

MARTINE SEGALEN — *Love and Power in the Peasant Family*. Trans. by Sarah Matthews. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983. Pp. 206.

Although studies of the French family are by now numerous, relatively fewer attempts have been made to probe deeply into the symbols and meaning of gender relations in the past. It is to this task that Segalen addresses herself: to clarify the twentieth-century crisis of the family by examining the relations between men and women surrounding work, authority and power in the peasant families of the past. Drawing on the accounts of nineteenth- and twentieth-century folklorists and ethnologists, proverbs, and contemporary anthropological and historical work on the peasant family, Segalen rejects the generalizations of scholars such as Edward Shorter (*The Making of the Modern Family*, New York: Basic Books, 1976) on the nature of peasant culture in the past and attempts to understand that culture on its own terms. She is, for example, critical of the notion that love and sentiment only gradually evolved in the rural family over the course of the nineteenth century, arguing instead that "love exists in the rural environment, but... its affective value is received differently according to the organization of the groups concerned" (p. 15). Thus, peasant customs of courtship involving mutual punching of the partners recorded by folklorists such as Van Gennep were "an effective way of measuring the physical capabilities of a future wife, which are of primary importance in rural life." Similarly, in explaining regional differences regarding the acceptance of pre-nuptial sexual relations, Segalen advances the plausible hypothesis that hierarchical societies will tend to defend class interests more strongly than non-hierarchical societies and hence control premarital sexual behavior more closely than egalitarian societies where a potential pregnancy does not threaten to disrupt the social order (pp. 21-22).

The evidence of folklore, Segalen maintains, suggests that privacy within the peasant family in the past was far less important than we may imagine and that the lack of intimacy afforded by communal living arrangements and particularly the sharing of sleeping quarters by children, adults, farm-hands and often animals, in regions such as the Hautes Alpes or Normandy, was accepted as part of life. In contrast to what historians such as Shorter or Lawrence Stone (*The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800* [Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977]) have argued, the emergence of separate bedrooms within the rural dwelling suggests neither a linear development of a more affective relationship between conjoints nor the progressive privatization of the couple within the family (pp. 52-53); rather, the presence or absence (in the Seine-Maritime, for example) of collective sleeping arrangements was more likely a product of variations in the wealth of regions and families. In general, Segalen gives material factors of production and wealth more weight in determining family relations than cultural or geographical differences. Forms of property ownership, Segalen suggests, are predominant in explaining the different living arrangements within peasant households, and also explain variations in family structure and family strategies, a finding which is reinforced by the recent work of John Shaffer on *communautés* of the Nivernais (*Family and Farm, Agrarian Change and Household Organization in nineteenth century France* [Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1982]).

Segalen's central argument is that "the man-wife relationship is based not on the absolute authority of one over the other, but on the complementarity of the two" (p. 9). The legal restrictions on women and the subordination of women in popular cultural representations would not be taken as reflections of reality; women played a central and often instrumental role in rural society as producers and their labour and productive activities were essential to the maintenance of the household economy. This point is seen, for example, in the rituals governing the distribution of authority within marriage; rituals which did not automatically assume the authority of the husband over the wife, but which challenged the husband to establish that authority (p. 29) or which emphasized the complementarity of tasks and authority relations. Thus, in the Haute-Saône, when the newly-married couple returned to their house, the husband was presented with a wooden spoon containing an egg which he had to throw over the house. If he succeeded, he would dominate his wife; if he failed,

she would dominate him (p. 29). "These customs demonstrate that beyond the framework of civil and church law, the question of authority between the couple is still an open one" (p. 36).

Love and Power in the Peasant Family is rich with provocative insights into the nature of gender relations in rural society, insights which are valuable precisely because they do not merely superimpose urban models onto the rural milieu. Indeed, the most useful parts of the book are those where Segalen questions the traditional analytical categories of male-female relations, as, for example, the classifications of men's and women's work. As Segalen convincingly argues, women's "household work" — cheese-making, care of poultry, meal preparation — is, in itself, productive activity and should not be dismissed as "just housework". For much of that "housework" which resulted in selling eggs, cheese, poultry and milk in local markets was in fact important income-generating production. Apart from the material aspects of production, there are symbolic elements as well in women's work, such as the "strong affinity between the woman and water which appears in rituals as a symbolic element ensuring the passage from life to death" (p. 87), and which made women both powerful and feared in rural society.

Far from denying the existence of a sexual division of labour, Segalen wishes rather to emphasize the overlapping of male and female tasks. Indeed, to go further, in some regions, so-called "women's work" was performed by men and vice versa, such as bread-making which was performed by men in the Maçonnais and care of livestock undertaken by women in the Auge region, or more generally, women's control of the purse strings in rural families. Still more common were the shared tasks of men and women — planting potatoes or haymaking — and those activities which extended beyond work to the rituals of domestic protection such as tracing crosses on the house and on the horns of livestock at Candlemas to protect both humans and animals from illness (p. 121).

The complementarity of relations which Segalen finds within the household, however, dissolved outside of the household, where in the past and to some extent in the present, the sexes were more clearly segregated. The segregation of extramural sociability is but one example: the café for men and the wash-house for women. Thus the public representation of the family masked the private distribution of authority within the household.

How, then, are we to reconcile the picture of male authority and female submission painted by folklorists' tales and proverbs or seen in the public displays above, with the inner complementarity of power relations within the household? The answer is that proverbs and tales are normative representations rather than depictions of actual behavior. They are the symbolic discourse which exists as if to exorcize "what to a male society, appears an incomprehensible and aggressive female nature" (p. 189). Folklorists, in accepting them at face value, have "confused the level of actual practice with that of representation" (p. 160), by imposing their androcentric and class-centered views of family life on the societies they observed. Thus Segalen criticizes the use made by historians of the testimonies of doctors or ecclesiastical officials which "reproduce the language of an external and dominant category seeking to impose its views on a dominated society" (p. 129).

Segalen's observations about the complementarity of gender relations and about the complexity of authority relations are thrown into relief by the last chapter which looks at the effect of economic and social change on the rural household since 1945. The assertion of the husband's managerial authority in the household is a relatively more recent phenomenon which has been accompanied by the gradual withdrawal of women from agricultural production. Technical and commercial changes which have removed women's traditional tasks from the family and household have meant that rural women have lost their role as managers of the family finances; they have lost the market connections which came from selling the produce of their kitchens and gardens. The changes for women have been not only material, but psychological as well. Rural women are far more isolated, more proletarianized or confined

exclusively to child-rearing, than their eighteenth- or nineteenth-century (or even early twentieth-century) counterparts ever were — a situation which is highly problematic for those who have resisted the rural exodus and who have remained on the farm. Indeed, the denial of a productive role to women in contemporary rural economies has been a part of the contemporary crisis of the family in rural society.

If there is any major criticism that can be leveled against *Love and Power in the Peasant Family*, it is that Segalen tends to treat the nineteenth century as an essentially static period for rural France, a period free of significant change. While she is right to stress a certain continuity in peasant culture and family relations over the centuries, such a view is not altogether accurate, especially if the migrations of young rural women to silk and textile mills of small towns and cities or to work as domestic servants are taken into account. Such phenomena began to change the shape of the rural family long before the industrialization of agriculture after World War II. Sarah Matthews' translation, for the most part quite readable, is regrettably spotted with errors which occasionally obscure rather than simply cloud the meaning of the original French. Thus, "rendre (not 'rend') son tablier" should be "give back one's apron", not "tear up one's apron" (p. 26); "la dispute pour la culotte est bien révolue" (p. 179) is unfortunately rendered, "well and truly resolved," rather than "a thing of the past", to cite but two examples. Having said that, however, it is indeed well that *Mari et femme dans la société paysanne* has been made available to an English-reading audience so rapidly. Much as social historians have shown how our perception of history changes once the focus is shifted from "history seen from above" to "history from below", Segalen provides an excellent example of how old conceptions of family and conjugality change once gender relations are made the focus of analysis. Here is an important book both for what it suggests about the specificity of the rural family and about the need to find new categories of analysis to describe the relations of men and women in the households of the past.

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SIEGFRIED BAHNE — *Les Partis communistes des pays latins et l'Internationale Communiste dans les années 1923-1927*. Archives de Jules Humbert-Droz, vol. 2. Dordrecht, Boston and London: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1983. Pp. xlix, 703.

This is an extremely valuable book. Scholars of the international labour movement following the First World War, or of the national movement in a number of European countries, have long been grateful for the archives of Jules Humbert-Droz held by the International Institute of Social History. A young ex-pastor and pacifist and one of the founders of the Swiss communist party, Humbert-Droz rendered the Comintern, in which he held a number of important posts in the 1920s, an immense service, concentrating on the Latin countries and acting as one of its chief trouble-shooters. Between 1923 and 1927 alone his work carried him to Italy, Spain, Portugal, Switzerland, Holland, Norway, Germany, Belgium and France, in some cases repeatedly, his journeys interrupted by stints in Moscow. Throughout he fortunately dispatched copies of the various documents sent to and by him to a private address in a Swiss village. The result is probably the richest collection of original documents, outside silent Moscow, on the activities of the Comintern in western Europe during the period.

The 170 documents — correspondence, reports, resolutions — of this second instalment of Humbert-Droz's archives relate to France, Italy, Spain and Portugal. Some have been