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Marcel Streng, *Subsistenzpolitik im Übergang. Die kommunale Ordnung des Brot- und Fleischmarktes in Frankreich 1846-1914*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017. 385 pp. Tables, figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$88.00 U.S. (cl.). ISBN 9783525370452.

Review by Martin Bruegel, INRA-CMH (CNRS/EHESS/ENS).

Several heuristic strategies animate Marcel Streng's study of the subsistence question in France between the mid-1840s and the 1910s. Politics, Streng seems to say, is primarily a struggle over definitional supremacy. Discourses therefore figure prominently in his analysis. Streng posits a "discursive space" where the statements, opinions and beliefs of philosophers, philanthropists, physiologists, political economists, administrators, legal professionals, representatives of trade and labor, politicians, and the occasional average citizen compete in order to understand the workings of food markets. In dictionaries and encyclopedias, forty-one of which provide the documentary basis for the first chapter, naming is framing. While inclusion consecrates "socially relevant knowledge," it also discounts angles deemed extraneous. According to Streng, discourses are performative. Naming bestows moral value on behavior and events. Perception relies on grids of meaning--a coherent lexicon if you will--that shape descriptions and, with them, configure reality in such a way as to get a hold on it (pp. 25-26). Identifying aspects of the subsistence complex, specifying their causes and relations, and pondering their likely or desirable futures, is thus a prelude to action. When it comes to government, knowledge constitution leads to policy propositions. They are levers applied to economic and social processes. And that is the focus of Streng's book: how government programs flowed from the evolving definitions of subsistence; the ways in, and methods by, which administrations translated political agendas into public actions; and finally, civil society's reception of government measures.

Context mattered. The events at the story's chronological benchmarks illustrate change over time. The beginning years 1845-1847 saw poor harvests and famine. The final episode foregrounds the peak prices of animal products (eggs, meat, milk) that prompted market riots in 1911-1912. While public discussions tended to find solutions to limited food availability in the organization of grain reserves and charitable ventures during the 1850s, the possibilities of controlling commercial middlemen--even their elimination--quickened the debate's beat before World War 1. The implementation of such ideas was, however, an altogether different matter (and neither made much administrative headway). Streng indexes his working assumptions on the development from a precarious to a rather more assured food supply. Improved provisioning did not reduce the importance of the subsistence question in the second half of the nineteenth century. Rather, it displaced anxieties over food security toward concerns with food safety, culminating in the adoption of the law on fraud and falsifications in 1905. There is something

mechanical to this switch from quantity to quality, from the state's objective to guarantee provisioning in exceptional circumstances (crop failures, shortages) to the new task of securing the permanent legal infrastructure of free markets and loyal competition. A comparative glance at other countries where pure-food legislation was enacted at about the same time might have nuanced the argument. This is a mild criticism, however, as definitions of hygiene and chemical products emerged everywhere as new variables in the regulation of food markets. Streng's strength lies elsewhere: he is astute in, first, tracking the flows of power that cascaded from Paris to the provinces and, second, in describing their different implementation on the ground.

Command hierarchies were suffused with the distrust central government officials harbored against regional civil servants. Brittany is Streng's case study, though he peppers his narrative with examples from other regions. While most every local government representative paid lip service to imperial free-trade doctrine during the lean years of the 1850s, pragmatic measures aimed at appeasing popular discontent. They included the rhetorical and legal indictment of grain speculation, as well as subsidies to keep bread affordable for the working classes. Streng finds unprecedented attempts to moralize the grain trade. Legal action by the administration against bakers and grain merchants appear retrospectively as token measures, but that seemed precisely the point. Local authorities pressured agents in the grain-flour-bread chain to correct their reputation as profiteers. In other words, they asked for the internalization of community values and the translation of the recovered virtue into less avaricious behavior. Then they made their activism, even ostracism, known so as to advertise their continued concern with reasonably priced foodstuffs without relying on price-setting. Streng argues that this tactic amounted as much to disciplining stakeholders as to pushing local politicians into line with imperial market liberalism. As if to emphasize this commitment to the government's positive but restricted role in markets, ministries intervened in evaluations of the quality of grains and flour. It was, we now know, a regulatory realm with a bright--and ultimately contested--future.

The cleavage between center and periphery likewise appears in the case of bakeries. It exposes the accommodations between free-trade ambition and grassroots realism. Streng here deconstructs the myth of the liberalization of this vital, symbolically supreme industry in 1863. To be sure, the imperial decree eliminated any intervention in the bread trade: there were no longer any limits on the number of establishments, no requirement for authorization to practice the craft, no rules on how to run sales, and so on. There was, however, a crucial subtlety: the decree left intact the local communities' right to tax, that is to put ceilings on the price of bread. Streng has a field day showing how the use of the tax actually increased in the first half of the Second Empire. He equates this proliferation with the "spatial expansion of the state" (p. 150). Mayors considered price-setting a more efficient means than supply and demand to balance the interests of bakers and clients, and in many cities, mayors identified with consumers rather than producers. The ability of local administrators to rein in bread prices remained intact through World War 1.

Streng treads on more familiar ground when detailing the local policing of bread and meat markets between 1871 and 1905. His comparative approach to the activity in different cities shows, most interestingly, that the same general ambition to guarantee markets filled with affordable foodstuffs gave rise to a wide variety of administrative measures meant to correct the effects of scarcity (real or imagined). Valence and Lyon recalled the government's age-old responsibility to listen to the population's expectations and deliver goods via price-setting. Lille hung on to free-market principles and aimed at overcoming information asymmetries. Bordeaux

went as far as stipulating labels and price tags on different cuts of meat. Streng sketches particular winning policies in order to highlight the large repertory of possibilities; he effectively replaces the conventional historiographic understanding of an overarching and unifying centralism spreading out from the capital, with a mosaic of regional arrangements. City administrators discussed issues with, and took advice from, each other without necessarily turning to superiors in Paris. But casting the net wide comes at the cost of losing sight of social and political context—the local texture, so to speak—that sustained different courses of action. And it says nothing about their short-term success or failure.

The increasing reliance around 1880 on experts—chemists and veterinarians, rather than physicians or botanists—had long been in the making outside of Paris. Discussions on the design of local slaughterhouses or the set-up of municipal laboratories responded to the search for a stable subsistence order. They also injected, Streng contends, a new brand of morality into the subsistence question. Professionals who gauged the quality of foodstuffs often held strong opinions on their function in the service of the public. While their nominal task was to help create the conditions of fair (“loyal”) competition, their more personal commitment aimed at protecting public health: they were not above targeting those whose pursuit of profit led to potentially shady trade practices.

The “vie chère” crisis in 1911-1912 offers a dramatic conclusion to this study. In some ways, the upheaval brings together issues whose emergence, development and closure lie at the heart of Streng's investigation. Still, the analytical prism shifts somewhat as Streng focuses on the fairly well-known social movement (and women's key role in legitimizing it before union involvement led to its criminalization) and political debate (the pertinence of tariffs, for one, or the support for food cooperatives) rather than the much less familiar regulatory activity. Protests appeared to have varied according to prior subsistence policies. Proactive intervention in Rennes eased hardship in the working class and tamed contentious street politics. Conservative reaction prevailed where the local government excluded price-setting from its repertory of regulatory instruments. In Brest and the department of the Nord, where intervention in the economics of food markets was shunned, the government-imposed police surveillance and military repression.

Streng's book is dense. It sparkles with archival discoveries. This is all the more rewarding as the historiography of nineteenth-century French politics tends to favor ideology and great thinkers in Paris over social forces and the provinces. It is a valuable contribution to the historiography of state building. In addition, it is possible to read *Subsistenzpolitik* as a methodological experiment. Here the going gets harder. The link between discourses and practices, as the author admits at one point (pp. 53-54), is not always straightforward. Streng does not clearly distinguish between different forms of discourse, some of which are likely to be more “performative” than others. And so, after stumbling over instances of “discursification,” “epistemization,” “discursive construction,” “truth regime,” “knowledge system,” “attention structures,” it is something of a let-down to discover mere “discursive contexts (correlations)” or the existence of “a heterogeneous, dense discursive grid” illuminating the subsistence question. The last expression (p. 246) is of course reminiscent of Clifford Geertz's much discussed “web of significance.” Like the anthropologist's formula, it deserves more depth.

The reluctance to engage ideas stirs regret rather than reproach. Expectations are indeed high with an author so well versed in historiography, archives and political theory, and one whose style betrays an evident pleasure in language. Streng dutifully mentions other historical

arguments but holds back on discussing them. This prompts the question of what it all means: how does the now well-documented emergence of hygienic and nutritional considerations regarding subsistence affect the idea that the making of the 1905 law was really a business compromise and excluded concerns for health? How does the discovery of consumer advocacy groups mesh with an historiography that finds only spokespeople for consumers but not self-organized, vocal groups whose members hailed from civil society? To what extent do the different incarnations of “morality” not simply coexist with, but actually shape public policies? These questions are not to gainsay the results of this study: on the contrary, they emphasize its considerable achievements, not the least of which are its attention to cities and departments that tend to be overlooked, its questioning of the routine character of, and the restoration of conflict to, an administrative life so important to the growth of the state, and, most importantly, its fine examination of food policies as a key feature of politics, high and low, large and small.

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