence. This tendency is, in fact, reinforced by Verdier's decision to reach the cultural organization of women's fate through three extraordinary statuses that are interesting for her precisely because of their position outside the statistical norm. But all this is methodologically proper since the goal is the identification of the direction of the "bias" of the informants. Verdier is particularly good at outlining this bias and at reconstructing an ideology from the minutest of details, apparently disparate taboos, and symbolic associations between activities and periods of the life cycle.

Interestingly, and paradoxically perhaps, Verdier's picture is not static and idealized. She is not describing vague patterns of belief or psychological orientations. She is describing *des façons de dire* (ways of saying) but also *des façons de faire* (ways of *doing*). French structural anthropology is not tempted to operate within the parameters of the sterile distinction between "what is said" and "what is done" which ensnarls American work. The ideology is something that people do. It exists only insofar as people indeed act in such a way that it can realize itself. This explains the need for extraordinary women within the village's society, women whose life cycle develops aberrantly and who appear to break the rules that are made to apply to other women. While this may sound rather abstract, Verdier makes it quite concrete in her account. Women are distinguished from men, as far as their respective areas of activity are concerned, according to the principle that men can only accomplish certain tasks while women, if need be, can do anything and everything. She quotes one of her informants as having told her:

> The woman was made to do everything [*faire tout*]! One would not laugh at a woman who worked in the fields or pushed a plow. Oh, no, on the contrary, people thought it natural. A woman must do everything! But we would have laughed at a boy who would have milked the cows. (my translation, 1979:339)

The women's own activity, however, is triple: they wash and help, they sew, and they cook. All women do all three, but each activity is also symbolically realized as three distinct and special statuses held by women whose training, experience, or talent have identified with the various statuses. Through the presence of these, women get both practical help at difficult times (birth and death, adolescence, weddings and other family feasts) and a symbolic representation of their own identity in a particularly stark manner.

Thus, female adolescence is marked by a passage through a time of

isolation from the village's society spent in the company of other girls of the same age in a seamstress's workshop where they are initiated into the mysteries of romantic love. The alibi for this rite of passage (which is not quite presented in this fashion at the most public level of public consciousness) is the need to learn to sew, something that has to be done not at home from female members of the family, but in the workshop of a professional. The avowed goal is to start the young girl toward the building of the trousseau she will have to bring to her marriage. But, Verdier shows, girls do not learn to sew from the seamstress. This one is jealous of her trade and cannot allow the development of a know-how which would compete with hers. What seems most important is that, in the workshop, a group of teen-age girls are together under the surveillance of a woman who has the reputation for loose morality (a reputation which seems earned, since the rate of illegitimate births is much higher among seamstresses than among any other group of women, except servants). If Verdier is right, then, the loose seamstress is a complementary figure, an element of the community and in fact of all the women, even those—the most numerous—who never imitate her "ways of doing." This role of the seamstress is not "belief" or "value": the villages specifically frown upon the seamstress's activities, and they do not want their daughters to become seamstresses. The role is the realization in action of an ideological requirement.

History and Anthropology

I have already dealt with some of the ways in which Zonabend and Verdier have tried to incorporate a historical perspective in their anthropology. I will not mention here the criticisms which I have already made. I would just want to temper them by mentioning that, from this point of view, these books are breaking ground in an original fashion. In the States, as in France, many have been those who have complained of the ahistorical bias of most anthropology. Few have been those who have tried to do something about it. In France it is, paradoxically, the interest which the historans of the so-called *nouvelle histoire* manifested for anthropology and their desire to communicate across disciplines which fed back onto anthropological work a concern for history which the discipline was, in any event, ready to accept.

For anthropology, there is both an opportunity for theoretical

development here, but also some dangers. First, it is now evident, many years after the daring work of the "culture at a distance" group, that serious anthropological knowledge is possible, even in the absence of direct observation, about the many populations where we have good historical records, as long, of course, as we do not do more with these records than we would with the same documents collected in contemporary times. For these populations, cross-cultural comparison through time is as legitimate as cross-cultural comparison through space. More importantly, a longer temporal perspective than the circular year can allow the anthropologist to preserve temporality, a central aspect of human experience. Indeed, all cultural performances have a temporal dimension. They are syntagmatic chains. One of the reasons why it has proven so difficult to produce semiological analyses of anything other than paradigmatic sets may be the inability to look at the organization of the passage of time and at the sequencing of actions. Time, in fact, is treated as the one last absolute infrastructure that no human cultural intervention can reorganize. The yearly cycle is determined by the seasons, the life cycle by biological decay. And yet we know that the beginning and end of childhood can be moved by many years; we know that there can be much signifying variation in the sequencing of rites of passage into adulthood between the sexes and the social statuses of complex societies. The age of marriage, the time of accession to adult autonomy, the relation to the elders—all this can vary somewhat independently from the astronomical time which memory can easily abolish.

To consider time seriously, however, can also be dangerous. For time, in our modern minds, is associated with change, the disappearance of orders and the creation of new ones. But, as is well known, time can also be viewed nonlinearly. A succession of different elements can be the heterogeneous product of historicity. It can also be the constitution of a syntagmatic chain organized as a whole. A syntagmatic chain, by definition, is a sequence of a variety of elements functionally different from the others. At the scale at which anthropologists generally work there are no clear criteria that would allow us to distinguish, between two movements from a state A (e.g. "then") to a state B. (e.g. "now") of a social situation, what is the product of structural change and what is the product of the development of a syntagmatic chain. We cannot distinguish between a radical change and a culturally grounded temporal dualism which would repeat itself generation after generation. The criteria we have now consist mostly in tests of replication or circularity: the "same"

actions or sequences repeating themselves. But these rough criteria necessarily limit the temporal depth that anthropologists can give to their analyses. As soon as the time frame goes beyond a few years or perhaps the generation, "pure" historicity in the shape of demographic variation, physical catastrophies, wars, invasions, or more peaceful contacts with other societies will always transform much of the material stuff with which the people have to deal. The introduction of tractors and combines in Minot has the effect of emptying the fields of women whose labor has ceased to be materially necessary. In the process, the items out of which syntagmatic chains are made change and certain human actions that were necessary given the inner property of the first item, cease to be necessary while other actions develop. But this does not necessarily mean that the generative principle which commanded the production of the syntagmatic chain has itself changed.

Structure, Context and Community

It should be clear by now that all three books, and particularly Verdier's, belong to the structuralist tradition in France even if it is to a renewed structuralism which, besides its concern with the material base of the people's lives and with the impact of history, is aware of the importance of anchoring all cultural practices and representations to the contexts, immediate and further removed, into which they fit. Whatever one may think of the extent to which the authors have been successful in achieving their goal of working with contextualized practices, it has to be recognized that they tried and thereby demonstrated that a structuralist perspective is not antithetical to the methodological perspective generally associated with the most virulent critics of Lévi-Strauss's work. These critics, of course, have always refused to consider Lévi-Strauss's own words on the importance of context. In his analyses, he uses contextual information repeatedly whenever he has access to it in his sources. He may be criticized for having persisted in studying textual materials that had not been properly contextualized when they were collected. But this is a personal decision which he does not seem to allow his students to make. It is not, as such, a theoretical decision, on the contrary. Structuralism is the method of items-in-context, and nowhere is it better illustrated than in these studies that completely lack the baroque rhetorical paraphernalia which makes an unwitting caricature of so much self-styled structuralist work.

One of the main strengths of the type of structuralism which the authors use lies in the ability of the method to demonstrate the presence of ordering mechanisms without suggesting that there also exists any kind of homogeneity or consensus within the village. The order is not something which each actor in the village, in his individuality, shares. It resides rather in the fact that the various practices and points of view complement each other within a differentiated system. To be a man or a woman, a seamstress or a farmer's wife, is to be different persons with different points of view, who fight, sometimes violently, in defense of their egotistical interests. And yet, when parents and children dispute over a desired marriage, they are not threatening the underlying cultural order; they are each playing a preordained part in an organized play. The people of the village have little in common except the fact that they are in relation one to the others. The village is not homogeneous, but it is orderly.

The difficulty in such an enterprise lies in the placing of boundaries, be they spatial or historical, around the set of items that is to be considered a whole in terms of which the items are ordered. Lévi-Strauss himself, it is well known, has never felt constricted by the most obvious frontiers, those of the "society" or "culture." He does not hesitate to roam widely across different cultures to discover the place of singular practices. Pingaud, Zonabend, and Verdier, while they do not talk directly to the issue of boundaries, place spatial boundaries narrowly around the traditional territory of Minot and they postulate two temporal sets, "now" and "then." I have already criticized the decision to separate as absolutely as they do "now" from "then." I would like to focus now briefly on spatiality.

I do not have to rehearse extensively to an American audience the reasons which make it unacceptable to deal with any peasant village, however "traditional," as an independent whole. What the peasants themselves often consider to be the "outside" is in fact always an integral part of the inside. The general recognition of this principle has led, in the United States, to the disappearance of the community study as a theoretically interesting form. I am sure that the authors of the work on Minot are aware of these problems but, in the making of the compromises on which any research is built, they decided to put the problems in the background, for they believe in the value of contextualizing participant observation, a method which necessarily limits the size of the sample and makes spatial localization attractive. They have accepted the traditional paramaters of a kind of equation: participation observation = small sample; small sample = a geographical community. The problem, traditionally, has lain in the

weighing of the payoff to be gained given the equation. It is noteworthy that our authors demonstrate that much can still be done with what is generally presented like an exhausted mode.

But do we have to accept the equation, particularly its second part? Is it really necessary to draw the small sample of the anthropologist from the same restricted geographical space? Particularly in modern mobile societies, do we not thereby run the risk of bypassing central phenomena? This is not a call for the abandonment of participant observation in favor of large-scale surveys, the only alternative to the community study that is generally offered. In Minot, and this is a very general thing in France, the youths that appear to leave the village under the attraction of industrial work and urban life, in fact never quite abandon it. They repeatedly come back to it during vacations, they buy old houses, they build new ones and, often, they retire in the village. Can such people really be considered "exterior" to the village? And, to the extent that they represent an eminently "possible" lifestyle within the village, one that is as possible as the lifestyle of the cook or the seamstress, are they not worth pursuing even if it means breaking the association that anthropology keeps making between social grouping and geographical space? Another compromise can be made than the traditional one. In order to preserve participant-observation, it is possible to sacrifice the search for totality within a space in favor of a detailed look at the set of statuses which constitute a modern society and which we otherwise know do complement each other, albeit indirectly through the obscure mechanisms of organic solidarity.

Our three authors' decision to conduct a "community study" also has another consequence. All the generalizations they make are to Minot as a cultural entity. There is no discussion of the extent to which Minot tells us something about any larger whole, be it France, Europe, or peasant society. This can be understandable when little is known of the larger society. But the situation is different in France, where an enormous amount is known. To anybody who has read some of the other studies on French villages, Minot will feel very familiar. It is evident that the authors know this other literature, for their work is more focussed, detailed than the first studies. But this is an indirect thing. The preceding studies are not used in an active fashion as the source of hypotheses about the constitution of French peasant culture which the work on Minot might inform or confirm in a more complex manner.

It is not impossible that this particularism is the debt to be paid by anthropologists who work on their own country and find it necessary

to create a "difference" between their informants and themselves which, without being altogether absent, is not very relevant given a cross-cultural perspective. American anthropologists cannot quite believe in the reality of Americanness as a cultural fact, and they are ready to deny actively their own cultural typification. French anthropologists do not seem to do this quite so actively but, in effect, these three completely isolate a village like Minot from a social environment that is treated as little more than the source of the contingent events which impose themselves on the people. But Minot is France. It is constitutive of France, in much the same manner that each inhabitant of Minot is constitutive of Minot. That we may not quite have the tools to say much that is not trivial about an entity such as France is no reason to ignore the fact that to say something about it is one of the frontiers of anthropology.

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Notes

1. It is interesting to note that these studies specifically acknowledge the active encouragement of Lévi-Strauss. Indeed, the books on Minot were written by some of his students and partially funded by his Laboratory at the College de France.

2. A study of Chardonneret, Orne, may also be mentioned (a research report was published in a special issue of *Ethnologie française* introduced by Labat and Salitot-Dion, 1974). It has the same characteristics as the others.

3. It should be remembered that the most successful community study conducted in the United States, the study of Newburyport, Massachusetts, directed by Warner (1941-1958) was organized along such lines. There have been other such large community studies, but they do not seem to have had much impact, perhaps because of the pressures that rent the project of which Vidich and Bensman were a part (1968: Chapter XIV).

4. This study brought together sociologists, anthropologists, economists, and historians (Chiva 1968). In a first stage, various data of a statistical nature were collected and a survey was administered. The results were published in a series of articles: Loux and de Virville (1969), Royer (1970), Petitot-Mauriès (1977), Raulin (1972), Chiva and Pingaud (1976-77). The in-depth ethnographic study of Minot made up the second stage. Besides the three monographs, the following papers were published (the substance of some of them

was later incorporated in the books): Jolas (1977), Jolas, Verdier and Zonabend (1970, 1973), Jolas and Zonabend (1970, 1973), Pingaud (1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1977), Verdier (1976a, 1976b, 1977), Zonabend (1973, 1977, 1978, 1979a, 1979b).

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