

Maria Halamska

HENRI MENDRAS (1927–2003)

Professor Henri Mendras, one of the best known and most active French sociologists died in Paris on 5 November, 2003. A student of Gurvitch and Friedmann, he spent the early 1950s in the USA as a Fulbright scholar. After returning to France he concentrated on the rural question, founding the *Groupe de Sociologie Rurale*, a team researching the turbulent changes in the French countryside and creating the foundations for modern and highly productive agriculture. "The incorporation of the countryside into France" was one of the most important French political problems at the turn of the fifties and sixties which French rural sociology took an active role in solving.

Mendras was engaged in the problems of modernisation of agriculture and the socio-economic questions of rural development from the early fifties which is documented by the following publications: *Études de sociologie rurale* (1953), *Les Paysans et la modernisation de l'agriculture* (1958) based on research on the diffusion of the maize hybrid in the rural community, *Six villages d'Épire, problèmes de développement socio-économique* (1962). *La sociologie rurale* published in 1967 brought him fame and the reputation of an experienced rural sociologist as did his work on the end of the peasantry (*La fin des paysans*) which pretty nearly provoked a national polemic. In it he proclaims the end of more than 1000 years of peasant civilisation: since the early fifties the peasantry as a certain way of life ceased to exist and in the French countryside all that remained were peasant producers, subordinated to the rules of the market and technological rigours of production. The collapse of that formation occurred under the influence of the industrial civilisation which led society into a fast rhythm of change. Peasant society where changes had taken place very slowly and loyalty to routine was more appreciated than flexibility and adaptability, had to disappear. Peasants with their specific, mythical relationship to the land, the cult of hard work which was based on techniques handed down from generation to generation and on the celebration of work, with time marked by nature's rhythm and production cycles as well as the local space also disappeared. The institution of the family farm which was

typical for the peasant civilisation also changed: the farm broke away from the family and became an integral part of the entire economy, whereas the family and its members gained greater autonomy.

As a tribute to that departing civilisation, Mendras published *Sociétés paysannes*, (1976) an outline of the theory of the peasantry, in Western Europe stepping down from the historical scene. Five typical features define the ideal peasant society: relative autonomy of the peasant community in relation to surrounding society, the structural significance of the home group in the organisation of the social and economic life of the community, relative autarky of the economic system, the principle of mutual acquaintance (*interconnaissance*) in social relations and the principle of mediation (as well as the function of mediator) deciding about the relations of the community with surrounding society. He also analyses peasant revolts and revolutions, agrarian reform, emigration from the countryside and innovation, change, attitude towards politics. On this subject he publishes in 1979 *Voyage au pays de l'utopie rustique*, an essay about the rural roots of European civilisation, referring to the utopian novel by Aleksander Czajonow.

In the seventies he gradually departs from the rural topic although continuing to observe changes taking place there, commenting them (an example of this is the extensive epilogue *Vingt ans après* (1984) to the following edition of *La fin des paysans* or participation in a debate on a similar subject in summer 2003) and he is the unquestioned authority in this field. He concentrates on the observation of changes in French society which fascinate him. Their results appear in further works whose titles are highly significant: *Sagesse et le désordre. France 1980* (1980, ed.) *Le changement social* (1983) with M. Forse, *La seconde Révolution française 1965–1987* (1988), *La France que je vois* (2002). In order to observe these changes he creates the French Observatory of Economic Affairs, in Paris, which gathers many outstanding specialists in the field of social sciences; later the Observatory of Social Change in Western Europe, in Poitiers.

European societies and the system of integrating Europe is Henri Mendras's third field of observation. In 1997 he publishes *L'Europe des Européens*, where he proposes neither a geographic nor a historical but a sociological definition of Europe. Europe's quintessence is its West, defined by four features: evangelical and Roman individualism, the idea of the nation, capitalism and democracy. These four features appearing together, nowhere else to be seen, describe the model, due to which it is possible to clarify large structures and European institutions: religions and system of values, hierarchy and social categories, family and kinship, the nation and capitalism.

Professor Mendras was an excellent organiser of academic research, formal and informal discussion, academic teacher (his handbook *Elements de sociologie* 1967), an excellent speaker and writer. In spite of his clear-cut position on many matters, he kept the distance of an academic. This is how Michel Crozier

describes this characteristic of his (*Le Monde*, 7.XI) *Sceptical, kind and polite, a charming yet shrewd analyst of society and a man with character, who did not get carried away by any of the fashions which fascinated French intellectuals...* It should be emphasised that being a sociologist in France in the sixties and seventies without adopting a Marxist tendency was quite an art. As Crozier continues, *Mendras gave the impression of being a thinker standing aloof, while also being at the centre of reflection.* All these features can be found in his memoirs *Comment devenir sociologue. Souvenirs d'un vieux mandarin* (1995), which are also a humorous sketch of the history of post-war French sociology.

Henri Mendras's works, particularly those concerning rural sociology, were translated into many languages and he was an important figure among European sociologists, participating in many conferences and international research.