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Sarah Farmer, *Rural Inventions: The French Countryside after 1945*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2020. ix + 168 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. £29.99. (hb). ISBN 9780190079079.

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Rural Inventions is a highly original study of a well-trodden subject: the decline of peasant society and culture associated with the post-war rural exodus and the subsequent transformation of the French countryside. Its originality derives from its multi-disciplinary approach that draws on a vast body of work not only by rural sociologists, historians, geographers and social scientists, but also by specialists in visual representation. Through a careful selection of topics of enquiry, Farmer argues that *la France profonde* did not disappear as a result of modernisation but was re-invented in multiple ways that gave it new life and demonstrated its capacity to adapt to change. Her research draws on an impressive assortment of archives both public and private, and on extensive interviews with an interesting range of individuals. There is a strong focus on visual aspects of her subject matter, and on photography in particular, which is used to illustrate some of the chapters. The front cover uses an image that juxtaposes high-rise housing blocks in Nanterre with an unkempt open green space where a man is seen walking with a horse in harness. This image captures the tensions between urban and rural life in postwar France that constitute the main theme running through the book's five chapters on the peasantry, second homes, rural utopias of the 1970s, memoirs of French peasant life, and what Farmer calls Raymond Depardon's "visual memoir" (see explanation below).

The first chapter sets the scene for the rest of the book by describing the "end of the peasantry," famously documented by Henri Mendras in his book of that name originally published in 1965.^[1] A discussion of the challenge of modernisation for France in the postwar era shows how the tractor became the ubiquitous symbol of the transformation of French agriculture, illustrated by posters from the 1960s. But migration from the countryside was not just driven by mechanisation. A desire for better standards of living and a different lifestyle caused mothers to encourage their daughters to leave, as documented by sociologist Edgar Morin's fieldwork in Brittany. The rural exodus created a divide between "winners" who adapted well to the new productivism, symbolised by the creation of the young farmers' union (CNJA), and "losers," mainly smallholders, who struggled to survive. Small farms were destined, under de Gaulle's agricultural reforms of the early 1960s, to be sucked into larger neighbouring farms through organisations like the SAFER, and the problem of "unwanted bachelorhood" that followed from female flight to urban life aggravated their situation. Rural housing was still very basic, usually without running water and very minimal access to electricity.

The disparities between rural and urban life fed into an even greater imbalance between "Paris and the French desert" (meaning the rest of France), highlighted by the geographer Jean-François Gravier in his famous book of that name.^[2] His work led planners to introduce a policy of *aménagement du territoire* in the interests of "territorial balancing" and a specialised agency, the DATAR, was set up to implement it. Farmer explains that, following the independence of Algeria in 1962, this became a "postcolonial project" reflecting the loss of empire, from which originates the term "the hexagon" now commonly used to describe mainland France (p. 25). But rebalancing led, in reality, to the concentration of state funds to urban areas in order to address the severe housing crisis that followed from the combined impact of rural exodus and foreign immigration on the labour force. Motorways soon started to appear, crossing through the countryside, bringing rural landscapes definitively into the project of modernisation. The DATAR engineered a reorganisation of rural space by prioritising the needs of urban planners over those of farmers: "the countryside was no longer just farmland" (p. 27). Infrastructure for mass tourism, industrialisation and commercial ventures gradually reconfigured the landscape, leaving only odd pockets of state-protected land for national parks. The impact of this collapse of "peasant civilisation" (p. 28) and the transformation of the rural landscape would not be fully recognised until the 1970s, when it took hold on the French urban imagination, revalorising the rural life and landscapes that had been abandoned in the rural exodus, as discussed in the following chapters.

Chapter two documents the development of second homes as rural retreats in reaction to the consumer society that the *trente glorieuses* had produced. This was driven partly by growing urban economic prosperity and the ample supply of cheap rural residences, but was also fuelled by a growing interest in restoring derelict old peasant houses, symbolised by the founding of "Maisons Paysannes de France," that often echoed new environmentalist concerns. Children of the rural exodus who inherited properties in their ancestral places of origin could also renovate them as holiday homes and this brought a certain democratisation to second-home ownership, traditionally associated with the the wealthy bourgeoisie's *maisons de complaisance*. The French countryside thus became "both a site of leisure and a place to imagine France's rural past" (p. 30). Data from INSEE shows an explosion of what it classified as *résidences secondaires* from just under half a million in 1954 to 1.8 million by the late 1970s, and one-third of owners were Parisians. *La chasse à la fermette* became a national pastime for aspirational urbanites and, as more motorways were built, the choice of accessible locations expanded. Enthusiastic media coverage played an important role in sensitizing the population to these new opportunities, but local notaries and estate agents who stood to make financial gains also encouraged this new urge to reconnect with France's rural past. The creation of "Gîtes de France" in 1955 enabled non-property owners to also enjoy vacations in the countryside, as did the construction of family vacation villages (*villages vacances familles*) and rural campsites. Although response to the influx of urban modernisers was sometimes challenging for sedentary local populations, the mass protest movement that led a successful campaign to resist the expansion of the military camp in the Larzac showed that alliances of convenience could also be formed around shared goals representing the defence of rural life and values. Although the economic downturn of the 1970s and 1980s led to a decline in sales of rural second homes, there was a revival in the 1990s and by then other northern Europeans, many of them British, had also joined the pursuit of a rural idyll in *la France profonde*.

Chapter three considers the quest for rural utopias that followed from the events of May '68 in France. The idea of self-sufficiency was not a French invention, but its French variant was a quite distinctive marriage between an idealised rural existence and the spirit of contestation, counterculture and marginality. Farmer documents two distinct waves of *néo-ruraux* from the late 1960s into the 1970s which became an important force in the postwar transformation of rural space. Communes of “ex-68ers” sprang up across the country as experiments in new ways of living rather than re-creations of an idealised past, and these new arrivals were not always welcomed by locals. The challenges of living as libertarian *communards* also created internal tensions and their experiences proved to be short-lived. They were replaced after 1975 by those who sought, instead, to make a living from the land in some way, including the parents of the now famous economist Thomas Piketty, who went to raise goats in the Aude. This kind of activity, along with many other subsidies for young farmers, was now being aided by the state in reaction to the desertification of the countryside following the rural exodus. The return to the land of the 1970s in its various forms captured considerable media interest which Farmer explores through magazines like *La Maison de Marie-Claire*.

In chapter four, Farmer looks at how memoirs of French peasant life were represented in books, TV programmes, advertising, and research projects and she explores the reasons for the French fascination with first-person accounts of peasant life, especially during the 1970s.

The first publication of a peasant *récit de vie* was Emile Guillaumin's *La vie d'un simple* in 1904 [3], which became a classic, being republished in 1935, 1943 and 1974. She then traces the genealogy of postwar memoirs of peasant life, focusing on what became four classic books: Ephraïm Grenadou's *Grenadou, paysan français*; Pierre Jakez Hélias's *Le cheval d'orgueil*; Emilie Carle's *Une soupe aux herbes sauvages*; and Antoine Sylvère's *Toinou: Le cri d'un enfant auvergnat*. [4] She examines the context in which each was written and read, their relationships to the rural past, and she considers the role of nostalgia in shaping their points of view. The success of these peasant stories was explained variously as nostalgia for the rural life only recently left behind, as a search for lost roots, or as a mourning for the loss of an enchanted world with clear borders and values. Indeed, nostalgia was presented as a natural response to the dislocations of the *trente glorieuses*, as well as of the era of decolonisation. Yet Farmer points out that her chosen writers were not locked in the past, but engaged with ideas of progress: Hélias wrote that it was the city dwellers who felt nostalgia for the countryside, not the peasants, and Carle showed herself to be a radical peasant activist who engaged with feminism and environmentalism, bridging the old world with the new. Peasants thus somehow became guiding figures to show how the now-urbanised French became modern and the ambivalence around the impact of modernisation crystallised around the peasantry, as symbolised in the hugely successful advertising campaign for Vedette washing machines, featuring *La Mère Denis*, a ruddy-cheeked old washerwoman whose perceived authenticity captured the transition from ancient to modern both visually and emotionally.

Chapter five is devoted to the photographic work of Raymond Depardon, who Farmer describes as “a unique figure in France's peasant moment...who reclaimed his peasant roots [near Villefranche-sur-Saône] in order to visually capture the dimensions of the post-war upending of rural life through autobiography” (p. 98). The focus here is on a collection of his work commissioned by the Photographic Mission of the DATAR (MPD) in which he visualises loss in ways that are intensely personal, but also bear witness to the transformation of French society that marked and shaped the contemporary landscape. The MPD was created in 1983 to mark the twentieth anniversary of the state agency established, as we saw earlier, to deliver territorial

rebalancing. It reflected a cultural turn in geography from the mid-1970s that considered landscape more as cultural representation, “a system of signs to be read,” than for its physical qualities, and in this respect it had wider echoes across other academic disciplines and amongst policymakers (p. 100). The MPD’s official aim was to foster a renaissance of the culture of landscape in order to nourish ecological awareness and stimulate civic responsibility but, at the same time, it was part of a broader effort to raise the status of photography as an art form, distinct from photojournalism or the aerial photography prized by technocrats.

Although Depardon was only one of many photographers invited to participate in the mission’s project, Farmer shows how his work was unique in its focus on “rural and agricultural space” which enabled him to portray the “silent revolution” of the restructuring of French agriculture in postwar France (p. 104). Because it was also autobiographical, it fitted well with the public enthusiasm for peasant life stories discussed in chapter four. She traces his personal and professional development, showing how they combined to produce his unique contribution to memoirs of peasant life analysed here. Interestingly, Depardon’s own story is not one of nostalgia, but of disruption and dislocation, showing the painful impossibility of return.

The book concludes with Farmer’s reflections on the campaign poster image which won the presidential election for François Mitterrand in 1981, depicting him against the backdrop of a traditional country village and its church spire. She argues that this was one of many visions of the French countryside portrayed by contradictory narratives, imagined as a site of stability, yet experienced as disruption. She rejects the transformation of rural society and the disappearance of the peasantry as a story of decline. Rather, she sees it as a continual reinvention of the value of the countryside by both those who remained, those who returned and by newcomers: “the countryside was a site of dynamic change and adaptation as well as one of decline and loss” (p. 121). Nor does she see the classic opposition of city to country as being as durable as imagined. The urban-rural comparison that held sway in the postwar decades has been challenged by the growth of peri-urban zones that developed in the 1990s outside towns and cities and which have blurred the boundaries, as illustrated by the book’s cover photo. The transformation of rural France is still underway.

I was delighted to review this book, as the French countryside has long been close to my heart, since writing my Year Abroad dissertation in the 1970s on the postwar rural exodus. Many of Farmer’s references resonated with my own experiences, of a rural hippy commune in the 1970s and the fantasy of self-sufficiency, of buying a second home in deepest Normandy many decades ago, of a copy of Guillaumin’s *La vie d’un simple* gifted to me when I visited friends in their rural retreat near Ygrande. Her analysis brought home to me the significance of these recollections in their wider historical context, as it would for others who spent time in France during this period. But the book will also appeal to readers with a less embedded fascination for the French countryside, and its engagement with visual representation will reward those whose interest comes from a more artistic perspective. Reasonably priced at just under £30 for the hardback, this is definitely a recommended addition for any wish list.

NOTES

[1] Henri Mendras, *La fin des paysans* (Paris: Sédésis, 1967).

[2] Jean-François Gravier, *Paris et le désert français* (Paris: Flammarion, 1947).

[3] Emile Guillaumin, *La vie d'un simple* (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1974).

[4] Ephraïm Grenadou & Alain Prévost, *Grenadou, paysan français* (Paris: Seuil, 1966); Pierre Jakez Hélias, *Le cheval d'orgueil* (Paris: Plon, 1975); Emilie Carle, *Une soupe aux herbes sauvages* (Paris: Jean-Claude Simoën, 1977); and Antoine Sylvère Toinou, *Le cri d'un enfant auvergnat* (Paris: Plon, 1980).

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