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H-France Review Vol. 19 (March 2019), No. 42

Venus Bivar, *Organic Resistance: The Struggle over Industrial Farming in Postwar France*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2018. 240 pp. Map, figures, notes, bibliography, index. \$29.95 (pb). ISBN 978-1-4696-4118-8.

Review by Joseph Bohling, Portland State University.

In his survey of world history, Eric Hobsbawm called the death of the peasantry the most profound social change of the second half of the twentieth century.<sup>[1]</sup> His argument can certainly be applied to France, even if recent scholarly trends point in other directions, like postcolonial immigration, women, and youth.<sup>[2]</sup> In *Organic Resistance*, Venus Bivar thankfully restores French farmers to the mainstream of postwar history, showing how they sank or learned to swim in the increasingly competitive postwar international economy. By the time that agricultural industrialization had remapped the rural landscape and driven peasants off the land, France had become the world's second largest agricultural exporter. As Bivar argues, this impressive feat came at enormous human and environmental cost, igniting an "organic resistance" that transformed French ideas about food and the land. This is a story that has important implications for both contemporary France and the world.

France's agricultural industrialization inspired major books as it was happening, most notably Gordon Wright's *Rural Revolution in France* (1964) and Henri Mendras's *La fin des paysans* (1967).<sup>[3]</sup> But since then, especially in the English-speaking world, it has not received the attention that it deserves, considering that its social and environmental consequences have now become clear.<sup>[4]</sup> In reopening the discussion, Bivar links the historiography on postwar French agriculture to food studies, the history of capitalism, the history of European integration, and environmental history. Her novel approach is a welcome addition to the literature on France's postwar remaking.

Chapters one and three focus on what Bivar calls the "industrial ideal" in France.<sup>[5]</sup> In these chapters, she focuses on the motivations behind, and the social effects of, state-directed agricultural industrialization. Bivar identifies a number of factors supporting the postwar imperative to modernize, not least the growing legitimacy of economic planning, Marshall Plan aid, and preparation for the European common market. She upends the myth that endures among some Francophiles that France was necessarily the land of fine food. "The primary inspiration for agricultural policy in the 1950s," she writes, "was not a French love of the land, or an attachment to terroir. The incentives that drove postwar farm policy were instead the promise of new markets and the threat of efficient competitors" (p. 45). In this way, Bivar also challenges any remaining belief that French farmers were anti-capitalistic, a stereotype that José Bové and

his followers seemed to confirm when they dismantled a McDonald's in 1999. Even if *Organic Resistance* makes the state look like the engine of agricultural change, using the carrot and the stick to get farmers to become bigger and more market-oriented, Bivar correctly portrays the main farm lobbies as "hard-nosed businessmen" who quickly took advantage of the more competitive environment of the European Economic Community (EEC).

In a country that, by Western standards, had a large farm population in 1945 and that valued small property, fulfilling the industrial ideal in a single generation was an amazing achievement. To explain it, Bivar devotes much of her study to state-mandated land redistribution (*remembrement*). In order to make agriculture more productive, state officials had to overcome the intense land parceling that they had inherited from Napoleon's Civil Code. Fragmented land prevented mechanization. To advocates of the industrial ideal—among them technocrats in the Ministry of Agriculture and the planning commissions, the bank Crédit Agricole, and the National Federation of Farm Unions (FNSEA)—farmers needed to treat their land as "rational businesses rather than as extensions of ancestral heritage" (p. 27). Yet persuading farmers to do so was not a given. To accomplish this controversial work of infringing on private property and redistributing the land, state officials created an agency called the Society for Developing and Settling Rural Land (SAFER). The SAFER carried out land redistribution in the name of the "general interest;" in the process, many farmers lost their land. Bivar is sensitive to the fact that, even though productivity levels rose in agriculture as a whole, incomes for many small-scale farmers stagnated. She notes that "...saving individual farmers from the cutthroat demands of modernization was never part of the agenda. Saving the agricultural sector as a *whole*, and preparing it for global domination, was the real objective" (p. 104).

Bivar emphasizes how new international and state imperatives were forced onto many farmers in fulfilling the industrial ideal. That is doubtlessly a central part of the story, but future historians will want to explore the international networks that French agricultural experts and farm lobbies must have woven to become such an agricultural powerhouse. It remains unclear where all this food went. Did it stay within Europe and/or go to other parts of the world? What did France get in return for all the food that it exported? More could be written about the strategies deployed and the alliances struck internationally by French agricultural interests in their attempt to shape and control the food supply system, both for industrial and high-end goods.<sup>[6]</sup> International organizations certainly impacted French farmers, as Bivar makes clear, but farmers' lobbies and state officials also must have made use of international organizations to turn France into the world's second biggest agricultural exporter, all the while maintaining the country's reputation for luxury food and wine.

Bivar rightly situates France's motivations to industrialize agriculture in the context of European integration, but she limits her study to European France as if to anticipate the end of empire, even though France was a formal empire and not a hexagon until after 1962. Dismissing Algeria, the Caribbean, and colonial agriculture debatably does not weaken her argument, but including them would make for an appealing analysis, especially given her convincing claim that the broader context had such an impact on agricultural industrialization. Colonies and former colonies were a real component of that larger context, and the frequent lack of complementarity between farmers in the colonies and the metropole caused economic and social problems for state officials. Some readers may be left wondering about how metropolitan France's agricultural industrialization articulated with plans for the colonies and overseas departments.

To date, historians have written relatively little about how economic planners in Paris thought about the relationship between metropolitan and colonial agriculture after 1945, and between French, EEC, and postcolonial agriculture after 1962. After 1945, French agricultural experts grew alarmed about the maldistribution of international food supplies and the malnutrition that stemmed from it. To what extent did famine relief influence French agricultural policy? To what degree did French agricultural experts, like their American counterparts, get tied up in the cold war struggle to make the world safe for capitalism? [7] Bivar mentions agronomists like René Dumont, who was active in the planning commissions and interested in both rural and colonial development and the connections between the two, but another historian could go further in discussing his international role and its possible impact on France's agricultural industrialization. Other agricultural experts, too, like Michel Cépède, considered the imperial and international food systems. Future historians will want to pay closer attention to the colonial and postcolonial contexts in order to advance our collective understanding of these other factors that may have motivated France's agricultural industrialization on the one hand, and how France went about influencing the international food system after empire on the other.

In chapters two and four, Bivar turns to the "alternative ideals" that were promoted by advocates of biodynamic and organic agriculture. Here, Bivar tells a totally new story. Through the use of personal papers and other archives, she introduces us to several colorful figures who worked tirelessly to defy agricultural industrialization. For example, Raoul Lemaire, a libertarian who hailed from the Somme, blended Catholic mysticism and Poujadism with an admiration for the work of Mohandas Gandhi and Rachel Carson in his defense of organic food. His alternative ideal was anti-statist, anti-technocratic, and even anti-Semitic. André Louis, another prominent advocate of alternative ideals, was a deist mystic from Bordeaux who followed the work of biodynamic guru Rudolf Steiner. There was also Pierre Rabhi, an Algerian Muslim who aspired to farm organically in the early 1960s, before 68ers flocked to the land as part of their protest against statism and capitalism. The makeup of early alternative food activists was diverse, but a constant refrain in Bivar's book is that, unlike these movements today, which tend to be movements of the left, early biodynamic and organic farmers tended to be on the right (Rabhi being a likely exception). The politics of early supporters of alternative ideals usually aligned with the conservative Vichy regime and linked food to the purity of the race and to the threat of degeneration. Bivar concludes that the organic food that we tend to sanctify has racist roots.

Bivar is adept at analyzing the emergence and expansion of these alternative ideals. She shows how the biodynamic and organic movements began as an international movement, then struggled to gain widespread legitimacy in France, and ultimately grew in popularity among French consumers. By the 1970s, alternative agriculture had won over back-to-the-landers, environmentalists, and those with a public health awareness. In restoring the voices of these alternative ideals, Bivar adds to an historiography that challenges the progressivist narrative of the "Thirty Glorious Years." [8] Alongside a fervor for economies of scale in agriculture, we find various activists for alternative farming, a trend that persists to this day.

Chapter five analyzes how, starting in the 1970s, the state responded to the high costs of agricultural subsidies for surpluses, growing environmentalist pressures, and new consumer preferences for "quality" food by coopting some of these alternative ideals. Enthusiasm for the industrial ideal did not disappear, but carving out a niche for alternatives helped improve the agricultural sector's public relations. Bivar calls the state's new emphasis on alternative

agriculture and quality production “supplements, not substitutes, to industrial agriculture” (p. 143).

For Bivar, May 1968 and the oil crises of the 1970s mark turning points in French perceptions of food and the land. As city dwellers rediscovered the countryside, as consumers became more concerned about the relationship between diet and health, and as the cost of chemical inputs and other agricultural tools increased following the OPEC’s oil price revolution, farmers began adopting alternative agricultural methods, and the state supported this trend. By the later 1960s, the state also began supporting other land practices. The emphasis on land as the central productive unit of agriculture partially shifted to a multipurpose approach to land use. This meant that the SAFER profited from the land not just through big agriculture, but also through the creation of new parks and recreational areas and the sale of secondary homes. In more ways than one, then, the new economic, environmental, and quality of life concerns of the 1970s had an important impact on the rural landscape and on thinking about food.

By the 1970s and 1980s, the human and environmental problems caused by industrialized agriculture pushed some farmers into niche production, a topic upon which Bivar could elaborate further. Throughout her book, she treats French agriculture as a bloc, obscuring the ways in which agricultural policymakers managed different crops differently. To be fair, she acknowledges that any analysis of “agriculture” quickly becomes a broad generalization (see footnote no. 10 on p. 186), but it is also important to underline that the trajectories of staples like milk, sugar, meat, and grain were not exactly the same, and large differences existed between staples like grain and luxuries like wine.[9] In the wine industry, niche production began earlier. In the 1930s, forward-looking wine industry leaders and state officials responded to frequent wine gluts by prioritizing quality over quantity production. By “quality,” they meant regulating the provenance and the “traditional” methods and style of production of a given region, and at least for a time scaling back on yields. They accomplished this through a state agency called the National Institute of Appellations of Origin (INAO), which promoted the Appellations of Origin (AOC) regional labeling system.

A look at the wine industry challenges our assumptions about how contemporaries necessarily viewed the land in the 1950s and 1960s. For the INAO, promoting “rational business” and “ancestral heritage” were not antithetical, but instead mutually reinforcing. True, over time, the AOC would succumb to the productivist mindset, as quality wine production increased and became more accessible to mass consumers.[10] In *Organic Resistance*, the AOC system emerges only in the 1980s, when it was extended to other foods. It appears without much context when in fact the AOC for wine had created an institutional framework that other farmers could later adopt. The politics of food and wine were not totally the same, of course, even if the outcome for luxury food and drink—AOC labeling—was. Bivar points out that the number of foods that were protected by the AOC system increased at the same moment that organic agriculture gained a little more traction in the halls of power in the 1980s, and that the AOC system’s success ultimately hindered the progress of the organic food market in France.

*Organic Resistance* is a rewarding book, one that should be read widely and expanded upon. Bivar persuasively demonstrates the centrality of agricultural industrialization to France’s postwar social and environmental transformation and its implications for the present. She shows that, in some respects, France underwent a similar experience to the United States, even though both countries’ food cultures are often held up as polar opposites. France, like the United States, has

struggled to navigate the tensions between industrial and alternative ideals. If you have ever believed that gastronomy necessarily reigned supreme in France, or if eating organic food has ever made you feel good and pure, read *Organic Resistance* and think again.

## NOTES

[1] Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914-1991* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 289.

[2] A few examples include: for postcolonial immigration, Yvan Gastaut, *L'immigration et l'opinion en France sous la Ve République* (Paris: Seuil, 2000); Daniel A. Gordon, *Immigrants and Intellectuals: May '68 and the Rise of Anti-Racism in France* (Pontypool, Wales: Merlin Press, 2012); and Amelia H. Lyons, *The Civilizing Mission in the Metropole: Algerian Families and the French Welfare State during Decolonization* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2013); for women, Sarah Fishman, *From Vichy to the Sexual Revolution: Gender and Family Life in Postwar France* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); and Rebecca J. Pulju, *Women and Mass Consumer Society in Postwar France* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011); for youth, Richard Ivan Jobs, *Riding the New Wave: Youth and the Rejuvenation of France after the Second World War* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2007).

[3] Gordon Wright, *Rural Revolution in France: The Peasantry in the Twentieth Century* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1964); and Henri Mendras, *La fin des paysans; changement et innovations dans les sociétés rurales françaises* (Paris: SEDEIS, 1967).

[4] There are exceptions, among them Peter H. Amann, *The Corncribs of Buzet: Modernizing Agriculture in the French Southwest* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990); M.C. Cleary, *Peasants, Politicians, and Producers: The Organization of Agriculture in France since 1918* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1989); and John T.S. Keeler, *The Politics of Neocorporatism in France: Farmers, the State, and Agricultural Policy-Making in the Fifth Republic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

[5] This ideal was analyzed in the American context by Deborah Fitzgerald, *Every Farm a Factory: The Industrial Ideal in American Agriculture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

[6] For example, Ann-Christina L. Knudsen takes us a long way in understanding how agricultural questions were treated in the early EEC, but she devotes less attention to France, a key country not just in European but also in international discussions of the food system. See her *Farmers on Welfare: The Making of Europe's Common Agricultural Policy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009).

[7] For the American story, see Nick Cullather, *The Hungry World: America's Cold War Battle Against Poverty in Asia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).

[8] Recent critiques of that narrative can be found in Céline Pessis, Sezin Topçu, and Christophe Bonneuil, eds., *Une autre histoire des "trente glorieuses": modernisation, contestations et pollutions dans la France de l'après-guerre* (Paris: La Découverte, 2013).

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[9] It is worth mentioning that Bivar avoids discussion of the organic and biodynamic movements in the wine industry. For the movement in favor of “natural” wine, see Christelle Pineau’s forthcoming *La corne de vache et le microscope: Le vin “nature”, entre sciences, croyances et radicalités* (Paris: La Découverte, 2019).

[10] I discuss the different and surprising trajectory of wine—from “quantity” to “quality” production, from a staple of everyday life to a luxury—during this period of agricultural industrialization in my recent book, *The Sober Revolution: Appellation Wine and the Transformation of France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018).

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ISSN 1553-9172