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Fabien Conord, *La Terre des autres: Le métayage en France depuis 1889*. Montrouge: Éditions du Bourg, 2018. 326 pp. €29.00 (pb). ISBN 978-2490650002.

Review by Venus Bivar, Washington University in St. Louis.

As a method of agricultural production that quickly receded into the historical distance in postwar France, sharecropping has been largely ignored in the scholarly literature. In this comprehensive new volume, Conord does an admirable job of redressing this oversight by providing readers with a detailed history of sharecropping in France from the last decades of the nineteenth century through the last decades of the twentieth. Drawing on a wide variety of sources, from parliamentary debates and the agricultural census at the national level to departmental legal records and literary memoirs, Conord successfully moves between the general and the specific, grounding his local research in the two departments of Allier and Haute-Garonne.

The book is organized into two parts, with the Statut du fermage et du métayage of 1945-46 serving as the dividing line. Chapters one and two provide a general overview of the legal and social framework of sharecropping before the Second World War. Conord opens by telling his readers just how quickly sharecropping declined in the century following the Revolution—in 1789 sharecropping accounted for the majority of agricultural production, while in 1876 it accounted for just 8 percent. In the aftermath of the Revolution, when land ownership was viewed as the best remedy for an historically impoverished peasantry, there was little room for sharecropping in the imaginations of those who sought to democratize and modernize the nation.

Sharecropping through the nineteenth century had largely served as a last resort. Agreeing to work someone else's land for a modest share of the yield was often the difference between survival and starvation. But as the nation urbanized and modernized, there were fewer and fewer desperate peasants. Given the availability of new jobs in urban centers, however poorly paid, landowners found it increasingly difficult to find farmers willing to labor under sharecropping conditions. For instance, farmers were largely barred from hunting on the lands that they worked and they were often obligated to supply owners with *corvée* labor. Legislation was introduced in 1889 in an attempt to improve the working conditions of sharecroppers, but by and large, legislators and farmers alike had already decided that it was a practice that ultimately needed to be eliminated, both to put an end to exploitation and to increase productivity by farming those lands in a more efficient fashion.

Chapters three through five examine how the debates about sharecropping in this earlier period led to major legislative changes after the Second World War. Conord pays close attention not only to how different political parties and labor unions addressed the problem of sharecropping, but also to how sharecroppers themselves viewed their situation. Predictably, center and center-right parties defended sharecropping, arguing for instance that maintaining close relationships between rich and poor was the best means available of inuring the French against socialism and of avoiding class conflict. Those on the left, equally predictably, decried the system as a form of exploitation. But as Conord points out, even the left failed sharecroppers in the end. As Socialists and Communists rethought their positions on private property in order to gain the support of the smallholding peasantry, they tended to forget about the landless peasantry. And those who did remember tended to focus on phasing out the system altogether rather than trying to improve it. Conord draws on Bernard Lambert, one of the most influential farming organizers of the postwar period, to make this last point. The son of a sharecropper, Lambert remembered that when he was seven years old, in the 1930s, his father won a radio receiver in a raffle. The following day, the man who owned their farm paid them a visit and ordered his father to sell the receiver and use the money to pay down his debt. As Lambert recalled, “Nous vendîmes le poste et, ce jour-là, pour la première fois, je haïs le propriétaire et j’eus conscience de ce qu’était la domination des supérieurs...” (p. 93). Lambert added that this experience was essential in shaping his radical-leftist views of the farm sector. Conord states at several points that he is attempting to present a more “balanced” view of sharecropping, one that does not dismiss the practice out of hand as an abusive system that relies on unequal power relations. Instead, he wants to understand the sharecroppers and why they might have opted for this system and how it might have benefitted them. But he doesn’t develop this argument enough to challenge the overwhelming evidence to the contrary. Stories like the one told by Lambert make it difficult to see sharecropping as anything other than raw exploitation.

The second half of the book concerns the history of sharecropping after the passing of the Statut du fermage et du métayage of 1945–46. Chapter six introduces the new law, which instituted several major changes. Most notably perhaps, contracts were set at nine years, providing much more stability for sharecroppers than they had previously enjoyed. Additionally, sharecroppers were given the right to request that their contract be converted into a tenant agreement (*fermage* as opposed to *métayage*) and property owners could claim as payment no more than one-third of the yield (previously it was not uncommon for them to claim a full half). These improvements notwithstanding, however, the majority of the agricultural sector still wanted sharecropping to disappear entirely, to be replaced by tenant farming or direct ownership. As the socialist politician Jules Moch wrote, the Section française de l’Internationale ouvrière “estime nécessaire de doter d’urgence les fermiers d’un statut comportant [...] un régime transitoire permettant la disparition progressive du métayage, vestige de la féodalité d’antan, et son remplacement par le fermage amélioré...” (p. 165). Conord argues that sentiments like these prevented politicians and union leaders from listening carefully to the sharecroppers themselves, a failure that made it impossible to provide meaningful assistance. Conord may very well be right, but without a better sense of what legislators might have done differently to offer more effective assistance, it is difficult to see how the sharecropping system might have been redeemed.

Chapters seven and eight are devoted to an examination of how the new legislation played out on the ground, as evidenced by the local court records of Allier and Haute-Garonne. In the end, a conservative local judiciary severely limited the potential of the new law. Staunchly in favor of rigid property rights, judges overwhelmingly found in favor of the owners when sharecropping

legislation was put to the test. For instance, when sharecroppers attempted to convert their contracts into tenant agreements, owners rescinded the contracts altogether—something they were allowed to do provided they took over the farm themselves. Judges then applied a very liberal interpretation to “taking over the farm themselves.” As explained in chapter nine, the law was tightened up in 1962 in order to make it more difficult for judges to find in favor of the owners. But by this time, sharecroppers had almost entirely disappeared from the agricultural landscape.

In chapter ten, the final chapter of the book, Conord examines the demographic decline of sharecroppers in the postwar era. In 1955, sharecroppers accounted for just 3.2 percent of all farmers. By 1988, it was down to 1.8 percent. Conord attributes the drop to four factors: sharecroppers became tenant farmers; sharecroppers became land owners; property owners chose to farm their lands without sharecroppers; and the exodus of young people to the cities deprived sharecropping parents of the free labor on which they had historically depended. Moreover, agricultural leaders and parliamentary members continued to call for a definitive end to the system. Joining Lambert and Moch in their dissent, the celebrated agronomist René Dumont argued that the incentive structure in sharecropping was totally broken and led to a mismanagement of the land. In the postwar era, when France was in the midst of turning its farm sector into a globally competitive power player, there was simply no room for a farming practice that did not maximize productivity.

Conord’s book is rich with data. His discussion of the parliamentary debates surrounding different pieces of sharecropping legislation is exhaustive. He is clearly in command of his subject matter. A more robust attempt to contextualize this data would have made the book that much stronger—as it stands there are oblique references to the major social changes of the postwar period and the political culture of Liberation, but they are not developed sufficiently to provide adequate framing for his discussion of sharecropping. For instance, Conord reveals that foreigners, particularly Italians, often accounted for a sizeable portion of the sharecropping population, but then does not follow through with this titillating fact. What does this phenomenon tell us about the precariousness of migration? Did sharecropping function as a stepping-stone for desperate immigrants who had few employment options? Stronger links to the wider world beyond the farm would have helped to make clear the stakes of the project. As it stands, however, Conord has produced a meticulously researched study that will serve as an invaluable reference for anyone interested in twentieth-century farming and agricultural labor.

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