
H-France Review Vol. 13 (August 2013), No. 127

Cynthia A. Bouton, *Interpreting Social Violence in French Culture: Buzançais, 1847-2008*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2011. 256 pp. Notes, figures, and index. \$39.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-9071-3686-7.

Review by Laird Boswell, University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Cynthia Bouton's short and elegant book takes as its starting point one of the last food riots in nineteenth-century France. On a brutally cold day in January 1847, a group of women on the outskirts of Buzançais, a small agricultural *bourg* in the Indre some twenty-odd kilometers west of Châteauroux, seized a shipment of grain. They forcefully prodded a group of men working in a nearby public charity workshop to join them, marched the carts of grain into town and unloaded them at town hall. As the mayor and the *gendarmes* pulled back, a crowd numbering a few hundred women, men, and children stepped in. Over the next few days, they seized more grain, and set a price for all the captured grain. They attacked a flour mill, visited the homes of landowners, merchants, and local elites demanding money along with a signed commitment to sell grain at the price set by the crowd.

When Eudoxe-Louis-Joseph Chambert, the son of a well-to-do landowner gunned down a rioter who was too forcefully pressing for money, the crowd turned violent. They pursued Chambert and gruesomely murdered him with an axe, sledgehammer, and pitchfork. Within days, however, the army had restored order. Less than one week after Chambert's murder, an examining magistrate was at work. In late February 1847, the state placed twenty-six accused (most of them day laborers and artisans; only five could sign their names) on trial in Châteauroux. The court found all but one guilty, and sentenced three to death. On April 16, they were guillotined on a market day in Buzançais in front of a silent crowd. The Buzançais food riot was over. It would live on for much longer in national and local memory. Its afterlife is the subject of this book.

Much like the murder of the country noble Alain de Monéys some two decades later at the market fair in Hauteveyrie (Dordogne), there is a gripping story here—one that goes to the heart of the deep-seated tensions, sharpened by economic crisis and hunger, that crisscrossed rural communities. Unlike Alain Corbin whose microhistory of Hauteveyrie gives intelligibility to the violent outburst of region's peasants, Bouton has little interest in reinterpreting the events of Buzançais.^[1] She does not propose a detailed explanation of the riot, nor does she provide much in the way of historical context. The author's first two chapters, which constitute the most extensive and compelling reconstruction of the riot and the ensuing trial available, set the stage for the pages that follow. Bouton's lens quickly turns to an analysis of how Buzançais was remembered and interpreted over the next 160 years. Finding traces of this violent *émeute* in cultural memory all the way up to the twenty first century, Bouton asks why this came to be. Why was Buzançais remembered—an object of sorrow and commemoration for some, fear and disdain for others, and a vehicle for lessons of morality, politics, and justice for all?

Not surprisingly, Buzançais first emerged in politics during the Second Republic when pamphlet writers and politicians on the left and the right invoked it to marshal popular support. Even Marx made a fleeting reference to the riot in *Class Struggles in France*. Buzançais appears both in *Les misérables* and in Flaubert's *Sentimental Education*. But only with the publication of Jules Vallès's serialized *roman-*

feuilleton, *Les blouses: La famine à Buzançais* in Georges Clemenceau's newspaper *La Justice* in 1880 did the grain riot occupy the center of a literary work. Vallès's novel was republished (again in serialized form) in 1885, and by a specialized publisher after the First World War. Vallès's rich narrative amply illustrated the depth of misery and exploitation in Buzançais, supported the rioters' demands for social justice, and called for clemency rather than repression. Bouton's close textual analysis of the novel and the circumstances of its publication are complemented by illuminating discussions of the illustrations that graced the work's postwar edition.

By the mid-1920s the winds had shifted. Pierre Bouchardon, a conservative magistrate and prodigious writer of crime stories seized on the affair. Bouchardon's *La Jacquerie de Buzançais*, published in 1926, took a decidedly different tack by criminalizing the behavior of the "pillagers" and "brigands" who seized the grain, the "wild beasts" who murdered Chambert, and the "horde" that rioted in the *bourg* (pp. 116-118). Public order had to be firmly defended in order to protect property and the rights of citizens from the insurgents. After the Second World War, Buzançais was taken up again, this time in the pages of *France-Soir* which reenacted the story in a 1956 cartoon series aptly entitled *Le Crime ne paie pas*. *France-Soir's* message was anything but subtle. Some twenty years later, French television (Antenne 2) returned to Buzançais, and produced a historical *téléfilm*, *Le pain et le vin*, that boasted a script by a key player in French public television programming, Pierre Desgraupes. In contrast to recent novelistic or illustrated accounts, *Le pain et le vin* presented a nuanced view of the events, giving voice to multiple perspectives. And it challenged previous interpretations that emphasized upholding law and order by suggesting that popular protest in defense of essential needs was indeed justified. At the end of the twentieth century, local historians keen on preserving the region's *patrimoine* reclaimed the story. Within a decade the town was the site of a theatrical *son et lumière* that put its history, including the 1847 riot, on stage.

The reenactments of the Buzançais hunger riots in print, illustrations, comic strips, film, and theater lie at the heart of Bouton's analysis. Part memory history, part fine-combed textual analysis, part cultural history of violence, *Interpreting Social Violence* ranges far and wide in its analysis of the episodic and varied resurgences of the hunger riot over time. The author has left no stone unturned in her search for traces of Buzançais in cultural memory and political discourse. The large palette of sites where the riot emerged as a central protagonist—novels, cartoons, television and theater for tourists—suggests how cultural memory, far from being transmitted over time through the same medium, is often fractured and patchwork in nature. This is surely one of the book's most original contributions, and one that would have merited a more substantial discussion.

But why did Buzançais hold such appeal? The event itself mattered less than the timeless issues it raised: the struggle of the *petits contre les gros*, the rights of property-holders versus the right to subsistence, the boundaries between protest and criminal activity, and the legitimacy of violence in the hands of protesters and the state. Bouton argues that "competing political cultures found the story of Buzançais a useful weapon in their ideological arsenal" (p. 2). She excels at tracing the shifting interpretations, manipulations, and instrumentalizations of the *jacquerie*. She is on less solid ground, however, when it comes to explaining why Buzançais, as opposed to countless other events that evoke the same embedded issues, was remembered and why it also appears to have been forgotten for significant periods of time. The author's claim that Buzançais became a "national cultural artifact" (p. 3) and a (minor) *lieu de mémoire* is not fully convincing. The public had to be regularly reintroduced to an event that no longer figured in its memorial landscape.

For a book concerned with "social violence" there is little focus on the changing nature and meaning of violence over time. Authors, illustrators, television producers, and the public may well have been attracted to Buzançais because it crystallized the clash between poor and rich while starkly outlining the conflict between social justice and economic rights, but they were surely also mesmerized by the episode's raw violence *tout court*. Perhaps Buzançais's appeal lies in its foreignness: it harks back to a

time when crowds took justice into their own hands and when the state's punishment was brutal and swift. There are no doubt other events that raise contested questions of social justice and property rights, but few that elicit such a combination of horror and fascination to the contemporary observer.

Bouton ends *Interpreting Social Violence* by outlining Buzançais's relevance for the present. In her view, the violent food riot fits into a long history of "collective mobilizations" in France, one that saw generations of protesters taking to the streets from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century. But is there really a connection between Buzançais, José Bové's dismantling of a McDonald's, and the *banlieue* riots of 2005? The tired concept of the *guerres franco-françaises* that Bouton cites in both her introduction and her conclusion doesn't fully do justice to the richness of her evidence. Her book matters not because it illuminates protest in the present or explains long-standing divisions in French political culture. Her microhistory matters because it makes us reconsider how memory works.

NOTE

[1] Alain Corbin, *Le village des cannibales* (Paris: Aubier, 1990).

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ISSN 1553-9172