Introduction

These essays are about peasants and even more about artisans and the menu peuple of the cities. The very rich, the powerful, the learned, and the priestly are described primarily in relation to the lives of the “modest”—as they reacted to them, conflicted with them, or shared their activities and beliefs. The interaction between Society and Culture and the balance between tradition and innovation are thus explored only for certain segments of the social order, and then through a set of case studies rather than systematically.

The cases are linked, however, by a ramifying chain of historical concerns. Sometimes a question in one essay leads directly to the next essay. So Chapter 1 considers what sorts of social experience might help form Protestant consciousness among male artisans, and how or whether their fight against the Catholic clergy might connect with economic conflict. What, then, prompted Protestant allegiance among some groups of urban women—the subject of Chapter 3—with their different patterns of geographical mobility, literacy, skill, and employ? If, under certain circumstances, economic enemies could be religious allies within the printing industry, what would one find if one looked anew, as in Chapter 2, at the relation of religious sensibility to the treatment of poverty in the sixteenth century? Under certain circumstances, could religious opponents be political allies in the reform of urban welfare institutions?
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So too, Chapter 4 examines a wide range of political and social uses for both carnivalesque topsy-turvy and festive organization, including their relation to the socialization of youth; but it stops short of analyzing the meaning of symbols in cultural play. This then becomes the issue in Chapter 5, at least for the complex case of sex-role reversal in rite and festivity. And if one can make such sense of popular recreations, which are sometimes dismissed merely as means of blowing off steam, can one go on to discover some order even in the extreme popular violence with which sixteenth-century crowds defended their religion? Chapter 6, "The Rites of Violence," suggests that this is so.

Next, "Printing and the People" returns to the interaction between literate and oral culture, now conceived more broadly than in the initial chapters on the Reformation. In the course of reviewing the impact of printing on villagers and city folk in the sixteenth century, one comes upon two genres that put the relation between the learned and the people in unusual perspective: collections of common proverbs and collections of "popular errors" in regard to medicine. These are examined in the last chapter from the end of the Middle Ages through the French Revolution. They turn out to generate some interesting questions about our own role as scholarly interpreters of the historical past.

Indeed, throughout the essays I have had a continuing concern about the sources for the lives of people most of whom were illiterate—not only where these sources were, but what they were. Thus, research became not simply a matter of scouring libraries for popular playlets, poems, and pamphlets and of sifting criminal and judicial records, welfare rolls, notarial contracts, and militia and financial lists for mentions of artisans and the poor. It was also a matter of recognizing that forms of associational life and collective behavior are cultural artifacts, not just items in the history of the Reformation or of political centralization. A journeymen's initiation rite, a village festive organization, an informal gathering of women for a lying-in or of men and women for storytelling, or a street disturbance could be "read" as fruitfully as a
diary, a political tract, a sermon, or a body of laws. Further, I began to understand that a book or a proverb not only could speak for its author or reader, but could be a clue to relationships among groups of people and among cultural traditions.

In interpreting this material and in accounting for the direction of change in early modern France, I have been guided by a few rules. First, I have tried to be especially attentive to the context of a change, an occurrence, or a decision. For example, the existence during the first half of the sixteenth century of some spheres of urban activity in which the boundary between the secular and the sacred was quite clearly delimited seems to me an essential condition for the events described in Chapters 1 and 2. Alter those boundaries, and journeymen and magistrates would have acted quite differently. But second, I have not assumed that either context or any single attribute of these peasants and city people—whether their sex, or their relation to property and production—in itself determined their behavior. Rather I have imagined these features of their lives as shaping their condition and their goals, as limiting or expanding their options; but I have seen them as actors, making use of what physical, social, and cultural resources they had in order to survive, to cope, or sometimes to change things.

It may also be helpful to readers if I here make explicit certain views about social structure in early modern Europe that I have developed in the course of writing these essays. I do not think only of persons or families mapped onto a one- or two-dimensional chart according to their property, power, prestige, or what have you. I picture a many-dimensional chart in which the axes of measurement represent qualitatively different kinds of power, property, and control, as well as other variables—such as sex and age—that can determine social organization. Different hierarchies may connect in various ways but are not reducible one to the other without some important social transformation.

To give an illustration, a beneficed cleric in Catholic Europe differs from a poor layman not only along the same axis as a
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merchant differs from a journeyman, but also along another axis in which control over expressive and emotional resources is the criterion. The Protestant Reformation erases this axis in some regions and makes “clergy” roughly equivalent to other professions. It also leads to a simplification of the criteria used to relate male and female, while sharpening the boundary between the superior and the subject sex.

Readers will catch sight of a like process several times in the pages that follow. Social hierarchies are simplified, or the “low” raised up a little to be more like the “high,” but the remaining boundaries are more firmly drawn and an effort is made at tighter control over the whole social order. (A friend and I have joked about a possible “law of conservation of boundaries.” Let us hope it is not universal.) The simplifiers and raisers-up are sometimes Calvinist leaders, sometimes city fathers dealing with the starving, sometimes humanists writing in the vernacular for the uneducated. Of the ways in which traditional Catholicism, more at home with the inflections and complexities of a multiform social order, also institutes tighter forms of control, I have said only a little in these essays. But I do not intend to suggest that only Protestant societies provide a pathway to the “modern.”* Nor, indeed, do I intend to suggest that new techniques of enlightenment and control had no support from the lower orders or always led to the results anticipated by their betters. But let the reader hear what the Lord of Misprint and Ghostly Sally have to say about that.

Society and Culture in Early Modern France