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*Ethnography* 2004; 5; 579
DOI: 10.1177/1466138104048829

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://eth.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/5/4/579
The peasant and his body

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ABSTRACT Based on a study of his childhood village of Béarn in southwestern France in the 1960s combining social history, statistics, and ethnography, the author shows how economic and social standing influence the rising rates of bachelorhood in a peasant society based on primogeniture through the mediation of the embodied consciousness that men acquire of this standing. The scene of a local ball on the margins of which bachelors gather serves to highlight and dissect the cultural clash between country and city and the resulting devaluation of the young men from the hamlet as urban categories of judgment penetrate the rural world. Because their upbringing and social position lead them to be sensitive to ‘tenue’ (appearance, clothing, bearing, conduct) as well as open to the ideals of the town, young women assimilate the cultural patterns issued from the city more quickly than the men, which condemns the latter to be gauged against yardsticks that make them worthless in the eyes of potential marriage partners. As the peasant internalizes in turn the devalued image that others form of him through the prism of urban categories, he comes to perceive his own body as an ‘em-peasanted’ body, burdened with the traces of the activities and attitudes associated with agricultural life. The wretched consciousness that he gains of his body leads him to break solidarity with it and to adopt an introverted attitude that amplifies the shyness and gaucheness produced by social relations marked by the extreme segregation of the sexes and the repression of the sharing of emotions.

KEY WORDS bachelorhood, marriage, peasantry, body, emotions, habitus, village culture, gender relations, Béarn, France
Plato in his Laws esteems nothing of more pestiferous consequence to his city than to let the youth take the liberty of changing their accoutrement, gestures, dances, exercises and songs, from one form to another.

(Montaigne, Essays, I: XLIII)

The data of statistics and field observation warrant establishing a close correlation between the vocation to bachelorhood and residence in the hameaux; and the historical approach enables one to see the restructuring of the system of matrimonial exchanges on the basis of the opposition between the bourg and the bameaux as a manifestation of the overall transformation of the local society. Yet it remains to be determined whether there is an aspect of this opposition that is more closely correlated with the vocation to bachelorhood; through what mediations the fact of residing in the bourg or the bameaux, and the economic, social, and psychological characteristics that are bound up with each of them, can act upon the mechanism of matrimonial exchanges; how it is that the influence of residence does not affect men and women in the same fashion; and whether there are significant differences between the people of the hameaux who marry and those who are condemned to celibacy – in short, whether the fact of being born in town or hamlet is a ‘necessitating condition’ or a ‘permissive condition’ of bachelorhood.

Whereas in the old society marriage was mainly the business of the family, the search for a partner is now, as we know, left to the initiative of the individual. What needs to be better understood is why the peasant of the hameaux is intrinsically disadvantaged in this competition and, more precisely, why he proves to be so ill-adapted, so disconcerted, in the institutionalized occasions for encounters between the sexes.

Given the sharp separation between masculine society and feminine society, given the disappearance of intermediaries and the loosening of traditional social bonds, the balls that take place periodically in the bourg or in the neighboring villages have become the only socially approved opportunity for meetings between the sexes. It follows that they provide a privileged occasion to grasp the root of tensions and conflicts.

**Cultural clash at the country ball**

The Christmas ball takes place in the back-room of a café. In the middle of the brightly lit dance-floor, a dozen couples are dancing with great ease the dances in fashion. They are mainly ‘students’ (lous estudians), that is, pupils at the high schools and junior high schools of the neighboring towns, most of them originating from the bourg. There are also a few poised paratroopers on leave and some young townsmen, employed as
factory-workers or clerks; a couple of them sport Tyroleans hats and wear jeans and black leather jackets. Among the girls dancing, several have come from the depth of the remotest hameaux, dressed and coiffured with studied elegance; some others, born in Lesquire, work in Pau [the main city and regional administrative center about a dozen kilometers away] as seamstresses, maids, or shop assistants. They all have the appearance of the city girl. Some young women, and even some girls a dozen years old, dance among themselves, while young boys chase and jostle each other among the prancing couples.

Standing at the edge of the dancing area, forming a dark mass, is a group of older spectators, looking on in silence. As if caught there by the temptation to dance, they move forward and tighten the space left for the dancers. There they all are, all the bachelors. Men of their age who are already married do not go to balls any more, except once a year for the major village festival, the agricultural show. On that day, everyone is ‘on the promenade’ and everyone dances, even the old-timers. But the bachelors still do not dance. On those evenings, they are less conspicuous because the men and the women of the village have all come, some to chat with friends, others to spy, chatter, and conjecture endlessly on possible marriages. But at small balls like the one at Christmas or New Year, they have nothing to do. These are balls where people come to dance, and these men will not be dancing, and they know it. These balls are made for the youth, in other words those who are not yet married; they are not so old, but they are and they know they are ‘unmarriageable’. From time to time, as if to hide their embarrassment, they lark about a little. A new dance is struck up, a ‘march’: a girl steps forth to the bachelors’ corner and tries to lead one of them onto the dance floor. He stands firm, embarrassed and delighted. Then he goes once round the floor, deliberately accenting his clumsiness and heavy-footedness, rather as the old-timers do when they dance on the evening of the agricultural fair, and looks back laughing at his mates. When the dance is over, he goes and sits down and will not dance again. ‘This one’, someone tells me, ‘is A’s son (the name of a big landowner). The girl who went to invite him is a neighbor. She made him go for a dance to cheer him up.’ Everything returns to normal. The bachelors will remain there, until midnight, hardly speaking, in the light and noise of the ball, their gaze trained on the girls beyond their reach. Then they will retire to the bar room and drink face to face. Some will sing old Béarn tunes at the top of their lungs, lingering on dissonant chords until their breath fails, while in the nearby dance room the band plays twists and cha-chas. And then they will depart slowly, in twos and threes, toward their far-away farms.

In the front bar, three bachelors are seated at a table, drinking and chatting. ‘So you’re not dancing?’ ‘No, we’re beyond that (ça nous a passé) . . .’ My
companion, a villager, says to me in a stage-whisper: ‘What a joke! They’ve never danced.’ Another:

Me, I’m waiting till midnight. I had a look in there earlier, there are only youngsters. That’s not for me. Those young girls could be my daughters . . . I’m going off to eat something and I’ll be back. Dancing isn’t for a man my age anyhow. A nice waltz, that I would dance, but they don’t play any. And young people don’t know how to waltz anyway.

– So you think there might be some older girls tonight?

– Yes, well we’ll see. And you, why aren’t you dancing? Me, I promise you, if I had a wife, I’d dance.

The villager: Yes, and if they danced, they’d have a wife. There’s no way out.

Another: Oh, well, you shouldn’t worry about us, you know, we’re not unhappy.

At the end of the ball, two bachelors are slowly leaving. A car starts up; they stop in their tracks. ‘You see, they’re looking at this car the way they were gazing at the girls earlier. And they’re in no hurry to get home anyway, you can be sure of that . . . They’re going to hang around like that for as long as they can.’

Thus this small country ball is the scene of a real clash of civilizations. Through it, the whole world of the city, with its cultural models, its music, its dances, its techniques of the body, bursts into peasant life. The traditional patterns of festive behavior have been lost or yet have been superseded by urban patterns. In this realm as in others, the lead belongs to the people of the bourg. The dances of the olden days, which bore the stamp of peasant culture in their names (la crabe, lou branlou, lou mounchicou, etc.), in their rhythms, their music, and the words that accompanied them, have made way for dances imported from the town. Now, it must be recognized that techniques of the body constitute genuine systems, bound up with a whole cultural context. This is not the place to analyse the motor habits proper to the peasant of Béarn, that habitus which betrays the paysanás, the lumbering peasant. Spontaneous observation perfectly grasps this hexas that serves as a foundation for stereotypes. ‘Peasants in the olden days,’ said an elderly villager, ‘always walked with their legs bowed, as if they were knock-kneed, with their arms bent’ (P. L.-M [see appendix]). To explain this attitude, he evoked the posture of a man using a scythe. The critical observation of the urbanites, swift to spot the habitus of the peasant as a synthetic unity, puts the emphasis on the slowness and heaviness of his gait: for the dweller of the bourg, the man from the brane [‘uplands’] is one who, even when he treads the tarmac of the carrère [the main street], always walks on uneven, difficult, and muddy ground; the one who drags heavy
clogs or big boots even when he has put on his Sunday shoes; the one who always advances with long slow strides, as when he walks, with the goad on his shoulder, turning back from time to time to call forth the oxen who follow him.

No doubt this is not a genuine anthropological description (Pelosse, 1960) but, on the one hand, the townsman’s spontaneous ethnography grasps the techniques of the body as one element in a system and implicitly postulates the existence of a correlation at the level of meaning, between the heaviness of the gait, the poor cut of the clothes, and the clumsiness of the expression; and, on the other hand, it suggests that it is no doubt at the level of rhythms that one would find the unifying principle (confusedly
grasped by intuition) of the system of corporeal attitudes characteristic of
the peasant. For anyone who has in mind Marcel Mauss’s (1935/1979)
anecdote about the misadventures of a British regiment marching to a
French band, it is clear that the empaysanit peasant that is, the ‘em-
peasanted’ peasant, is not in his element at the ball. Indeed, just as the
dances of the olden days were bound up with the whole peasant civiliz-
ation,3 so too modern dances are linked to urban civilization. By demand-
ing the adoption of new corporeal uses, they call for a veritable change in
‘nature’, since bodily habitus is what is experienced as most ‘natural’, that
upon which conscious action has no grip. Consider dances such as the
Charleston or the cha-cha in which the two partners face each other and
hop, in staccato half-steps, without ever embracing:4 could anything be
more alien to the peasant? And what would he do with his broad hands
that he is accustomed to hold wide apart? Moreover, as testified by simple
observation and interviews, the peasant is loath to adopt the rhythms of
modern dances:

B. danced a few paso-dobles and a few javas; he used to get well ahead of
the band. For him, there was no two-step, three-step or four-step tunes. You
lunged in and you marched, you trod on people’s feet or worse, but what
mattered was the speed. He quickly found himself reduced to the rank of
spectator. He never concealed his spleen at never being able to dance
properly. (P. C.)

Two-thirds of the bachelors cannot dance (as against 20 percent of the
married men); a third of them nonetheless go to the ball.

Moreover, one’s ‘bearing’ [tenue] is immediately perceived by others, and
especially by the girls, as a symbol of one’s economic and social standing.
Indeed, bodily hexis is above all a social signum.5 This is perhaps particu-
larly true for the peasant. What is called the ‘peasant look’ [allure paysanne]
is no doubt the irreducible residue that those most open to the modern
world, those most dynamic and innovative in their occupational activity, do
not manage to shake off.6

Now, in the relations between the sexes, the whole bodily hexis is the
primary object of perception, both in itself and in its capacity as social
signum. If he is in any way clumsy, ill-shaven, ill-attired, the peasant is
immediately perceived as the bucou (the tawny owl), unsociable and
churlish, ‘somber (escu), clumsy (desestruc), grumpy (arreboubiec), some-
times gross (a cops groussé), graceless with women (chic amistous ap las
hennes)’ (P. L.-M.). It is said of him that ‘n’ey pas de here’, literally: ‘He’s
not at the fair’ (to go to the fair, one put on one’s smartest clothes); he is
not presentable. Being particularly attentive and sensitive, owing to all their
cultural training, to gestures and attitudes, to clothing and a person’s whole
presentation [tenue], readier to deduce deep personality from external
appearance, the girls are more open to the ideals of the town, and they thus judge the men according to alien criteria: gauged against this yardstick, the country men are worthless.

Placed in such a situation, the peasant is led to internalize the image that others form of him, even when it is a mere stereotype. He comes to perceive his body as a body marked by the social stamp, as an empaysanit, ‘em-peasanted’ body, bearing the trace of the attitudes and activities associated with peasant life. It follows that he is embarrassed by his body and in his body. It is because he grasps it as a peasant’s body that he has an unhappy consciousness of his body. Because he grasps his body as ‘empeasanted’, he has a consciousness of being an ‘empeasanted’ peasant. It is no exaggeration to assert that the peasant’s coming to awareness of his body is for him the privileged occasion of his coming to awareness of the peasant condition.

This wretched consciousness of his body, that leads him to break solidarity with it (in contrast to the town-dweller), that inclines him to an introverted attitude, the root of shyness and gaucheness, forbids him from the dance, forbids him from having simple and genuine attitudes in the presence of the girls. Indeed, being embarrassed by his body, he is awkward and clumsy in all the situations that require one to ‘come out of oneself’ or to offer one’s body on display. To put one’s body out on display, as in dancing, presupposes that one consents to externalizing oneself and that one has a contented awareness of the image of oneself that one projects towards others. The fear of ridicule and shyness are, on the contrary, linked to an acute awareness of oneself and of one’s body, to a consciousness fascinated by its corporeality. Thus the repugnance to dance is only one manifestation of this acute consciousness of peasantness that is, as we have seen, also expressed in self-mockery and self-irony – particularly in the comic tales whose unfortunate hero is always the peasant struggling to come to grips with the urban world.

Thus economic and social condition influences the vocation to marriage mainly through the mediation of the consciousness that men attain of that situation. Indeed, the peasant who attains self-awareness has a strong likelihood of grasping himself as a ‘peasant’ in the pejorative sense of the word. One finds a confirmation of this in the fact that among the bachelors one finds either the most ‘empeasanted’ peasants or the most self-aware peasants – those most aware of what remains ‘peasant’ within them.7

Sentiments and social structure

It is to be expected that the encounter with the young girl brings the unease to its paroxysm. First, it is an occasion upon which the peasant experiences,
more acutely than ever, the awkwardness of his body. In addition, owing to the separation of the sexes, girls are entirely shrouded in mystery:

Pi. went on outings organized by the parish priest. Not too much going to the beach, on account of the provocative swimsuits. Coed outings with girls from the same association, the JAC.\(^8\) These excursions, fairly rare, one or two a year, take place before military service. The girls remain in a closed circle throughout these outings. Although there is some shared singing, a few timid games, you have the impression that nothing can happen between participants of different sexes. Camaraderie between boys and girls does not exist in the countryside. You can be friends with a girl only when you experience friendship and when you know what it means. For the majority of the young boys, a girl is a girl, with everything mysterious about girls, with this
great difference that there is a gulf between the sexes, and a gulf that is not easily crossed. One of the best ways to come into contact with girls (the only one there is in the countryside) is the ball. After a few timid attempts, and some learning that never took him further than the java, Pi. didn’t go any further. They fetched him a neighbor’s daughter who doesn’t dare refuse – for one dance at least. Just one or two dances each ball, that’s to say every fortnight or every month, that’s little, that’s very little. It’s certainly too little to be able to go from ball to ball further afield with any chance of success. That’s how you end up as one of those who watch the others dance. You watch them till two in the morning, then you go home thinking that those who are dancing are having fun. That’s the way the gap widens. If you would want to marry, it becomes serious: how are you to get close to a girl you
fancy? How do you find an opportunity, especially if you’re not the go-getter type? There’s only the ball. Outside the ball, there’s no salvation. . . . How do you keep up a conversation and lead it to an embarrassing subject? It’s a hundred times easier in the course of a tango. . . . The lack of relations and contacts with the opposite sex is bound to give a complex to the most audacious young man. It’s even worse when he has a slightly shy nature. You can overcome shyness when you have everyday contact with women, but it can get worse in the opposite case. Fear of ridicule, which is a form of pride, can also hold a man back. Shyness, sometimes a bit of false pride, the fact of coming out of the backwoods, all that creates a gulf between a girl and a worthy young man. (P. C.)

The cultural norms that govern the expression of sentiments contribute to making dialogue between boys and girls difficult. For example, affection between parents and children is expressed much more in concrete attitudes and gestures than in words. ‘In the old days, when the harvest was still done with sickles, the harvesters would move forward in one row. My father, who was working beside me, as he saw that I was getting tired, would cut in front of me without saying anything, to give me some relief’ (A. B.). Not so long ago, father and son would feel a definite embarrassment to find themselves together at the café, no doubt because it could happen that someone would tell lusty stories in their presence or utter smutty talk, which would have caused unbearable embarrassment to both of them. The same modesty dominated relations between brothers and sisters. Everything that relates to intimacy, to ‘nature’, is banned from conversation. While the peasant may enjoy making or hearing the most unrestrained remarks, he is supremely discreet when it comes to his own sexual life and even more so his emotional life.

In a general way, feelings are not something it is appropriate to talk about. The verbal awkwardness that compounds corporeal clumsiness is experienced as embarrassment, for the young man as much as for the young woman, especially when the latter has learned from women’s magazines and serialized love-stories the stereotyped language of urbanite sentimentality:

To dance, it’s not enough to know the steps, to put one foot in front of another. And even that isn’t so easy for some. You also need to be able to chat to girls a little, after you’ve danced and while you’re dancing. You’ve got to be able to talk during the dance about something other than farm work and the weather. And there aren’t too many who are capable of that. (R. L.)

If women are much more adept and quick than men to adopt urban cultural models with regard to the body as well as dress, this is for various converging reasons. First, they are more strongly motivated than men due
to the fact that the city represents for them the hope of emancipation. It follows that they present a privileged example of this ‘prestigious imitation’ of which Mauss ([1935]1979: 101) spoke. The attraction and the grip of new products or new techniques in matters of comfort, of the ideals of courtesy or of the forms of entertainment offered by the town, are due for the most part to the fact that one recognizes in them the mark of urban civilization, identified, rightly or wrongly, with civilization tout court. Fashion comes from Paris, from the city; the model is imposed from above. Women strongly aspire to urban life and this aspiration is not unreasonable, since, according to the very logic of matrimonial exchanges, they circulate upwards. Thus they look first and foremost to marriage for the fulfillment of their wishes. Placing all their hopes in marriage, they are strongly motivated to adapt by adopting the outward appearances of the women of the city.

‘The daughters of peasants know the life of the peasant too well’

You see, the other day I went to R.’s, one of the richest farmer in the region. I told him, ‘You, you think you’re the master on the farm, don’t you? You think all these fields and vineyards belong to you? You think you’re rich? Well, let me tell you, you’re but a slave to your tractor. What do you have, now, with all this land? Yes, you have millions worth out there under the sun, four or five millions [of old Francs]. And then what? Compute how much you’re earning: go ahead, take a pen and paper. You see, it’s over now with the old methods. The peasant who does not compute, who does not always have his pen and paper with him, he’s done for. Compute what you give per hour of labor to your father, your mother, your sister who are all helping you, compute what you earn. You’ll see that you’ll take out your wallet and throw it out in the courtyard!

Say you love this girl: do you think that she would want to come here, to slave away all day and come back home at night to go milk the cows, fed up with weariness (harte de mau)? The daughters of peasants know the life of the peasant. They know it too well to want a peasant. And to get up at five every morning? Even if she loves you, she’ll prefer to get married to a postman, do you hear me? That’s for sure, a postman or even a gendarme [military police]. When life’s too hard, you don’t even have the time to love each other. You’re slaving away all day. Where is the love then? What does it mean? You get home exhausted. Do you think that’s a life worth living? There is not a girl who would want that life. You don’t have feelings any more, you don’t have loving any more. And then you have the old ones. No one would want to cause them grief.
But there is more: women are prepared by their whole cultural training to be attentive to the external details of the person and especially to everything having to do with ‘tenue’, in the different senses of the term [i.e., dress, bearing, deportment, and conduct]. They have a statutory monopoly over the judgment of taste. This attitude is encouraged and fostered by the whole cultural system. It is not uncommon to hear a ten-year-old girl discussing the cut of a skirt or a blouse with her mother or with her friends. This type of behavior is rejected by the boys, because it is discouraged by social sanction. In a society dominated by masculine values, everything contributes on the contrary to foster among them the churlish and coarse, rough and pugnacious attitude. A man too attentive to his dress and appearance would be regarded as too ‘emmonsieuré’ [literally, ‘en-misterized’ or ‘gentrified’] or (which amounts to the same), too effeminate. It follows that, whereas the men, by virtue of the norms that dominate their early upbringing, are struck by a kind of cultural blindness (in the sense in which linguists speak of ‘cultural deaf-muteness’) for everything having to do with ‘tenue’ as a whole, from bodily hexis to cosmetics, women are much more apt to perceive urban models and to integrate them into their behavior, whether it be clothing or techniques of the body. The peasant girl speaks the language of urban fashion well because she hears it well, and she hears it well because the ‘structure’ of her cultural language predisposes her to it.

What peasant men and women perceive, both in the city-dweller and the world of the city and in other peasants, is thus a function of their respective cultural systems. It follows that, whereas the women adopt first the external signs of ‘urbanity’, the men borrow deeper cultural models, particularly in the technical and economic sphere. And one readily understands why it would be so. For the peasant woman, the city is first of all the department store. Although some stores are reserved for the few, most are aimed at all the classes. ‘As for clothes’, remarks Halbwachs (1958[1955]: 95, translation modified), ‘everyone wears them on the street and the people of the different classes confront and observe each other, so that a certain uniformity tends to obtain in this regard. There is

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You’d want to wheedle them, to stroke them. And yet you’re having fights with them because you’ve got too many worries, because you’re too tired. The young girls now they want to have their independence, they want to be able to buy things that they like without having to give accounts. No, there isn’t one who would come live here.’

L.C., 42, born in a nearby village, primary education, now a shopkeeper in the market-town
a common market for food and to some extent for clothing.’ Given the unilateral and superficial character of her perception of the city, it is normal that the young peasant woman associates urban life with a certain type of clothes and hair-styles, manifest signs, in her eyes, of enfranchisement – in short, she sees only, as the phrase goes, the good side of it. And thus one understands, on the one hand, that the city holds a veritable fascination for her, and through it the city man, and, on the other hand, that she borrows from the city woman the outward signs of her condition, that is to say, what she knows of her.

At all times, the better to prepare them for marriage and also because they were less indispensable to the farm than were the boys, a number of families used to place their daughters in apprenticeships, as soon as they left school; with a seamstress for example. Since the creation of the cours complémentaire, they have been more readily persuaded than boys to pursue their studies to the brevet [until 16], which can only increase the attractiveness of the town and widen the gap between the sexes. In the town, through women’s magazines, serials, ‘film stories’ and songs on the radio (as they spend more time at home than the men, the women listen to the radio more), girls also borrow models of the relations between the sexes and a type of ideal man who is entirely the opposite of the ‘empeasanted’ peasant. In this way a whole system of expectations is built up which the peasant simply cannot fulfill. We are a long way from the shepherdess in the traditional ballad whose only ambition was to marry ‘a good peasant’s son’. The ‘gentleman’ has his revenge.

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**Ballad of the shepherd**

*(local song, collected in Lesquire in 1959)*

Fair shepherdess, will you give me your love?

I will be forever true to you.

*You qu’aymi mey u bet hilh de paysà ...* (I would rather take a good peasant’s son)

Why, shepherdess, are you so cruel?

*Et bous moussù qu’et tan amourous?* (And you, sir, why are you so amorous?)

I cannot love all those fair ladies ...

*E you moussù qu’em fouti de bous ...* (And I, sir, give not a damn for you)

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Owing to the duality of frames of reference, a consequence of the differential penetration of urban cultural models among the two sexes, women judge their peasant menfolk by criteria that leave them no chance. It then
becomes understandable that a number even of modernizing agriculturalists remain unmarried. Thus 14 percent of the farms where bachelors are found, all belonging to relatively well-off peasants, have been modernized. In the new rural elite, among the members of the JAC and the CUMA\textsuperscript{14} in particular, many have not married. Even when it helps to confer a definite prestige, modernism in the technical realm does not necessarily foster marriage:

Lads like La., Pi., Po., perhaps among the most intelligent and dynamic of the region, have to be put among the ‘unmarriageable’. Even though they dress properly, they go out a lot. They have brought in new cultivation methods, new crops. Some have equipped their houses. It’s enough to make you think that, in this domain, imbeciles do better than the rest. (P. C.)

In the old days, a bachelor was never really an adult in the eyes of society, which made a clear distinction between the responsibilities left to youths, that is to say to the unmarried, for example the preparation of holiday feasts, and the responsibilities reserved for adults, such as the town council.\textsuperscript{15} Nowadays failure to marry appears more and more as an inevitability, so that it has ceased to appear imputable to individuals, to their defects and their shortcomings:

When they belong to a great family, people find excuses for them – especially when the allure of the great family combines with the allure of a strong personality. People say, ‘It’s a pity, when he has a fine property, he’s intelligent, and so on.’ When he has a strong personality, he manages to make his mark anyway, otherwise he’s diminished. (A. B.)

This will be seen more concretely through the story told by a woman who, as a neighbor, went to help with the pélère, the slaughter and processing of the pig, at the farm of two bachelors aged 40 and 37:

We said to them: ‘What a mess we found!’ Those birds (\textit{aquets piocs})! Just touching their crockery! Filthy! We didn’t know where to look. We threw them out of the house. We said to them, ‘Aren’t you ashamed! Instead of marrying. . . . That we had to be the ones to do that. . . . You would need a wife to do that for you.’ They hung their heads and crept away. When there is a \textit{daune} [mistress of the house], the women, neighbors or relatives, are there to help. But when there are no wives, the women [who come to help] have to decide everything. (M. P. -B.)

The fact that 42 percent of the farms run by bachelors (of which 38 percent are owned by poor peasants) are in decline, as against only 16 percent of the holdings owned by married men, shows that there is an obvious correlation between the state of the holding and bachelorhood; but the decline of the property can be as much the effect as the cause of
bachelorhood. Experienced as a social mutilation, bachelorhood induces in many cases an attitude of resignation and renunciation, resulting from the absence of a long-term future. This can be seen in this testimony:

I went to see Mi., in the Houratate neighborhood. He has a well-kept farm house surrounded by pine-trees. He lost his father and mother around 1954 and now he’s about 50. He lives alone. ‘I’m ashamed that you see me looking like this,’ he said. He was blowing on a fire he had lit in the courtyard to do his laundry. ‘I’d have wanted to invite you in and do you the honors. You have never come. But, you know, it’s a real mess inside. When you live alone. . . . Girls don’t want to come to the country any more. I’m desperate, you know. I would have liked to have a family. I would have made up things a bit, on this side of the house [the custom is to build up the house when the
eldest son is married]. But now the land is ruined. There won’t be anyone anymore. I can’t bring myself to work on it. Sure, my sister came, she does come from time to time. She’s married to a man who works for the SNCF [the national railway company]. She comes with her husband and her little daughter. But she can’t stay here.’16 (A. B.)

The bachelor’s tragedy is often redoubled by the pressure of family members, who despair at seeing him reduced to this state. ‘I give them an earful,’ said a mother whose two sons, already aged, have not yet married, ‘I tell them “Are you afraid of women? You spend all your time à la barrique [drinking]! What will you do when I’m not there any more? I can’t take care of it for you any more!” ’ (widow, aged 84). And another, talking to one of her son’s mates, said: ‘He’s going to have to be told that he has to find a wife, he should have married at the same time as you. I’m telling you for good, it’s terrible. We’re both alone and as lost as can be’ (related by P. C.). No doubt everyone makes it a point of pride and honor to conceal the despair of his situation, perhaps by drawing on a long tradition of bachelorhood for the resources of resignation he needs to endure an existence without present or future. Yet bachelorhood is the privileged site through which to understand the poverty of the peasant condition. If the bachelor expresses his distress by saying that ‘the land is blighted’, this is because he can no longer grasp his condition as determined by a necessity that weighs upon the whole of the peasant class. The non-marriage of men is lived by all of them as the sign of the mortal crisis of a society incapable of providing the most innovative and the boldest of its eldest sons, trustees of the heritage, with the possibility of perpetuating their lineage – in short, incapable of safeguarding the very foundations of its order at the same time as it makes room for innovative adaptation.

Conclusion

‘Young girls don’t want to come to the country any more . . .’ The judgments of spontaneous sociology are by nature partial and one-sided. No doubt the constitution of the object of research as such also presupposes the selection of one aspect. But, because the social fact, whatever it may be, presents itself as an infinite plurality of aspects, because it appears as a web of relationships that have to be untangled one by one, this selection cannot fail to see itself for what it is, to offer itself as provisional, and to supersede itself through the analysis of the other aspects. The primary task of sociology is perhaps to reconstitute the totality from which one can discover the unity of the subjective consciousness that the individual has of the social system and of the objective structure of that system.
The sociologist endeavors, on the one hand, to grasp and understand the spontaneous consciousness of the social fact, a consciousness that, by virtue of its essence, does not reflect upon itself, and, on the other hand, to apprehend the fact in its own nature, thanks to the privilege provided him by his situation as an observer renouncing to ‘act upon the social’ in order to think it. That being so, he or she must aim to reconcile the truth of the objective ‘given’ that her analysis enables her to discover with the subjective certainty of those who live in it. When she describes, for example, the internal contradictions of the system of matrimonial exchanges, even when those contradictions do not rise as such to the consciousness of those who are its victims, she is only thematizing the lived experience of the men who concretely feel those contradictions in the form of the impossibility of marrying. While she forbids herself from granting credit to the consciousness that the subjects form of their situation and to accept literally the explanation they give of it, the sociologist takes that consciousness seriously enough to try to discover its real foundation, and she can be satisfied only when she manages to embrace in the unity of a single understanding the truth immediately given to lived consciousness and the truth laboriously acquired through scientific reflection. Sociology would perhaps not be worth an hour of effort if its end were only to discover the strings that move the actors it observes, if it were to forget that it is dealing with men and women, even when those men and women, in the manner of puppets, play a game of which they ignore the rules, in short, if it did not assign itself the task of restoring to those people the meaning of their actions.

Appendix: the informants

Instead of a phonetic translation, the testimonies given in the local dialect have been transcribed in the spelling conventionally used in Béarnais-language literature.

J.-P. A., 85, born in Lesquire; lives in the bourg but spent all his youth in a hameau; widower; education: level of the certificate of primary education (CEP); interviews alternated between French and Béarnais.

P. C., 32, born in Lesquire; lives in the bourg; married; education: level of the Brevet élémentaire [mid-secondary schooling]; mid-level administrator; interviews in French.

A. B., 60, born in Lesquire; lives in the bourg; married; education: level of the Brevet élémentaire; interviews in French, breaking occasionally into Béarnais.

P. L., 88, born in Lesquire; lives in a hameau; widower; education: level of CEP; farmer; interviews in Béarnais.
P. L.-M., 88, born in Lesquire; lives in the bourg; bachelor; education: level of CEP; interviews alternatively in French and in Béarnais.

A. A., 81, born in Lesquire; lives in a hameau; widower; can read and write; farmer; interviews in Béarnais.

F. L., 88, born in Lesquire; lives in a hameau; married; can read and write; farmer; interviews in French and Béarnais.

Mme J. L., 65, born in Lesquire; lives in a hameau; married; peasant farmer’s wife; can read and write; interviews in Béarnais.

R. L., 35, born in Lesquire; lives in a hameau; can read and write; shopkeeper; interviews in French.

Mme. A., 84, born in Lesquire; lives in the hameau; widow; can read and write; peasant farmer; interviews in Béarnais.

B.-P. A., 45, born in a neighboring village; lives in the hameau; married; primary education (CEP); interviews in French.

L. C., 42, born in a neighboring village; lives in the bourg; married; primary education (CEP); shopkeeper; interviews in French.

Acknowledgements

This article is excerpted from Pierre Bourdieu, ‘Célibat et condition paysanne’, Études rurales, vol. 5, no. 6, April 1962, pp. 32–136, and published here in English translation for the first time by kind permission of Jérôme Bourdieu and the journal. The title is from the original text; the section titles have been added. The full text is forthcoming as part of Pierre Bourdieu, The Ball of the Bachelors (Cambridge: Polity Press; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

Notes

1 The small town or market-village (bourg) referred to here as Lesquire (in reality Lasseube, where Pierre Bourdieu grew up) is surrounded by small clusters of farm houses known as ‘hamlets’ (hameaux). The section that precedes the present article in the 1962 text marshals historical, statistical and interview data to draw out ‘The Opposition between the Market-Town and the Hamlets’ that serves as the dynamic pivot of the local society [translator].

2 For a fuller examination of the structure and flow of gender relations in Lasseube around the same period, read Bourdieu (1962) [translator].
3 Sport provides another opportunity to confirm these analyses. The rugby
team – rugby being a city sport – is made up almost entirely of ‘urbanites’
from the bourg. Here too, as at the ball, the ‘students’ and carrèrens [bourg-
dwellers] are prepared by their whole cultural training to hold their place
in a game that demands skill, cunning, and elegance as much as strength.
Having attended games from their earliest childhood years, they have a
‘feel’ for the game even before they play it. The games that, in the old days,
used to be played on feast days (lou die de Nouste-Dame, 15 August, the
feast of the village patron saint) – lous sauts (jumping), lous jete-barres
(throwing the bar), running, skittles – demanded first and foremost athletic
qualities and gave the peasants an opportunity to show off their vigor.

4 Curt Sachs, quoted by Mauss (1979: 115–16), opposes feminized societies,
where people tend to dance in place by shaking, with societies where
descent operates through men, who would take pleasure in moving about.
One might suggest that the repugnance to dance manifested by many young
male peasants could be explained by a resistance to this kind of ‘feminiza-
tion’ of a whole, deeply buried, image of one’s self and of one’s body.

5 That is why, rather than sketch a methodical analysis of bodily techniques,
it has seemed preferable to relate the image that the ‘urbanite’ forms of it,
an image that the peasant tends to internalize willy-nilly.

6 A whole category of bachelors matches this description: ‘Ba. is an intelli-
gent man, and very good-looking, who’s managed to modernize his farm,
who has a fine estate. But he’s never known how to dance properly [cf. the
text quoted above p. 586]. He always stands watching the others, as he did
the other night, until two in the morning. He’s a typical example of a young
man who has lacked opportunities to approach the girls. Nothing about
his intelligence, his situation, or his looks should have prevented him from
finding a wife’ (P. C.). ‘Co. danced correctly, but without for that ever being
able, based on his style, to pretend to invite anyone other than “peasant
girls”’ (P. C.). (See also the text quoted below, the case of P.)

7 A number of boys from the bourg are objectively as lumbering as some
peasants from the hameaux, but they are not aware of being such.

8 Jeunesse Agricole Catholique, the movement of ‘young catholic farmers’,
founded in 1929 and active in the region through the 1960s [translator].

9 The term is used by Ernst Pulgram (1959); see also Trubetzkoy (1969: 51–5,
62–4).

10 Clothing is an important aspect of overall appearance. It is in this area that
one sees most clearly the men’s ‘cultural blindness’ to certain aspects of
urban civilization. Most of the bachelors wear the suit made by the village
tailor. ‘Some try wearing sports outfits. They get it all wrong in combining
the colors. It’s only when the mother in the family is up-to-date or, better,
when his sisters, who are more apprised of fashion, take the matter in hand
that you see well-dressed peasants’ (P. C). In a general way, the fact that he
has sisters can only increase a man’s chances of marrying. Through them, he can get to know other girls; he may even learn to dance with them.

11 The Cours complémentaire refers to additional years of schooling after primary education; the Brevet is equivalent to a Basic certificate of secondary schooling, typically obtained after four years [Translator].

12 As attested by the distribution of pupils in the cours complémentaire in Lesquire in 1962 by sex and socio-occupational category of the parents:

<table>
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<th>Sex</th>
<th>Farmers</th>
<th>Farm employees</th>
<th>Shopkeepers</th>
<th>Craftsmen</th>
<th>Junior administrators</th>
<th>Manual workers</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>31</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

13 This song is imported here from the previous section of the original 1962 article [Translator].

14 Coopérative d’utilisation du matériel agricole: the local cooperative for the pooled acquisition of farm machinery, set up in 1956 [Translator].

15 Marriage marks a break in the course of life. From one day to another, it is over with balls and with night-time outings. Young people of bad repute have often been seen to suddenly change their behavior and, as the phrase goes, ‘fall into line’ (‘se ranger’): ‘Ca. hung out at all the balls. He married a girl younger than him who had never gone out. He had three children with her in three years. She never goes out, though she’s dying to. He’d never think of taking her to a dance or to the movies once. All that is over with. They don’t even dress up any more’ (P. C.).

16 The judgments of public opinion are often severe but they converge with the conclusions of the bachelors themselves. ‘They have no taste for work. There are 50-odd of them like that who haven’t married. They are winebags. If you want them for drinking on the carrère . . . The land is ruined’ (B. P.).

References


