
H-France Review Vol. 11 (June 2011), No. 133

Noelle Plack, *Common Land, Wine and the French Revolution: Rural Society and Economy in Southern France, c. 1789-1820*. Surrey, England and Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate Publishing, 2009. xiv + 215 pp. Figures, maps, tables, appendices and bibliography. £55.00 UK (hb). ISBN 978-0-7546-6728-5.

Review by Jeffrey Houghtby, Iowa State University.

In this study of common land and its partition in the department of the Gard, Noelle Plack seeks to understand “how Revolutionary, Napoleonic and Restoration legislation in the long term fostered the ‘privatization’ of common land” and fueled the expansion of viticulture in southern France before 1850 (p. 12). Drawing primarily from the L and the 2O subseries in departmental archives and the F series in the Archives Nationales, Plack argues that the combined impact of legislation was significant in France because it brought about a “dramatic removal of common land from the public domain” (p. 133). She focuses primarily on the formulation and implementation of three pieces of legislation: the law of 10 June 1793, which permitted rural communities to partition their commons; the law of 9 Ventôse XII (27 February 1804), which sanctioned a few partitions but annulled many more; and the legislation of 20 March 1813, which ordered the seizure and sale of common land to pay for Napoleon’s disastrous wars. This book marks a significant advance by providing one of the few longitudinal studies of common land tenure at the department level. Plack’s analyses of the relevant historiography and legislative debates are quite good, but her conclusions are, for the most part, speculative and unconvincing.

Plack’s discussion of the Gard’s topography, climate and economic conditions in 1789 is quite good. Like Languedoc more generally, the Gard was in the midst of a slow transition, dating back to the late sixteenth century, from grain production to viticulture (pp. 20-24). The collapse of the textile and silk industries after 1765, an ovine epidemic in 1775, and the destruction of two million olive trees during the harsh winter of 1789 accelerated this transition. Old Regime legislation of 1759, which revoked longstanding prohibitions against the plantation of new vines, and that of July 1770, which permitted land clearances, opened up more land to the vine. The real boom in viticulture, she concludes, occurred between 1770 and 1788, when the availability of more land and rising wine prices boosted wine production in Languedoc by 25 percent. Plack focuses particular attention on the middle and eastern half of the department, where the rocky, brushy hillsides so characteristic of Mediterranean France predominated (*garrigues*). Common lands were extensive there, accounting for about 14 percent (roughly 195,000 acres) of the department’s surface area in 1846. The *garrigues* teemed with small-scale peasant proprietors, particularly micro-landowners (those owning less than one hectare) and *petits* (those owning between one and five hectares). The book focuses in part on the extent to which these smallholders lay the foundations of the viticultural revolution after 1850.

Chapters two and three discuss the circumstances surrounding the formulation and implementation of the law of 10 June 1793. Plack describes a state of legislative paralysis in Paris throughout the liberal phase of the Revolution. Legislators proved unable to reconcile the interests of large-scale landowners and better-off farmers, who demanded partition in proportion to property holdings or tax assessments or opposed partition altogether, and smallholders and the landless, who demanded egalitarian partition. Nor could legislators agree whether partition should be mandatory or optional or whether the plots should be distributed on the basis of households or individuals. As they struggled to reach consensus, pressures for egalitarian partition mounted in the countryside. Impatient communities in many regions

of France, including the Gard, began to partition the land on their own during the summer of 1791. Even the Paris uprisings of August 1792 failed to prompt decisive action. Although the Legislative Assembly ordered the mandatory partition of non-forested common land on August 14, it gave the Committee of Agriculture just three days to determine how to go about it. Three days turned into ten frustrating months, during which communities continued to partition their commons. The Jacobins' rise to power, Plack argues, finally broke the logjam. The law of 10 June 1793 gave communities the option to partition non-forested common land equally among all individuals regardless of age or gender.

The silence with which Gardian communities welcomed 10 June 1793 was deafening, as the vast majority never responded to the government's invitation to deliberate. Of the department's 361 communities, only twenty-five agreed to partition; of those eighteen were carried out, and at least three of those were later annulled. Plack speculates that most communities chose not to partition because it did not suit their best interests to do so. Some commons could not support crops. Communities also feared erosion and other environmental damage that might occur after clearing the land, while others feared upsetting the balance between arable land and pasture. The fact that most villages produced unanimous votes for or against partition is interesting on a variety of levels. She finds unanimity suspicious, however, and speculates that partition in the Gard made little headway because better off peasants attended the assemblies and blocked partition in the villages to preserve their "monopoly" over the commons. Historians have argued much the same for other regions of France, but have yet to carry out detailed studies of livestock distribution among peasant households. Recent research in Burgundy is finding that, while village notables and wealthier peasants owned a disproportionate share of cattle and sheep, their practice of leasing them to poor and often landless peasants on collaborative terms aligned the interests of both parties regarding common land and common right. Villages there typically produced unanimous or highly lopsided votes for or against partition. Was unanimity simply a "procedural device" for presenting a united front, as Plack suggests, or have we overstated the degree to which disparities in livestock ownership divided rural communities over *partage* (p.79)?

The implementation of Napoleonic legislation revealed that at least sixty-seven communities had partitioned during the 1790s under the radar of the state. Napoleon's desire to reconcile the nation and restore stability took legislative form on 9 Ventôse XII (27 February 1804). The government sought to defuse rural tensions over common land by investigating the legality of these partitions. It confirmed partitions in just two villages that produced a formal act of partition conforming to 10 June 1793. Partitions were annulled in most of the others. Some could not produce their paperwork, in which case possessors were permitted to cede, purchase or lease their plots from their communities. At least fifty-two villages had simply cleared common land without any deliberation, in which case, possessors were ordered to cede their plots to the community. Plack argues that the administration's desire to increase communal revenues (of which the state took 10 percent) prompted a change in this provision in 1805, when the government permitted usurpers to purchase or lease their plots. She cites a 21 percent increase in communal revenues between 1808 and 1812 as evidence that possessors chose the lease option, but these are national figures, not departmental ones.

Chapter five explores Napoleon's efforts to seize and sell common land to pay for his disastrous wars. Legislation of 20 March 1813 declared that certain types of common land, including those being leased back from communities, were to be sold at auction. Plack shows that bourgeois landowners purchased most of these lands despite accounting for a small minority of purchasers (pp. 114-21). The practice of grouping smaller plots into large blocks put land out of the reach of smallholders. Not surprisingly, wealthy landowners purchased hundreds of acres in a single block. The scheme did not work as planned, as only a "small percentage" of the department's common land was actually sold (p.114). Plack devotes just six pages to Restoration legislation of 1819, which applied many features of 9 Ventôse XII to then-current circumstances but which gave the proceeds from land sales to the communities. The book's title, then, is somewhat of a misnomer given such little attention to the Restoration, but readers will discover that the 1819 legislation failed to privatize common land on any appreciable scale.

Plack's historiographical discussions should provide an excellent resource for graduate students and historians seeking to familiarize themselves with rural aspects of the Revolution. However, the book too often assumes the guise of a historiographical essay, and one would have liked these discussions pared back and the space dedicated to a more-in depth discussion of the Gard. Appendix 1 is much too long (twenty-three pages), redundant and could easily have been condensed into a table (pp. 161-184). The book gives every indication of having been rushed to press. Misspellings and typos abound: "siegneur," "completing" rather than completely, "boarder" rather than border, et cetera. Other errors are more glaring. The Rhone formed the eastern boundary of the department, not the western boundary (pp. 15-16). The period 1789-1808 spans nineteen years, not thirty (p. 142). Table 6.4 miscalculates percentages or confuses factor change and percentage change (p. 149). Such errors needlessly undermine the creditability of the author and the publisher and make for a frustrating read.

The book also founders on its narrow selection of sources. Plack relies almost exclusively on administrative archives (correspondence, reports, village responses to administrative queries, etc.) which tell us precious little about events on the ground where the real impact of legislation was experienced or about the dynamics of village society. Rural historians are likely to be disappointed that the book did not delve more deeply into notarial and judicial archives or give more attention to the critical period of 1793-1804. Historians have long known that many peasants abandoned, mortgaged or sold their plots well before 1804.^[1] One village in the book partitioned its commons in 1793 and again in 1800, yet just 49 of the 202 individuals who received plots in 1800 declared their plots four years later (p. 81). Some measure of engrossment appears to have occurred in the Gard before 1804. Readers also will learn little about the practical effects of 9 Ventôse XII at the village level. The law appears to have stipulated that possessors could not lease their plots without first reimbursing their villages for lost income, to be calculated from 1 Vendémiaire XIII. Given that prefects were applying the law as late as 1810, these indemnities might well have dissuaded smallholders from leasing, especially if they were to be paid in a lump sum. It is not clear how rents were set, who set them and at what levels. Plack observes that rising communal revenues strongly suggest that leases were actually drawn up, but does not follow up. Property inevitably provoked disputes and litigation in rural society, making judicial archives a promising place to isolate those rural tensions that prompted governments to intervene in the first place.

It remains to be seen if Revolutionary, Napoleonic and Restoration legislation moved much land out of the public domain in the Gard before 1820. Most communities never sold, leased, or partitioned their commons in the first place, as Plack notes. Those that did, partitioned only a portion of their commons. The suspension of 10 June 1793 in 1796 stopped other partitions in their tracks (pp. 87-88). Napoleonic legislation *reconstituted* the public domain by returning common land to rural communities. Peasants who leased their plots under 9 Ventôse were the primary casualties of 20 March 1813. Plack is probably correct to conclude that smallholders cultivating grapes on former common land accounted for "at least some" of output increases during the first half of the nineteenth century, but her conclusion that the Revolution made a "remarkable socio-economic impact" in the Gard before 1820 is unconvincing in light of these reversals (p.150).

Perhaps the better question focuses on the nature of that expansion. The great oddity of this study lies in its propensity to speculate about the smallholder's place in viticulture ca. 1850 based on the state of affairs in 1820. Plack's data strongly suggests that the most important phase of expansion occurred *after* 1820 in regions where partitions were most widespread. Sometime between 1812 and 1854, surface area devoted to wine grapes declined by 21 percent in the northern *garrigues* near Uzès, but increased by 31 percent in the south. Both regions also registered impressive productivity gains (58 percent and 92 percent respectively). If Plack is correct that smallholders did not change their production techniques at any point before 1850, then these productivity increases—and the seeds of the viticultural revolution, post 1850?—must have occurred primarily on bourgeois estates, not on peasant farms.

The ways in which smallholders exploited their plots raise important issues about their relationship to capitalism. Plack situates her study in longstanding debates among Marxist historians over the place of the rural revolution in the transition from feudalism to capitalism. Georges Lefebvre argued long ago that the peasantry opposed feudalism and capitalism with equal vigor, hence his famous observation that the rural revolution “destroyed feudalism but consolidated the agrarian structure of France.”[2] During the 1970s and 1980s, a younger generation of Marxian historians challenged the Lefebvre thesis, contending that peasants tried to effect an egalitarian, “democratic” transition to capitalism by breaking up bourgeois estates, émigré property, and common land into small farms freed from rents and feudal levies.[3] They argued for two possible paths to capitalism, the first predicated on large farms producing surpluses with wage labor (*la voie anglaise*), the second on peasant farms producing surpluses for the market (*la voie paysanne*). Plack persuasively argues that neither model adequately describes the situation in the Gard. Smallholders were just as likely to plant grain as grapes, which tended to reinforce the subsistence sector of the rural economy. On the other hand, they actively participated in the marketplace. What is often overlooked is that subsistence production and sales of small surpluses were complementary, not mutually exclusive, activities. Producing solely for the market is a very different endeavor. Indeed, if capitalism means anything in a nineteenth-century context, it means producing for the market through innovation and productivity enhancements, not extending time-worn techniques to additional land. The similarities between early modern peasants and Plack’s smallholders are striking in this regard. They look far more like Lefebvre’s peasants than budding capitalists.

Despite its flaws, this book is a must read for anyone interested in common land and nineteenth-century viticulture more broadly. It raises a range of important methodological and historiographical issues, and poses important questions for future research. One can only hope that future researchers will take them up, expand their source base, and provide more definitive conclusions.

NOTES

[1] See Peter Jones, “The ‘Agrarian Law’: Schemes for Land Distribution During the French Revolution,” *Past and Present*, 133(November 1991): 96-33; 128-129.

[2] Georges Lefebvre, “La révolution française et les paysans,” reprinted in *Etudes sur la Révolution française* (Paris, 1963), pp. 338-367; 349.

[3] See Florence Gauthier, *La voie paysanne de la Révolution française: l'exemple picard* (Paris, 1976) for the best study of the *voie paysanne*.

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ISSN 1553-9172