
H-France Review Vol. 12 (February 2012), No. 24

Charles Menzies, *Red Flags and Lace Coiffes: Identity and Survival in a Breton Village*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011. xiv + 155 pp. Figures, tables, notes, bibliography and index. \$24.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-1-4426-0512-1.

Review by Patrick Young, University of Massachusetts-Lowell.

The search for embattled but enduring “ways of life” has led often, and at times a bit too readily, into Brittany. So commonly cast as romance or tragedy over the modern period, struggles for identity and survival in the region are better understood in the specific contexts within which they have unfolded. This is borne out by Charles Menzies’ short, but wide-ranging historical ethnography of crisis, adaptation and resistance in a fishing community on the southern Breton coastline.

Menzies brings to the subject a highly engaged and original perspective, grounded not only in his academic training as an anthropologist, but also in his experience working for nearly three decades as a commercial fisherman in Canada. It is a perspective that enables him to remain sensitive to the intimate textures of the fishing life, even as he analyzes the broader global capitalist restructuring that has threatened the livelihood of small fishermen over recent decades. The different threads of the story don’t always feel fully woven together, but the book offers valuable insight into the ways local actors have reshaped their economic pursuits, local history and cultural capital, and natural environment to maintain a fragile foothold in the “capitalist hinterland.”

The geographic focus for Menzies’ study is the southern coastal portion of the Bigouden area of the Finistère department and principally the fishing port of Le Guilvinec. He is hardly the first to have chosen the Bigoudennie—famed for its cultural distinctiveness—as a vantage point from which to consider the impact of accelerated change upon structures of community and identity. Teams of French social science researchers descended upon the commune of Plozévet in the early 1960s to undertake sustained study of the social and cultural dimensions of modernization in the area, with the renowned sociologist Edgar Morin, among others, documenting the definitive decline of a once insular and self-sustaining peasant society. Pierre Jakez-Helias’ widely read memoir of his peasant childhood in the *pays* Bigouden, *Le Cheval d’orgueil*, evoked mingling currents of continuity and change in the life ways of the rural population earlier during the interwar period, as aspects of modernity began to register even within the more hidden recesses of peasant experience. Martine Segalen also adopted the *pays* Bigouden as a focus for her study of changing kinship patterns within rural communities, revealing how seemingly outmoded peasant practices continued to be vital to social reproduction in the area, even into more recent times. [1]

In contrast to these more rurally-based accounts, Menzies anchors himself in the southernmost coastal reaches of the area and thereby encounters a social world touched far earlier and more profoundly by capitalist relations of production. From the establishment of industrial canning enterprises in the later nineteenth century through to an economic present defined mainly by seasonal tourism and family-based artisanal fishing, the Bigouden coast has had to weather

significant economic dislocation that recurrently threatened its continued viability as a distinctive local place.

Part one of *Red Flags and Lace Coiffes* addresses what Menzies terms the “politics of survival,” showing how fishermen (or more accurately, skippers and boat owners) have contended with the climatic, environmental and market fluctuations intrinsic to the fishing economy, and drawn actively upon local memory to refortify communal solidarities and galvanize campaigns of resistance. The *crise sardinière* (Sardine Crisis) of the early twentieth century provided the first great shock to the area’s maritime economy, as the (at the time unexplained) flight of the sardine to other waters devastated local fishing families and compelled canneries to turn to Spain, Portugal and North Africa for their supply. The resulting economic distress, labor unrest and militancy spread across the lower Breton coastline, attracting national attention to the area and giving rise to France’s first communist mayoralty in the city of Douarnenez in 1924.

Far from simply disappearing, though, the artisanal fishing of the Bigoudenie enjoyed a period of resurgence over the decades following World War II. Technological innovations in the catch itself, combined with the decline of local agriculture and industry, and state largesse administered through the Crédit Maritime and other bodies, encouraged the retention of an artisanal fishing economy. Menzies’ analytical point of departure is the downturn of the 1990s, which coincided directly with the period of his fieldwork. Fishermen struggled to maintain their incomes and often their jobs in the face of withdrawn fiscal supports, a new French and EU regulatory framework, and greater exposure to European and global competition.

Contending with these often-faceless agencies of a de-spatialized late capitalism required that the fishing community, paradoxically, become “local” in new ways. The strikes, acts of sabotage and international networking arising from the crisis of the 1990s represented a fledgling effort at adapting localized resistance traditions to the changed conditions of global capitalism. How exactly was one to target political action, given the global dispersal of networks of production, processing and distribution, and the weakening of French national sovereignty? The book takes its title from two key symbols resurrected during the labor unrest of the 1990s, the red flag of labor mobilization and the distinctive lace *coiffe* hair preparation traditionally worn by local women. While each of these derived its symbolic resonance from conflicts of the more distant past, Menzies reveals how they were reinvested during the conflicts of the 1990s as emotionally laden markers of communal continuity and resistance. In drawing strength from past communal struggles, the red flag and *coiffe* marked off a local territory and a sense of “here” that helped identify abstract external forces of change as threats to community survival.

Menzies redirects his focus in the second half of the book toward the social and material world of fishermen and the fishing community, looking to explain how the struggle to survive germinates, not only in political action, but also within everyday life worlds. Capturing what he calls the “messiness and situatedness of everyday life” (p. 91) means entering into the work and private lives of fishermen, and also understanding the complex role of social class, gender and kinship relations in reproducing the local fishing economy. Artisanal fishing, he argues here, was less a holdover than an adaptation. The genesis of a new global capitalist regime of post-Fordist “flexible accumulation” [2] actually allowed the continued existence of independent fishermen, but it also compelled them to assume more of the capital investment and attendant risk associated with competitive global pricing. In one of the more intriguing sections of the book, Menzies demonstrates how the peculiar combination of familial/friendship norms and class distinctions governing the relationship of boat owners and crews aboard the vessels enabled both labor efficiencies and labor solidarities, the two equally vital to the continued viability of small-scale fishing enterprises.

He also suggests how family-based artisanal fishing has been supported by a gender division of labor that has remained more fixed over time within the fishing community than in comparable economic sectors. Fishermen's wives have continued to shoulder the periodic responsibility of unassisted household management and childrearing common to fishing wives, even as they have also been forced into the workplace by the contraction of the fishing economy in recent years. The family and communal networks of resource-sharing that help sustain small-scale fishing in the Bigouden simultaneously leave the area more vulnerable to market and organizational shifts within global commercial fishing. Not unlike peasant families to the north in earlier decades, fishing families have had to adopt prudent strategies around marriage, property inheritance and resource allocation to maximize their chances of survival.

Though its focus is mainly contemporary, Menzies' book does speak usefully to established fields of concern within French history. One is the historical evolution of the small producer, and of the economic and political means by which artisanal industries have managed to survive and even to thrive in France amidst seemingly averse conditions. In the case of Bigouden fishermen, as for a great many other categories of small producer, effective political mobilization has proven especially vital in winning support for the struggles of *les petits*. Defense of the small producer has historically lent itself to both left- and right-wing political inflections, though Menzies reveals how such advocacy in the Bigouden succeeded more as a project of local defense than of national political affiliation or a move for Breton autonomy.

As important as political mobilization to the survival of the small producer has been the ability to marshal symbolic capital vis-à-vis the French public and state. From the invention of the *artisanat* in the 1920s through figures such as Pierre Poujade and José Bové, the figure of the small producer has crystallized an enduring French ambivalence toward market-based society.[3] In his attentiveness to the local and global contexts for fishermen's struggles, Menzies perhaps underplays the importance of this history of small producer politics, in allowing essentially local interests to garner broader sympathy in France as incarnations of an embattled national distinctiveness. One is left wondering a bit at how fishermen's protests played out in national media and politics during the 1990s, and how they might have been related to the great many campaigns of self-advocacy mounted by similar producers in both contemporary and more distant times.

A second historiographic context for Menzies' analysis is the by-now established body of work on the history of the French coastline and coastal communities. Books by Alain Corbin and Alice Garner, among others, as well as more Breton-specific accounts by Johan Vincent and Karine Salomé, have analyzed the dialectical relationship of local and outside actors and agendas at specific coastal sites over the modern period.[4] Like those accounts, Menzies' suggests an ongoing and conflicted negotiation of place along the coastline, borne out of competing claims to local resources, natural environments and populations. He might, I think, have gone even further in this direction, by considering more fully how reassertion of the "local" character of the Bigouden might have depended, not only upon shared memory, but also upon new conditions of exchange in the area since the Second World War. Consciousness of Bigouden identity and distinctiveness was always bred in some measure from encounter with others, Bretons from neighboring communes and other sub-regions most immediately, though also French and foreign visitors keen on locating the traces of cultural difference and survival.

Along these lines, one can ask whether Menzies has taken sufficient account of how the self-conceptions and economic prospects of Bigouden fishermen and their families might have been influenced by the ever-growing outside fascination with "the fishing life," or by the cultivation of a Breton maritime heritage and heritage-based tourism, as for example in institutions like the nearby Musée de la Pêche in Concarneau. His book left me wondering what it has meant for

certain lines of work—farming certainly, though also artisanal fishing—to function simultaneously as economic sectors and sites of memory. Have fishing families gained access to new resources and opportunities as a result of increased public solicitude or have they been made more to feel like picturesque relics of a vanishing way of life?

As an account of how one fishing community has managed to survive into present times, *Red Flags and Lace Coiffes* ultimately provokes salient questions about the prospects for localized production and life in the twenty-first century. French historians now understand far better than they did how modernity, far from merely effacing local difference, in many ways actually produced and valorized it. One can hope, similarly, that an awakening concern for sustainability will inspire continued inquiry into the historical and contemporary diversity of efforts of local reinvention.

NOTES

[1] Edgar Morin, *Commune en France: La Métamorphose de Plodémet* (Paris: Fayard, 1967), tr. *The Red and the White: Report from a French Village* (New York: Pantheon, 1970); Pierre-Jakez Helias, *Le Cheval d'Orgeuil* (Paris: Plon, 1975), tr. *The Horse of Pride: Life in a Breton Village* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1980); Martine Segalen, *Quinze générations de bas bretons: parenté et société dans le pays bigouden sud 1720-1980* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1985), tr. *Fifteen Generations of Bretons: Kinship and Society in Lower Brittany 1720-1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

[2] As popularized by the British geographer David Harvey in his book, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Hoboken N.J.: Wiley-Blackwell, 1989), “flexible accumulation” connotes the main organizational innovations associated with capitalist globalization such as sub-contracting, outsourcing, small-batch and just-in-time production, and the loosening of union and regulatory constraints upon the growth of capital.

[3] On artisanal politics in the twentieth century, see Steven Zdatny, *The Politics of Survival: Artisans in Twentieth Century France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

[4] Alain Corbin, *Le territoire du vide*, tr. *The Lure of the Sea: The Discovery of the Seaside in the Western World 1750-1840*, tr. Jocelyn Phelps (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Alice Garner's suggestive study of the southwestern coastal town Arcachon's modern transformation is *A Shifting Shore: Locals, Outsiders and the Transformation of a French Fishing Town* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2005); Karine Salomé, *Les îles bretonnes: Une image en construction, 1750-1914* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2003); and Johan Vincent, *L'Intrusion balnéaire: Les populations littorales bretonnes et vendéennes face au tourisme, 1800-1945* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2007).

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ISSN 1553-9172