
H-France Review Vol. 24 (February 2024), No. 24

Jean-Philippe Martin, *Des paysans écologistes: Politique agricole, environnement et société depuis les années 1960*. Ceyzérieu: Champ Vallon, 2023. 224 pp. €23.00 (pb). ISBN 9791026711834.

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In this slim volume, Jean-Philippe Martin attempts to summarise the last sixty years of environmentally friendly agriculture in France. Starting with the rise of environmentalism and the growth of anti-industrial critiques in the 1960s, he makes his way through the founding of alternative farm unions, government policy, the importance of various farmer-led associations, and changing consumer demands. He takes his readers right up to the present day with a postscript that addresses the devastating drought of 2022. In many ways, Martin has set himself an impossible task. A book with this much breadth is bound to leave readers wanting more. That said, for anyone interested in a solid introduction to the various facets at play in the attempt to green French farming, this is an excellent resource.

The book is made up of five chapters. The first three are organised chronologically and cover, respectively, the 1960s and 1970s, the 1980s and 1990s, and the 2000s and 2010s. Chapter four delves into the development of organic farming in greater detail, while chapter five looks at internal debates within various ecological farming groups and the challenges they face. The chapters vary considerably in length, which means that readers will get more detail on some topics and less on others. For example, chapter five is over fifty pages long while chapter four is a short fourteen pages.

Martin takes both a top-down and bottom-up approach, examining the official policy of the French government (and to a lesser extent the European Union) alongside grassroots movements. If there is an overarching argument to the book it is that government policy has promised a lot and delivered very little. For example, as discussed in chapter three, President Emmanuel Macron promised in 2017 that glyphosate would be phased out in French agriculture. Making the pronouncement on Twitter, he vowed that this toxic chemical found in herbicides would no longer be in use by 2020. Two years after his public declaration, Macron was rolling back his promise, stating that a regulation against glyphosate would “kill our agriculture” (p. 96). Similarly, promises made under François Hollande to eliminate the use of Neonicotinoids, a particularly toxic class of insecticides associated with declining bee populations, were dropped after the major farm union protested that growers would not be competitive without them.

While the government has been slow to legislate more ecologically sound agricultural practices, farmers themselves have been forming networks, joining alternative unions, and experimenting

with different methods. The list of the ventures that Martin covers is long, ranging from the 2018 founding of l'Atelier Paysan, a radical group that criticises other alternative associations for not going far enough, to individual stories about converting farms from conventional to organic production. One of the most intriguing cases that Martin discusses is that of the ELB (Euskal Herriko Labororien Batasuna), a Basque farm union established in 1982 to protest the productivist model championed by mainstream agricultural organisations. In addition to advocating for ecological practices, the ELB is committed to supporting the autonomy of its members, by pushing back against the productivist trap of expensive inputs and the debilitating levels of debt required to finance them. The discussion, however, runs less than two pages and leaves readers wanting more. This might, therefore, be a promising avenue for further research.

Methodologically, the text is rooted primarily in published sources, with a few archival references sprinkled throughout. In the introduction, Martin states that he wanted to pay full attention to the farmers in this story and so decided to rely heavily on interviews. Some of these he conducted himself, and others are available as either published texts or as part of archival collections. As the timeline reaches closer to the present day, the interview material gets richer and richer, presumably as Martin had greater access to living subjects. One of the stand-out interview excerpts is drawn from a telephone call with Claude Aubert, one of the pioneers of organic and biodynamic farming. In reference to the oft-made-fun-of biodynamic practice of timing certain activities according to the stars, he stated, "C'est curieux, mais ça marche, ça donne lieu à des controverses; ça marche peut-être parce que les agriculteurs qui font ça s'occupent mieux de leur compost, observent plus leur ferme" (p. 21). As someone who has often puzzled over the more mystical aspects of biodynamic farming, I found this interview to be especially insightful. Practitioners might not believe that the alignment of the stars influences their compost production, but the act of keeping track of such a complicated system requires farmers to be much more tuned in to their crops and animals. This practice of careful observation is what accounts, at least in part, for the success of biodynamic methods.

While organic farming is just one of the ecological alternatives to conventional agriculture that Martin explores, it is the easiest to quantify. As he informs the reader at the start of chapter four, in the year 2000 there were fewer than ten thousand organic farms in France. By 2020 that number had grown to fifty-three thousand, roughly 10 percent of the national total. This is a significant move in the right direction. But it is not enough. Agriculture continues to be one of the main drivers of both pollution and climate change. Run-off from chemicals used in conventional agriculture is causing massive toxic algae blooms off the coast of Brittany. The algae then wash ashore and emit dangerous fumes. In some ways, these "marées vertes" have come to serve as a visual symbol for all that is wrong with industrial farming. In terms of climate change, agriculture accounts for 21 percent of all greenhouse gas emissions in France. Granted, almost half of these emissions are tied to livestock production, and therefore a transition away from conventional methods in this particular sector might not yield significant reductions. But it is a significant statistic in that it communicates just how irrational our food systems have become.

In this regard, *Des paysans écologistes* has arrived at a propitious moment. While his purpose is not to proselytise, his sympathies are clear. And while I might have preferred a book that privileged depth over breadth, Martin's wide lens serves as a useful introduction to just about every single facet at play in the struggle to transform food systems, from the economic insecurity faced by farmers, and the difficulties they encounter when seeking assistance to adopt ecologically sound practices, to the political and institutional roadblocks that stand in their way.

NOTE

[1] Ministère de l'agriculture et de la souveraineté alimentaire, "Infographie - Le secteur agricole et forestier est à la fois émetteur et capteur de gaz à effet de serre" (Dec. 5, 2022): [Venus Bivar
University of Oxford
venus.bivar@history.ox.ac.uk](https://agriculture.gouv.fr/infographie-le-secteur-agricole-et-forestier-la-fois-emetteur-et-capteur-de-gaz-effet-de-serre#:~:text=R%C3%A9partition%20des%20%C3%A9missions%20fran%C3%A7aises%20de,18%25%20(manufacturi%C3%A8re%2C%20construction, accessed 31 January 2024.</p></div><div data-bbox=)

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ISSN 1553-9172