"Bad citizens" with "murderous teeth":
Goats into Frenchmen, 1789-1827

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Responding to a statistical survey of France's domestic animals in 1794, an inspector from the Committee of Agriculture reported that damage by goats in the department of the Yonne was the worst of any of the regions he had visited. "Goats have contributed, more than any other cause, perhaps, to the shortage of wood that we are lamenting; everywhere that their numbers have increased, the amount of firewood has diminished as a direct result." He added, "these voracious and destructive animals are a most detrimental public nuisance."¹ Other observers agreed. "I know how much this animal offers in resources to its indigent family," remarked J. A. Marc, a member of the Haute-Saône Society of Agriculture, Science, Commerce, and the Arts, "but I also know there is nothing more devastating, more harmful to the forests." "A herd of goats spread within their interior does one hundred times more harm than the axe," he contended.²

Administrators and agronomists reserved special vitriol for goats and the harm they were believed to cause to forests. Even

¹ Archives nationales [hereafter AN] F10 328 Year III (1794-5).
² J. A. Marc, "Quelques vue qui pourront servir à la solution de cette question: Quels sont les moyens d'augmenter la production de Bois, et de diminuer leur consommation sans nuire à l'Agriculture ni aux Arts?" in Mémoires de la Société d'agriculture, sciences, commerce et arts du département de la Haute-Saône (Vesoul: Imprimerie de la Préfecture, 1806), 37.
in an era noted for purple prose, the invective against goats appears excessive, even outlandish. Observers denounced them in terms of malice and warfare: "The clearest enemy of the tree is the goat," shrieked a report from the Aveyron in 1795.\(^3\) "Trees, bushes, live hedges and all manner of cultivated enclosures are their prey," despaired another.\(^4\) The metaphor of homicidal incisors was especially popular. "Everyday experience proves," remarked a member of the agricultural society of Chaumont, "that the murderous tooth of beasts ruins young coppices and gradually converts beautiful woods into worthless scrub."\(^5\) The pariah of livestock, goats fared badly even in comparison to wolves: "Wolves do not wreak nearly as much havoc as goats," one critic claimed.\(^6\) Even goats' hygiene was called into question: "[Nanny] goats and billy goats have extremely noxious teeth and their breath is very bad," asserted the legal theorist La Poix de Fréminville in 1782.\(^7\)

What could explain this outrageous vilification of goats at a time when myriad other animals and activities consumed France's forest bounty? The answers have to do with goats' close cultural and economic ties with the rural poor: landless laborers and smallholding peasants who from the Revolution forward began keeping goats in ever-increasing numbers. By placing the blame for woodland deterioration on silvopastoralism, with a


\(^{6}\) AN F10 405, Year IV.

\(^{7}\) Edme de la Poix de Fréminville, La pratique universelle pour la renovation des terriers et des droits seigneuriaux as quoted in Daniel Solakian, "De la multiplication des chèvres sous la Révolution," in Révolution et espaces forestiers, 57.
particular emphasis on goats, state and bourgeois stakeholders legitimated their attempts to wrest control of the nation's natural resources from its deeply rooted inhabitants and impose in their place scientific forestry and rational management. This discourse of denunciation, which had its roots in the Enlightenment, was part of a broader effort to bring the wild countryside to heel from the Revolution through the nineteenth century.

"The Approximate number of goats . . . is truly frightening"

Goats were not always so reviled. The Ordonnance des Eaux et Forêts of 1669, a landmark forest law created under the oversight of Louis XIV's ambitious minister of finances, Jean-Baptiste Colbert, treated goats and sheep as equally inimical to the forest. The law categorically barred shepherds from sending either species into or even alongside state, communal, and privately owned woods under threat of being flogged, expelled from the district, and having one's animals confiscated. While the ordinance did allow pig and cattle grazing within limits, many believed even this was too permissive. As the renowned agronomist Duhamel du Monceau argued in Des semis et plantations des arbres (1760),

I will not at all investigate which among the Beasts are the most or least harmful in the woods: it suffices that it is proven that Horses and Donkeys nibble buds, for them to be banished[,] Pigs root up the earth with their snouts and eat the seeds . . . red deer are like big livestock, roe deer like goats and sheep, wild boar like pigs, . . . and rabbits, who dig up dirt and feed on tree bark also commit much disorder in young woods.

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All animals, even wild ones, should be kept out of the woods, Duhamel contended. 10

Within five years of the start of the Revolution, however, goats were increasingly singled out among their fellow ruminants as the most wanton of woodland browsers. A rapid expansion in the goat population prompted in large part this shift in outlook. According to figures provided by departmental administrators, goats multiplied rapidly throughout France at the end of the eighteenth century, particularly in the Jura, Alps, and Pyrenees. While weaknesses in the method and extent of reporting undercut the data's accuracy, the tabulations nonetheless suggest an astonishing increase: from nearly a million goats in Year III (1794-95) – already a much greater number than in previous years – to more than a million and a half in Year V (1796-97). 11 Whatever the precise figure, almost everyone agreed that goats were on the rise. Expressing a view shared by many, a Committee of Agriculture correspondent declared in 1794, "The approximate number of goats . . . is truly frightening." 12 This trend continued throughout the Revolution. Writing from the Doubs in 1806, the prefect, Jean De Bry, reported that goats had multiplied by an astounding 48,000 percent in the department in the past fifty years – from a mere fifty-three in 1755 to 25,470 in 1804. 13

Historically, a combination of legal repression and cultural aversion had kept France's goat population in check. In addition to the 1669 ordinance, various decrees issued in the eighteenth century reiterated goats' unwelcome status in the nation's

10 ibid. At minimum they should be kept out of stands under ten years old.
11 Tabulations based on Festy, Les animaux ruraux, 2: 290, 313, and 340. See also by the same author Les Délits ruraux et leur répression sous la Révolution et le Consulat, étude d'histoire économique, Bibliothèque d'histoire économique et sociale (Paris: M. Rivière et Cie, 1956), 64-5. See also map in Solakian, 60.
12 AN F10 328 Commission d'Agriculture et des arts, Year III.
forests. With their beady eyes, cloven hooves, sharp horns, and discomfiting under bite, goats were linked in peasant superstition with black magic, causing rural inhabitants to acquire them with reluctance, if at all. One folktale from the Franche-Comté described how a goat who had cunningly outwitted a wolf in mid-pounce was assumed to be a witch and burned alive. Popular belief also held that the devil often took the form of a black billy goat.

Goats' storied stubbornness and wayward temperaments further lessened their appeal. La Fontaine invoked these traits, universally understood as caprine, for the moral of his fable "The Two Goats." An allegory of obstinacy and idiocy, the fable depicts two goats, having "tasted a certain liberty," setting out separately to "seek their fortune" – only to lose their chance at freedom when neither will give way in an encounter on a narrow footbridge. "For want of retreating, they fell together," wrote La Fontaine. "This accident is not new on the path of Fortune." Despite this unflattering reputation, goats experienced a surge in popularity from 1789 forward. A combination of factors contributed to the change. One of the most significant was the sudden decline in woodland supervision due to the National Assembly's suppression of the maîtrises des Eaux et Forêts, the venal superstructure that enforced the 1669 ordinance and other

14 See, for example, Arrêt du parlement qui fait défense à tous propriétaires, fermiers, etc., de mener paître en aucuns temps les boucs et chèvres dans les vignes, bois, buissons. 12 Nov. 1778, in Isambert et al., 25:453-5.
18 Jean de la Fontaine, Fables choisies, mises en vers, ed. Georges Couton (Paris: Bordas, 1990), Fable IV.
While officers and guards were instructed to keep working pending the development of a new forest administration, no effective replacement for their oversight emerged until 1801. Legislative reforms took even longer; it was not until 1827 that a new Forest Code took the place of the outdated ordinance. Freed from the constraints of the reviled maîtrises, rural communities, private landowners, industrial forge masters, and others profited from the long period of administrative impairment by intensifying their harvests of fuelwood and timber and even leveling woods for agriculture. The deterioration that arose from this expanded exploitation often resulted, several seasons down the road, in a terrain best suited to the indiscriminate palate of goats.

Also key to goats' proliferation were the immense state auctions of former ecclesiastical holdings and other nationalized properties, launched in 1790 in the name of fiscal stability, and the division of the commons announced in 1792 and enacted from 1793 forward. By parceling and privatizing expanses once


23 Décret relatif à une instruction pour l'aliénation des biens nationaux, 1 June 1790, in Archives parlementaires de 1787 à 1860. Recueil complet des débats législatifs et politiques des chambres françaises, 1st ser. (Paris: Librairie administrative de Paul Dupont, 1862-1913), 16:26. On the division of the
used for communal pasture, these measures reduced the fodder available for large livestock and forced rural inhabitants to turn to goats. Unlike their more discerning bovine and ovine cousins, goats could get by on the most meager terrain, be it rocky southern scrubland or vertiginous alpine slopes, and still produce one to four liters of milk a day as well as the occasional meat, hides, and bristles.24

Wartime requisitions were yet a third factor in goats' spread. As a report from Reims observed in 1794, communities throughout the district were complaining of the depopulation of their livestock due to the "requisition of goats, oxen, cows, and sheep for the use of the Armies" as well as demands for "an enormous quantity" of grain.25 Cheaper to obtain than cows and sheep, quick to multiply, and exceptionally adept at foraging, these cut-rate ruminants offered a critical source of milk and cheese in a time of intense need.

No alms for the poor man's cow

As the Committee of Agriculture's Year III livestock survey showed, the upsurge in the goat population was greatest in the country's least agriculturally viable regions. From the Haute-Saône south to the Var, the departments of the east and southeast commons, see Décret relatif au partage des biens et usages communaux, 14 Aug. 1792, in Duvergier, 4:306; and Décret concernant le mode de partage des biens communaux, 10 June 1793, in Le Partage des biens communaux: documents sur la préparation de la loi du 10 juin 1793, ed. Georges Bourgin (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1908), 728-39. For a recent study of the decree's effects, see Noelle L. Plack, "Agrarian Individualism, Collective Practices and the French Revolution: The Law of 10 June 1793 and the Partition of Common Land in the Department of the Gard," European History Quarterly 35:1 (2005): 39-62.

24 Solakian, 53, 62.

25 AN F10 328 Commission d'Agriculture et des arts: correspondance par départements. See also AN F/IcIII/Doubs/6 Analyse des opérations des administrateurs du district du Quingey pendant le mois de Frimaire An III (Nov.-Dec. 1794): "The mood of the public has cooled in the countryside in light of the requisitions of all sorts [including] the oxen which are on the road to carry feed from Colmar to Belfort and which they fear losing."
all reported more than 30,000 goats each, as did the departments of the Landes and Pyrénées-Orientales. In these areas, high elevation, harsh winters, and poor soil conditions limited arable production and encouraged pastoralism instead. Yet even in the rest of the country, goats’ resourcefulness and hardiness were a boon to the landless and smallholding poor who had no access to pastures of their own. In this way, the increase in goats ensued from and sustained the expansion of France’s human population throughout the first third of the nineteenth century.

Goats’ importance to the rural poor blunted some woodland advocates’ otherwise insistent criticism. "Their very high number is considerably harmful, and yet they provide for the life and maintenance of the most indigent in the countryside," wrote one official in 1795. The agronomic theorist Rougier de la Bergerie agreed. "A sole consideration tempers the curse that one is tempted to pronounce against the goat," he conceded; "it is the cow of the poor, but if it is so useful to him for providing milk to children, it must be raised for him alone." Speculating on the social costs of goat suppression for the nation, the Restoration administrator Isaac-Philibert Ardant fretted,

to suppress pasturage in the mountains is to destroy a numerous population, industrious and useful, it is to force them to desert their homes and expatriate themselves in distant climes . . . in a word, it is to wish to enlarge the American colonies, whose population grows daily, and always at the expense of some fault of the governments of Europe.

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26 See map in Solakian, 60.
27 Festy, Les Animaux ruraux, 2:212-3.
28 J. B. Rougier de la Bergerie, Traité d’agriculture pratique, ou Annuaire des cultivateurs du département de la Creuse et pays circonvoisins (Paris, Year III [1795]), 190.
29 Ardant was a senior official in the Conseil d’État under Louis XVIII. Isaac-Philibert Ardant, Projet de code rural et de code forestier (Paris: Testu, 1819), 2e partie: 96.
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Such a measure is too far from all the ideas of justice and charity of the government ruling France," he averred in 1819, "an exception must be made."\textsuperscript{30}

But such sympathies were anomalous. The majority of agronomists believed that goats had to be reined in regardless of the consequences. Calling for goats' unconditional exclusion from state and communal forests, a member of the Haute-Saône agricultural society avowed:

If I were an administrator, in vain would petitions come crying to me, in vain would one give the decline of livestock, the abandonment of farming, the ruin of the farmer as a pretext for me to authorize grazing in the forest, above all in stands five or six years old; I would be inflexible . . . I would forbid access.\textsuperscript{31}

While the primary aim of the 1669 ordinance had been the protection and promotion of big timber in the interest of maritime strength, woodland theorists and administrators in the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were motivated by broader reasons for forest conservation. France in this period remained utterly dependent on wood as its main source of domestic and industrial energy as well as its principal material of crafts, construction, agricultural and manufacturing equipment, land and water transport, tools of all types, and even footwear. In addition, forests' critical role in climate stability and watershed protection was beginning to be understood. The engineer and

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid. Municipal administrators frequently echoed this point. See McPhee, 138.

\textsuperscript{31} Marc, 37. Other works calling for a ban were \textit{Opinion de Marc-François Bonguiot (du Jura) sur l'administration forestière} (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, Year III) and Houry, "Mémoire sur cette question: Quels sont les moyens d'augmenter la production de Bois, et de diminuer leur consommation sans nuire à l'Agriculture?" in \textit{Mémoire de la Société d'agriculture, sciences, commerce et arts du département de la Haute-Saône} (Vesoul: Imprimerie de la préfecture, 1806), 61-82. See also "Loi relative aux droits de pâturage, pacage, et autres usages dans les forêts nationales, 28 Ventôse XI (19 Mar. 1803)" in Baudrillart, \textit{Traité général des eaux et forêts}, 1:636. Though the law was not enforced, it reiterated the state's opposition to woodland grazing.
early hydrologist Jean-Antoine Fabre, among others, warned of the need to restore the mountain forests lest disastrous floods ensue.\textsuperscript{32}

In this context, critics' concerns about goats' real or potential damage were decisive in shaping France's woodland management policies, particularly the Forest Code of 1827. The spokesperson for the code in bill form, the Vicomte de Martignac, regarded goat keeping, along with most other peasant practices, as threatening to the very future of the nation. "These rights form, for the property of the state as well as for private property, the most formidable danger, and the most fertile source of damage and abuse," Martignac asserted.\textsuperscript{33} For conservation to succeed, he argued, woodland grazing and other traditional use rights would have to be suppressed.

Most legislators agreed. In his remarks on the draft code, Le Comte Roy, a member of the Chamber of Peers, observed, "Pasturage is the greatest scourge of the woods: it necessarily brings destruction to them, over a more or less extended period of time."\textsuperscript{34} Characterizing grazing as the prime culprit in a dramatic narrative of decline, Roy contended that the six million hectares of forest currently in existence in France were but the "remainders of more than forty million hectares that [the country] possessed two thousand years ago." "Of all the trees destroyed in France," he added, "the hand of man has destroyed only one twenty-fifth of them, the rest have been [ruined] by grazing animals."\textsuperscript{35}

\textsuperscript{33} \textit{Archives parlementaires}, 49:91, 29 Dec. 1826.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 51:639, 8 May 1827. Antoine Roy served as minister of finances under Louis XVIII before being named a peer. He was the spokesperson for the Chamber of Peers' committee on the Forest Code.

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The final version of the Forest Code stopped short of banning woodland grazing altogether. Nonetheless, goats fared poorly in the new law. Choosing to ignore the vital place that goats had come to occupy in the economy of the rural poor, legislators upheld the old ordinance's interdiction of them in state and communal forests. Even sheep got an exemption "in certain localities per ordinances of the king." The law reduced other customary practices by requiring that communities produce ancient charters or other written proof of their use rights within two years of the law's promulgation. Those that could not forfeited their claims. More importantly, the Code laid the groundwork for the systematic application of *cantonnement*, a method of isolating communal usage and divesting it from state and private forests. By contrast, private forest owners, who comprised the majority of the nation's industrialists and possessed more than half its forests, got free rein. Beyond a pair of temporary and timid restrictions on clearing and timber felling, the new Code assured landowners of the autonomy to capitalize on their forests in whatever way they saw fit.

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Bad citizens and degenerate subjects

Compared with the innumerable other demands on the forest in the same period, the governmental and intellectual rejection of goats from France's woodlands appears all the more curious. In the seventeenth century, long before the goat population was at all significant, Colbert had warned, "France will perish for want of wood!" Le Comte Roy and others' anti-caprine indictments aside, clearing for agriculture and settlement was always the biggest factor in the forest's retreat. Clearing dates back to the first human settlements, of course, but in the 1760s under physiocratic influence clearing for agriculture rose dramatically as official crown policy. Population growth and industrial consumption also increased during the later eighteenth century. In the Doubs alone, wood used for ironworks and domestic hearths devoured more than 230,000 cords per year.

In the grand scheme of things, goats' impact on forest health was relatively modest. Why, then, the recriminatory rhetoric? As the trajectory of the Revolution shifted from popular expectancy to bourgeois triumph, goats emerged as a symbol of disorderly opposition to rationalizing progress. If bourgeois lawmakers and administrators imagined scientific forestry as vital to a resurgent nation's power, goats became identified with everything they wanted to leave behind: rural backwardness, confused common rights, and resistance to state authority. Goats were "degenerate subjects" that must be "improved" and disciplined, officials asserted, just as the rural poor were trespassers, ne'er-do-wells, and "bad citizens" for insisting on pursuing their longstanding rights of woodland gathering and grazing.

In short, goats came to stand for everything wrong with the peasantry. Goats were obstreperous, unmanageable, and unpredictable; so were the rural poor. Goats made do with

40 Quoted in John Croumbie Brown, ed., French Forest Ordinance of 1669, with Historical Sketch of Previous Treatment of Forests in France (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1883), 12.
41 Bry, 84-5.
42 Archives parlementaires, 2nd ser. 50:639, 8 May 1827; also AN M 30, 6 Mar. 1848: Dévastations dans la forêt de Poligny.
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meager provisions and endured in rough environments; so did the rural poor. Goats relentlessly consumed with no refinement and little thought beyond their own survival – ultimately to the detriment of the environment, the nation, and its new guardians – and, in the characterization of many bourgeois, so did the rural poor. "It must be said that goats, in general, live for the profit of those who have no property at the cost of those who do," remarked the prefect of the Ain, "goats have only multiplied so much because day laborers find it more convenient to [send them] to devastate enclosures and neighboring properties than to earn an honest wage through useful employment." Balzac went one step further, portraying the poor and their time-honored practices as indistinguishable from beasts. Describing a group of peasants awaiting entry into a field for gleaning in Les Paysans, Balzac wrote,

There were old folks with turkey necks, red and hairless to their eyelids, who extended their heads like dogs stopped before a partridge, children silent as soldiers under fire, young girls who stamped their feet like animals waiting for their pasture; the traits of childhood and old age were oppressed under a ferocious desire; the property of another, which became their property through abuse.

In sum, France's Revolutionary-era disparagement of goats had less to do with forest protection than with conflicts of class and ideology. In affixing blame for the forest's retreat on peasants and their favored beasts, policymakers and property owners not only obscured their own responsibilities for woodland decline, they also bolstered arguments for state centralization, rational management, the curtailment of customary rights, and by extension the dispossession of the rural poor who, by the middle of the nineteenth century, would increasingly resort to emigration. In pursuing their own self-

43 Festy, Les Délits ruraux, 67.
interest, France's new rulers cast themselves as the protectors of the public good while castigating peasants and goats alike for their irremediable selfishness.  

In later years, ironically, the perception of both goats and their masters has come full circle. As the peasantry has become domesticated under expanded state rule and dependent on the government for its economic survival, its image has changed from unruly oafs to archetypes of integrity. As one historian has put it, they are now the embodiment of "all the very best values." Goats' reputation has also improved. Not only are they hailed for their fine artisanal cheeses, they are also viewed, remarkably, as forest protectors. In France and elsewhere, goats are increasingly deployed to consume the dense underbrush that contributes to the spread of forest fires and to restore the open woodland habitats of endangered birds and butterflies.

This reversal reminds us that popular and scientific debates about animals and the environment must be carefully scrutinized. Whether the topic is whale harvesting or wolf killing, cattle lots or cockfights, advocates and critics alike are inevitably informed by larger political, socioeconomic, and cultural concerns. In this case, goats' rehabilitation came two centuries too late for their impecunious owners. Yet if the rural poor had been given an opportunity to advocate for their customary rights as they


believed was possible in the early stages of the Revolution, perhaps the merits of woodland pasturage might have been understood earlier, and the environmental policies that emerged might have proven not only more acceptable, but also more effective at sustaining the forest's multidimensional values for all living things.