

toward the English model, an ironic plea, given the highly systematic nature of this book. Still, while reading this book and after putting it down, one finds oneself both marvelling at its conceptual magnitude and pondering critically its bold assertions, which, in the end, is what a good, even great book should accomplish.

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Roberta Pollack Seid — *The Dissolution of Traditional Rural Culture in Nineteenth-Century France: A Study of the Bethmale Costume*. New York and London: Garland Publishing Inc., 1987. Pp. v, 475.

In the 1909 *Annuaire de l'Ariège*, images of old and new coexisted. According to the editors, villagers still wore traditional local dress; at the same time, an advertisement for the healing baths of the department carried a picture of a woman in a modern bathing suit (349). This juxtaposition is just one of the tangles Roberta Pollack Seid attempts to unravel in her study of the celebrated Bethmale costume.

Pollack Seid, a member of the Institute for Historical Study, has taken on the modernization problem in a study of the commune of Bethmale, located in southwestern France, not far from the French-Spanish border, in the Pyrenees. The point of departure is Eugen Weber's notable study, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France* (1976) and a collection of essays edited by J. Beauroy and E. Gargan, *The Wolf and the Lamb: Popular Culture in France from the Old Regime to the Twentieth Century* (1977).

Challenging the description of traditional rural society and the process of its disappearance presented by many historians, the author argues not for the abandonment of the model, but rather for its modification. She questions several key aspects of the conventional model. Village-centered, socially cohesive, static and isolated are qualities generally invoked to describe traditional French peasant culture; these are re-examined by Pollack Seid. She forces the reader to listen carefully as she attempts to answer the following questions:

Was peasant culture in France really so autonomous a system, so divorced from urban and even regional contact? Were there only simple stages in traditional culture; did it cling to its medieval roots until it disappeared in the nineteenth century?...[I]f peasants were so attached to their traditional ways, practices, festivals and world views, how did the agencies of change wear them? (7-8).

One might wonder why dress should be the subject of a study of the dissolution of traditional rural culture. When historians, anthropologists and other scholars speak of traditional culture, they refer to a complex of threads making up a way of life: language, dress, beliefs, rituals, production. According to Pollack Seid, dress, or more specifically the traditional village costume, stood as one of the most prominent symbols of that culture. Beyond being visibly identifiable (and they were frequently described by contemporaries), traditional dress fit the model of analysis "for they were village-centered, tradition-bound and highly structured" (9).

The author, however, adds another dimension to her analysis by introducing dress theory to her study. Claiming that dress historians have generally shunned village costumes in favor of elite and middle-class fashions and that other historians have relegated these costumes to a subcategory of folkloristic traditions, she argues that rural costumes should be studied as a form of dress centrally linked to questions about the larger culture. According to her, “virtually every facet of a society, from its material base to its loftiest aesthetic and spiritual ideals, plays a role in...dress” (15-16). Dress, writes Pollack Seid, is also a personal, private matter permitting a look at *la vie intime*.

Abandonment of traditional dress by peasants cannot, according to the author, be simply explained by pointing to the availability and acceptance of new materials (cheaper and more comfortable) for clothing. The author challenges Weber’s claim that peasants were ripe for emancipation from their archaic popular culture. Pollack Seid chooses to emphasise the active, complex manner in which peasants interacted with the outside world. Rejecting the notion of “simple stages both in traditional culture and in the shift from traditionalism to modernity”, she argues that traditional culture was never as isolated or resistant to change as many historians have contended and that, in fact, it was responsive to “new circumstances and opportunities”. However, she does validate Weber’s claim that in the last third of the nineteenth century, strong winds of change (national politics, schools, commercial and industrial activity, state bureaucracy, for example) irreversibly altered rural life: “Despite its resilience and adaptability, folkloristic culture disappeared.” The Bethmale costume disappeared in the period 1890-1914, not because peasants were eager to abandon their past, but because the pull of “nation-centeredness” could no longer be resisted (38-39).

Perhaps most enlightening is the author’s observation that the “traditional” Bethmale costume (painstakingly described in Chapter I) was a product of the nineteenth century, not a distant past, developing its distinctiveness only around the 1830s. The development of this celebrated costumism is linked, according to Pollack Seid, not to the commune’s isolation, but rather to its increasing contact with the outside world (*l’extérieur*). Indeed, railroads, markets, emigration and state Forest Service provided the Bethmalais with numerous opportunities for diverse social encounters beyond their village. In this context, the peasant costume took on the mark of a social identity badge, now necessary, due to increasing social contacts.

Indeed, the very complex relationship between village and *l’extérieur* is exemplified in the growth of the wet-nursing business for Bethmale’s women. By the middle of the nineteenth century, Bethmalaises were sought after because many outsiders associated traditional clothing with physical and moral health. Ironically, some Bethmalaises became unwed mothers in order to participate in the wet-nursing business. The author regards maintenance, even elaboration, of the traditional costume as an indication not of simple isolation then, but rather of integration with the culture and economy of the region and nation.

Chapters III, IV and V concerning the “undressing” of Bethmale are rich sources of information regarding the transition from traditional life to modern life in France. On this microscopic level, the process appears more complex than many have thought, with many local factors playing a determining role. For example, in the geo-politics of Bethmale, it was the politically conservative section of Arrien that began to abandon the traditional dress first; the Republican-dominated section of Ayet preserved the costume. Generational factors too operated, as the same parents

who, in the 1890s, began to encourage school attendance among their children, also introduced new and unusual names for their offspring and supervised the abandonment of traditional dress by their children (though they, themselves, continued to don the traditional clothes).

Important discussions also focus on changes in textile manufacturing, both domestic and industrial, on developments in urban lower class dress, on economic development in the region, on gender variations in dress and the “undressing”, on the emergence of local politics and patronage linked to national political culture and on the role of fashion as a commodity in the late nineteenth century. Finally, Pollack Seid discusses the role of romantic revivalism at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. Outsiders interested in folklore drew attention to the costume in a way which emphasized the sentimental and commercial vestiges of the dress, transforming the costume into an *objet d'art*. This patronizing attention contributed to the Bethmalais' abandonment of the costume, but also helped preserve vestiges of the costume for commercial tourism, a marriage of convenience between tradition and modernity.

*The Dissolution of Rural Culture* by Roberta Pollack Seid is published as part of a relatively new venture launched by Garland Press with the aim of putting in print a significant number of previously unpublished dissertations. It bears the strengths and weaknesses of a dissertation: thoroughly documented, repetitious at times, marred by the usual typographical errors found in every dissertation. The book includes a number of photographs and maps useful to the reader, though, as with dissertations, there is no index. An Afterword attempts to address some complex issues raised by feminist scholars about dress and fashion, but is too brief to be satisfactory. In the end, the merit of Pollack Seid's work is its use of local history to provide a nuanced look at a process with which historians must come to grips: modernization.

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Aileen Ribeiro — *Fashion in the French Revolution*. New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, Inc., 1988. Pp. 159.

Examples of colorful and political clothing in revolutionary France abound in Aileen Ribeiro's *Fashion in the French Revolution*. Buckles representing the towers of the Bastille were shown in a fashion magazine of 1789. Men and women sympathetic to the plight of royalty under constitutionalism and the Republic allegedly wore black, symbolic of mourning. Under the Directory, elite women — known as the *merveilleuses* — carried the craze for antique styles to extremes, wearing diaphanous, high-waisted white muslin dresses, short, curly hair *à la Titus* and thin, laced sandals. During this period, a few men — the *incroyables* — showed their disdain for the Republican Terror by sporting huge collars and wide lapels on tight, square-cut coats; long locks of hair fell beside their faces like dogs' ears and calf-length breeches caught by ribbons hugged their legs. Throughout the revolutionary decade, whether out of conviction or for self-preservation, males and females in large numbers donned blue, white and red cockades in their hats.