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Christophe Voilliot, *Le Département de l'Yonne en 1848. Analyse d'une séquence électorale*. Vulaines-sur-Seine, Seine-et-Marne: Éditions du Croquant, 2017. 238 pp. Maps, tables, figures, notes, and bibliography. ISBN 9-782365-121170; €20 (pb).

Review by Peter McPhee, University of Melbourne.

Jacques Rougerie long ago posed the question as to whether the history of France could be studied adequately through a departmental lens. His critique of departmental boundaries as often incoherent has not dissuaded local historians often motivated—as he quipped—by a love of their own department of “Cher-et-Tendre.”^[1] Apart from departments with an obvious ethno-linguistic coherence (such as Corsica before its sub-division and Pyrénées-Orientales), most of the best studies have therefore been of provinces with a larger and more durable substance. Among them, some of the jewels in the crown of French historiography have been regional studies of 1848 and the Second Republic, such as those by Vigier, Lévêque and Corbin.^[2]

However, precisely because departments generally have both a rough geographic rationale and an intriguing diversity, they have also been the locus of superb historiography of the same period, as in the cases of the Var and Loiret. Christophe Voilliot discusses the pluses and minuses of his chosen arena of analysis, the department of Yonne in Burgundy, while conceding in the end that it worked best for him simply because he happened to be living there! Certainly, Yonne is an example of geographic diversity, 160km from northwest to southeast, its landscape contrasting from the limestone of Chablis to the wooded hills of Puisaye and Morvan and the Yonne valley, a laboratory to analyze divergent political behavior.

Voilliot opens his book with a highly interesting discussion of the life and rarely read 1950 doctoral thesis of Louis Chevalier on the Parisian region—including Yonne—written before his famous published studies of Paris itself.^[3] Chevalier came from a political milieu which regarded the departments created by the French Revolution in 1790 as arbitrary and regrettable: his own rationale for studying six of them was they were in some sense the “crown” around Paris and under its influence. Chevalier tended to dismiss nineteenth-century provincial elections as “la politique du clocher”, although he admitted that those of 1849 marked a turning-point in creating a modern politics explicable in socio-economic and historical terms.

For many decades, since the studies of Agulhon and others in France, and those by Merriman, Margadant and others from elsewhere, the Revolution of February 1848 was understood as the major Parisian eruption of a profound national upheaval which lasted from the economic and political crisis of 1846 until the proclamation of the Second Empire in December 1852.^[4] That

is, social historians of politics examined the Second Republic as the foundation of regional political traditions which mostly endured until the 1980s (the Midi Rouge, the Catholic west, and so on). For Voilliot, in contrast, the Revolution of 1848--and in particular the election of Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte--was the beginning of the Bonapartist experience in French history. He is explicitly critical (pp. 15, 217) of another local historian--the ecologist, activist and Auxerre municipal councilor Denis Martin--for seeing 1848 through the optic of republican resistance to the coup d'État of December 1851. [5]

The core chapters of the book (chapters two to five) are a dense, closely documented and well-illustrated analysis of the electoral process in Yonne from April to December 1848: the nomination of candidates, creation of electoral lists, the counting of votes, and so on. Voilliot's painstaking archival research and thorough knowledge of the historiography results in a deep study of the processes of exercising masculine electoral democracy after a half-century of limited suffrage. He convincingly notes the limited initiative possible in the short campaign leading up to 23 April for republican *commissaires* appointed from Paris and for local republican clubs compared with the advantages enjoyed by already well-known local *notables*, well-to-do professional men and property-owners. There was an explosion of political life after February: political clubs (five in Auxerre alone) and mass meetings were common, and no fewer than fifty-seven candidates offered themselves to the electorate. But the victors were the well-known, from the local "bourgeoisie des capacités" (p. 84): the first six elected of the nine deputies did not even bother to issue campaign manifestoes. The level of participation was massive, over 80 per cent, and the electorate chose nine men with varying degrees of republican loyalty, headed by Alexandre Marie, a member of the Provisional Government in Paris. Voilliot's only suggestion as to why the west of the department in the *arrondissement* of Joigny voted more heavily for the republican list (90 percent) than the south around Avallon (62 percent) is religious, the strength of Jansenism in the former and ultramontanism in the latter, previously in the diocese of Autun.

The most startling electoral outcome of 1848 was Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte's crushing victory in the presidential election of 10 December, when 84 percent of eligible males voted, and he won 87 percent of the votes cast. He had already won a by-election to the National Assembly there very comfortably in September. How can this landslide be explained? In a famous and often-quoted passage written in 1852, Marx likened the French peasantry to "a sack of potatoes" because their individual holdings prevented them from acting collectively except through a figure like Louis-Napoléon. For Voilliot, Marx was correct: December 1848 was "the peasants' insurrection," and he draws neatly on Max Weber's notion of "appropriated representation" to express Marx's notion of peasant landowners expressing their rage through a charismatic individual.

Voilliot's only concession to the methodology of Chevalier--and the generation of historians that followed him, from Armengaud to Lévêque--is to analyze the results to test the correlation between wine-growing and voting patterns. True, the wine-growers around Auxerre and Chablis were slightly more likely to vote for Ledru-Rollin in December 1848, but overall even winegrowers, normally seen as the backbone of a republican peasantry, were not immune from the allure of Bonapartism in the context of anxiety over the depressed and over-supplied wine market of 1848, accentuated by fears of *partageux* fleeing from Paris in June and anger at the special 45 percent supplementary tax.

The winegrowers' votes were volatile, however, and in May 1849 a distinctly republican vote emerged, with a new slate of *démocrates-socialistes* winning more than one-third of the votes in Yonne. A new regional tradition had been born. While there was little armed resistance to the coup d'État in December 1851 except in parts of Puisaye, there was certainly a significant republican opposition and consequent arrests.

Voilliot reproduces some fascinating pages from Friedrich Engels, who in October 1848 set out to walk from Paris to Berne.[6] The notes he made on the first part of his trip, south from Paris through Loiret then east to Vermenton on the river Yonne, were brilliantly evocative and full of wit. They were also full of presumptions about ignorant, narrow-minded “barbarians in the midst of civilization.” Towards Vermenton, however, he became aware of the distinctive geographical and economic structures of Burgundy: “here, where there is a small town always within three hours travel, where the population has a great deal of contact with the outside world by virtue of their trade in wine, here a certain degree of sophistication prevails.” But he failed to connect this with a potential for peasant republicanism, only using it to explain why the girls wanted to look pretty.

While Voilliot uses Engels to good effect, he might also have used Balzac, whose great rural novel, *Les Paysans* (1846)—in his words, “the most important of those I've resolved to write”—showed in an expert way the ongoing struggle of the rural poor to maintain collective rights, in this case in Yonne during the Restoration. Indeed, Voilliot's silence on the local legacy of the French Revolution is the greatest shortcoming of his analysis. Political choices in 1848–49 were as much a function of memories of the French Revolution as they were of socio-economic factors. Reference to Suzanne Desan's remarkable study of grassroots religion in Yonne would have further enriched his analysis. For example, she recounts the story of devout petitioners from Chablis in 1796 seeking to have their church reopened. They insisted that they were republicans exercising constitutional guarantees of religious freedom: “we wish to be Catholics and republicans, and we can be both one and the other.”[7]

Voilliot's book gives the impression of being a collection of only loosely connected chapters. Chapter six, for example, is an analysis of the income and expenses of the Paris-based “Club des clubs”, founded by Martin Bernard, Joseph Sobrier, Armand Barbès and others in March 1848 to coordinate and fund republican activism in the brief electoral campaign leading up to 23 April. Without questioning Peter Amann's conclusion that its actions were a failure, Voilliot examines the 40,000 francs spent by the Club, not enough to achieve its goals but more than enough to make its members vulnerable to accusations that it was used to plan the attempted republican coup d'État of 15 May.[8] The chapter does not mention the department of Yonne. The final chapter studies the influential work on electoral democracy generated by Louis Marie de Lahaye, vicomte de Cormenin, deputy for the Yonne *arrondissement* of Joigny in 1834–46 and re-elected in 1848. Again, however, it is not immediately apparent what Cormenin learnt from his years in Yonne or what his tireless democratic theorising can tell us about the department in 1848.

Christophe Voilliot teaches political science at the Université de Paris-Nanterre and is the author, among other things, of a published doctoral thesis on government-backed candidates across the nineteenth century.[9] His new book is an unusual and eclectic one, far from the conventional departmental monograph, and alternately instructive and unconvincing, but always rewarding. He discusses some of the central issues in our understanding of the history

of democratic political culture in France. Certainly, his core thesis, that the links between republicanism and Bonapartism in the emergence of electoral culture need to be acknowledged (pp. 148-55), is compellingly argued. But his reluctance to place the experience of 1848 within the broader context of the Second Republic 1848-52 leads him to downplay the rapid emergence of a deep and durable cleavage between the two.

NOTES

[1] Jacques Rougerie, “Faut-il départementaliser l’histoire de France?,” *Annales: Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations*, 21 (1966), pp. 178-193.

[2] Philippe Vigier, *La Seconde République dans la région alpine. Étude politique et sociale*, 2 vols (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1963); Pierre Lévêque, *Une Société en crise: la Bourgogne au milieu du XIXe siècle* (Paris: J. Touzot, 1983); Alain Corbin, *Archaïsme et modernité en Limousin au XIXe siècle, 1845-1880*, 2 vols (Paris: Marcel Rivière, 1975).

[3] Louis Chevalier, “Les fondements économiques et sociaux de l’histoire politique de la région parisienne, 1848-1870”, Thèse pour le doctorat ès lettres, 3 vols, Université de Paris, 1950.

[4] Among such studies, see Maurice Agulhon, *La République au village. (Les Populations du Var de la Révolution à la Seconde République)* (Paris: Plon, 1970); André Armengaud, *Les populations de l’Est-Aquitain au début de l’époque contemporaine. Recherches sur une région moins développée (vers 1845 - vers 1871)* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1961); Christiane Marcilhacy, *Le Diocèse d’Orléans au milieu du XIXe siècle: les hommes et leurs mentalités* (Paris: Sirey, 1964); Jean-Luc Mayaud, *Les Paysans du Doubs au temps de Courbet: étude économique et sociale des paysans du Doubs au milieu du XIXe siècle* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1979); Ted W. Margadant, *French Peasants in Revolt: The Insurrection of 1851* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1979); John M. Merriman, *The Agony of the Republic: The Repression of the Left in Revolutionary France, 1848-1851* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1978); Peter McPhee, *Les Semailles de la République dans les Pyrénées-Orientales, 1846-1852: classes sociales, culture et politique* (Perpignan: Éditions de l’Olivier, 1995).

[5] For Martin’s historical activism, see <http://adiamos-89.wifeo.com/>

[6] Friedrich Engels, “From Paris to Berne,” in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 7 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1977), pp. 511-529.

[7] Suzanne Desan, *Reclaiming the Sacred: Lay Religion and Popular Politics in Revolutionary France* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 146.

[8] Peter Amann, *Revolution and Mass Democracy: The Paris Club Movement in 1848* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1975), p. 124.

[9] Christophe Voilliot, *La Candidature officielle: une pratique d’État de la Restauration à la Troisième République* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2005).

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