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Gérard Béaur, ed., *Alternative Agriculture in Europe (Sixteenth-Twentieth Centuries)*. Turnhout: Brepols, 2020. 349 pp. Illustrations and tables. €80.00 (pb). ISBN 978-2-503-58674-8.

Review by Elizabeth Heath, Baruch College, City University of New York.

What are the conditions under which agriculturalists have embraced new crops? Bringing together twelve distinct and diverse case studies ranging from the shift to turnips, flax, and clover around Antwerp in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to the rise of horticulture and floriculture on the outskirts of Paris in the nineteenth century and the battle between wheat and citrus in Fascist Italy, this edited volume explores this important question. Each of the case studies is richly researched and expertly analyzed, revealing something of the complex economic, political, social, and environmental conditions that led European agriculturalists to embrace alternative crops in the period between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries.

The volume begins with a rather paradoxical approach to this important question. As a whole, the collection is deeply informed by the scholarship of the late Joan Thirsk who introduced the idea of alternative agriculture in her pathbreaking 1997 work, *Alternative Agriculture: A History from the Black Death to the Present Day*.^[1] In that book, Thirsk raised an important question: under what conditions did agriculturalists shift from the “traditional” production of food cereals and meat to “alternative” crops like hemp, rapeseed, millet, and woad? Her overarching argument was that farmers shifted to alternative agriculture in moments of crisis, specifically when the price of grains and meat declined. Her attention to crop diversity and change, Gérard Béaur writes in his introduction to this edited volume, stimulated new research and approaches to the study of the history of European agriculture.

Yet Thirsk’s model is robustly critiqued in the second essay of the volume. Jean-Pierre Poussou’s finely argued “Another Look at Joan Thirsk’s Concept of ‘Alternative Agriculture’, and why it should be discarded,” essentially dismantles key aspects of Thirsk’s argument and concludes that her explanatory model should be jettisoned altogether. Poussou’s argument is two-fold. First, he argues, the very concept of alternative agriculture is problematic. Above all, Thirsk’s terminology was imprecise, especially considering that agronomists had already adopted the term “alternative agriculture” to describe innovative production techniques like organic farming. Here Poussou suggests that the production shifts Thirsk examined would be better conceptualized not as alternative agriculture per se, but as the embrace of alternative crops, substitution crops, complementary crops, or even industrial crops. Indeed, Poussou notes, many of the crops Thirsk would later list as examples of alternative agriculture (hemp, rapeseed, millet, woad, licorice) were introduced as complements rather than replacements to cereal grains and

meat production. Second, Poussou questions Thirsk's causal argument regarding the factors driving the shift to alternative crops. Whereas Thirsk attributed change to the falling price of food cereals and meat, Poussou argues for greater complexity. Above all, he notes that farmers were much more likely to shift production not, as Thirsk argued, under conditions of economic duress, but as prices rose. Such an analysis leads Poussou to consider a wide range of factors shaping market dynamics, namely changing consumer demand for alternative crops conditioned by novel gustatory and culinary practices as well as war, technological innovation, industrial demand, and environmental change. In the end, Poussou applauds Thirsk for reviving interest in the wide range of crops grown in Europe since the sixteenth century and for shifting the focus of the field, but ultimately concludes that much of her theory "does not seem to me to hold up" (p. 49).

The scholars whose essays fill the remainder of the volume thus find themselves a bit betwixt and between. On the one hand, the authors all work and engage with Thirsk's framework of alternative agriculture and crisis as the motor of change. Yet all are also attentive to Poussou's critique of Thirsk's work. As such, each in their own way offers complex explorations of the historical conditions that prompted agricultural producers to adopt new crops and production techniques. The result is a series of short, but richly researched and thoughtful essays that offer a nuanced examination of European agricultural producers as economic actors highly responsive to a wide range of fluctuations.

The essays in the volume are organized into four thematic sections. The first group addresses the city and the ways that proximity to growing urban centers shifted agricultural production in nearby regions. Michael Limberger's "Turnips, Flax, and Clover" examines the ways urban markets coupled with an influx of townspeople schooled in Flemish husbandry and eager to implement farm improvements transformed land use around Antwerp after the devastation of the Dutch Revolt. Hervé Bennezon's "Adapting to the Paris Market" similarly charts the rise of Montreuil as a garden center producing fruits and vegetables (including the famed Montreuil peach), a shift conditioned by the Fronde and the collapse of the wine industry. Here again, the rise of a new class of bourgeois landholders and growing urban demand for luxury produce helped to condition the shift to capitalist agriculture. The section concludes with Nadine Vivier's "Was Horticulture an Alternative Crop?" in which she explores the rise of horticultural production in the Parisian suburbs in the nineteenth century. Insofar as this industry arose from growing urban consumer demand rather than in response to a crisis in cereal prices, Vivier ultimately argues that the horticultural industry did not constitute an alternative agriculture in the sense used by Thirsk.

The second thematic section focuses squarely on the role of crisis—broadly construed—in shaping agricultural production shifts. Caroline Le Mao's "War, Crisis, and Alternative Crops" begins the section by analyzing the impact of war on French production of hemp and wine in the late seventeenth century. In her essay, she explores how French producers responded to wartime disruptions and state demands for supplies by temporarily expanding hemp production and selling wine once destined for international markets to the French Navy. At war's end, French producers once again adjusted to the new normal. Gabriel Jover Avellà's "Was There an Agrarian Crisis in the Mediterranean World During the Last Third of the Seventeenth Century" takes an expansive approach to the study of crisis in the Little Ice Age. Drawing together market demands, agro-climatic, and socio-economic factors, he explores how each conditioned the fin-de-siècle rise in olive and olive oil production in Majorca. Niccolò Mignemi completes the section

with his “The Battle of Wheat and Other Fascist Battles in Italian Agriculture (1920s-1930s)” by taking up the question of whether Fascist Italy was a development dictatorship. Adopting Thirsk’s idea of dominant and alternative crops, he uses this perspective to explore the different roles that wheat and citrus production played in state policies aimed at both promoting economic modernism and self-sufficiency.

The factors that shaped the initial growth and continued expansion of alternative, non-cereal crops are addressed in the third section. T.J.A. Le Goff’s “Alternative Agriculture in Northern Burgundy” traces the development of Dijon’s Hôpital Général into a major landholder and wine producer. The Hôpital’s decision to develop and expand wine production despite fluctuations in the cereal and wine markets, ultimately served the charitable institution’s consumption and fiscal needs. In charting this growth over the eighteenth century, Le Goff demonstrates how producers like the Hôpital Général thought about production strategically and over the long-term. Emmanuelle Charpentier’s “The Emergence of the Breton ‘Golden Belt’” likewise focuses on the crisis-prone eighteenth century to chart the development of vegetable and fruit farming around Saint-Malo, arguing that garden production served as a “real alternative” to grain production. She attributes the viability and growth of horticulture in the region to a number of factors: favorable soil and environmental conditions suited to garden crops, growing demand by members of the urban elite, the ability to sell crops to meet the victualing needs of the King’s ships, and encouragement by the state. Moving from the coast to the Alps, the section concludes with Luigi Lorenzetti’s “Between Conversion and Innovation,” which examines the expansion of fruit growing in the Trentino-South Tyrol and Valais regions between 1860 and 1960. Lorenzetti argues that a crisis in the wine industry initially triggered the shift to commercial production of fruit, but that the sustained growth and expansion of this alternative agriculture must be attributed not to crisis but to demand for fresh fruit from nearby markets. Thus, while Thirsk’s crisis model offers some explanation for the initial shift, the industry’s growth must be attributed to market demand.

The final section entitled “Changing Alternative Crops” examines the concept of alternative agriculture in regions of mixed agricultural production. Focusing on the irrigated regions of Valencia, Salvador Calatayud’s “New Crops in the Crisis of Mediterranean Agriculture, Valencia, 1800-1950” draws attention to the fact that the shift to alternative crops was not always a decisive shift away from cereals but rather a redistribution of production. In Valencia, he shows, older predominant crops like mulberry, wheat, and hemp did not disappear altogether but rather became secondary crops farmed on the margins while “alternative” crops of oranges, vegetables, and flax took center field. Anne-Lise Head-König’s ambitious “Alternative Agricultural Production in Switzerland, Sixteenth to Twentieth Centuries” charts the development of two different alternative agricultural sectors--dairy and fruit-growing--as well as two alternative activities--absinthe and snail gathering. Moving away from a simple economic explanation, Head-König explores how geography, regional competition, cultural shifts, market demands, and changing legal and tax codes all shaped the development (or, in the case of absinthe and snail gathering, the decline) of these regional specialties in ways that had little to do with the price of the dominant grain crop. The section concludes with David Celetti’s “Considerations on Hemp and Alternative Agriculture in Italy, France, and Russia from the Seventeenth to the Nineteenth Century.” Through a comparison of these three countries, Celetti argues for greater attention to complementary production of industrial crops like hemp, which often grew alongside wheat and served a multitude of purposes. Moving away from Thirsk’s emphasis on price shifts, Celetti

highlights the multiple and varied factors like local production relations, industrial and trade demands, and domestic consumption that shaped hemp production in these three regions.

Salvatore Ciriaco's concluding essay completes the volume by calling for more nuanced analyses of the multiple historical factors that have shaped changes in agricultural production in Europe. In particular, he advocates for a wider perspective that is attentive to the global, including the introduction of new crops from the Americas.

As a whole, the essays raise fundamental questions about agriculturalists and agricultural change in Europe between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries. In so doing, they challenge long-held stereotypes of rural farmers as tradition-bound curmudgeons resistant to change. The portrait of rural Europe that emerges from this kaleidoscope of essays is of an ever-changing countryside responsive to crises and opportunities and whose population was aware of and attuned to expanding local, national, and international markets. Over generations, farmers responded to these upheavals with measured calculation about the costs and benefits of shifting production or diversifying their holdings. They were also not averse to changing course as necessary, sometimes returning to the original crop and sometimes abandoning it all together. In many other instances, though, the shift was not one of adoption and abandonment, but transfer of resources to prioritize one form of production over another, at least temporarily. As a result, one is left wondering whether there is much to retain of the very concept of "traditional" agriculture.

The essays that comprise the volume are extremely rich but necessarily short. As such, they are bound to raise many questions about the broader context that allowed European agriculturalists greater flexibility to respond to market pressures beginning in the late sixteenth century. What enabled agricultural producers to shift their energies, or at least part of their energies, away from crops that could feed and sustain a family to industrial crops like hemp, or luxury items like artichokes, asparagus and peaches? What changes in standards of living and subsistence networks had developed to make these shifts possible? Béaur notes some of the factors considered by Thirsk in her original work, but as Ciriaco argues in his conclusion, the wider context merits additional consideration in order to better explain the rise of capitalist agriculture.

Overall, this collection of essays offers a thoughtful consideration of the factors that shape agricultural shifts and the possibilities for agricultural change. In the end, though, one wonders if the current framing, which is very much focused on exploring the merits and weaknesses of Joan Thirsk's model of alternative agriculture, unduly limits the appeal of the volume to a small scholarly audience working on similar topics. Yet in a world of climate change, economic crisis, and pandemic, the scholarship included in the volume and the debates they engage offer important historical examples for thinking about a wide range of timely questions regarding agricultural change, resilience, and response to crisis that should be of interest to a broad readership.

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Salvatore Ciriaco, “Conclusion. Agrarian Crises and Alternative Agriculture”

NOTES

[1] Joan Thirsk, *Alternative Agriculture: A History from the Black Death to the Present Day* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

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