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Reynald Abad, *La conjuration contre les carpes. Enquête sur les origines du décret de dessèchement des étangs du 14 frimaire an II*. Paris: Fayard, 2006. 200 pp. Annexes, bibliography, and indexes. 20€ (pb). ISBN 9-782-213-62788-5.

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Professor Abad's *Conjuration contre les carpes* is a telling illustration of the blessings and limits of today's editors' taste for short texts. This precisely focussed and tightly argued analysis of the genesis of an admittedly secondary decree of the Convention tells us a great deal about Revolutionary politics and their intellectual foundations, while deliberately ignoring several other prominent questions. It is anchored in the author's exhaustive survey of the victualling of Paris under the Old Regime, a massive and evidently nation-shaping trade. *Le grand marché* explored the vast and surprisingly grey areas left aside by many well known pages.[1] This lighter exercise is concerned with a startling threat to the rather small trade generated by France's fish ponds.[2] Late in 1793 (14 frimaire an II), the Convention called for the destruction of most ponds and the turning of reclaimed areas to crops. To appreciate the author's intention, one must first recall the definition of the word *étang* or pond—a small body of still water of artificial formation, most often devoted to the production of fish and/or the powering of a mill. On paper at least, this decree was not concerned with the better known fate of marshes or similar wetlands, but with a unique component of the rural economy of Old Regime France. Furthermore, this ban had little impact. It was suspended and then abrogated eighteen months later. Of interest here are the words used to craft this decision, their origins, and the context in which they were deployed.

Fish-farming was shaped by nature, economics, and a range of cultural parameters. Where geography brought together markets and lands better suited to the damming of a stream than to agriculture, it paid to cater to the demand created by tastes and religious prescriptions.[3] All of these factors were tightly linked. The imperatives of the calendar were both canonical and physical, given existing transportation and conservation techniques, and the custom that freshwater fish be sold live, backed by regulations, further raised the price of an expensive product. This was also a trade that called for substantial resources and skills, notably with regard to the maintenance of ponds, their stocking, and the timing of their harvest. Fish-farming was in many ways complementary to agricultural cycles, but it also became a highly visible occupation in some regions, with evident environmental and social implications. This small sector of the economy offers significant entry points into some of the key tensions of the age.

Ponds had not spread widely across Western Europe until the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and they were not coherently questioned in France until the 1777 competition held by the Lyon Académie des sciences, Belles-Lettres et Arts. The leading lights of the kingdom's second city, likely familiar with the nearby notoriously amphibious Dombes region, asked if ponds were more useful than "*nuisible*". The essays they received initiated a debate that is Abad's first original focus. Not only is it reasonable to assume that most revolutionary initiatives were rooted in the intellectual ferment of the previous decades, but in this case it appears possible to exhaustively survey and link all contributions to the discussions. In a matter of a few years, and with the usual repetitions, a few voices argued that ponds were a nefarious component of the traditional agrarian economy. Essays by Condorcet and the *abbé* Rozier linked these accusations to broader enlightened circles, but generally without adding much to the arguments developed by parties closer to the areas where pisciculture had a large presence. Similarly, the "aerist" theories of the age and some fundamental physiocratic assumptions contributed to

the attacks on ponds, but along rather obvious lines; these mostly or almost stagnant waters were always regarded with some suspicion, and they could also be accused of stealing agricultural land.

If other factors contributed to raise tempers against fish ponds, they remained outside the discussions that are the object of this chapter and cannot, following the author, have played an important role. This principle leads him to reject the idea of a drop in the profitability of ponds driven by a fall in consumption that reflected a decline in religious observance. "Since Abad had himself...profitability of ponds and "dechristianisation", all the more since ponds supplied a very small fraction of the fish eaten at that time.[4] Yet, we also know that consumption of pond fish would drop rapidly in the following century while that of sea fish rose, and that as late as a generation ago, many more people ate fish on Friday than would have counted themselves as practising Catholics.[5] This suggests that tastes and dietary fashion played a role, a pattern all the more likely because fresh fish was eaten by people who could afford to heed such trends. Carps, in particular, may have increasingly been the object of a growing dislike that would in fact outlast the universal concerns about stagnant waters that generated this negative perception.[6] To what extent could such powerful yet subtle changes of attitudes affect a debate on the usefulness of ponds without being explicitly discussed remains unquestioned here, perhaps because it opens too broad a perspective on "*l'invisible des habitudes*".[7]

In any case, the Revolution upset this polite debate in a distinctive leap that may be summarised in a rather logical sequence: popular attacks fuelled political interventions, and the extraordinary circumstances of 1793 led to drastic measures. However, the author shows that everything that matters in this characteristic revolutionary process is hidden from a superficial perusing of the record (confirming, along the way, the limits of central, Parisian records). When, before even the end of 1789, crowds raided ponds in the Corrèze or municipalities denounced fish farming in the Bresse, they were not attacking this production *per se*, but rather the fact that it was tightly linked to the seigneurial system and local hierarchies. And when pleas reached the National Assembly, by the spring of the following year, they did not simply disclose what was happening in these southern provinces, but quickly adopted the more radical terms of the previous debates to call for the suppression of all ponds. Then, as a few years earlier, references often led back to the Lyon Academy *concours*, but not without an interesting shift: the winning essay remaining unpublished, writers and orators cited the much more radical runner-up that had been published by its author.

The next serious, if misinformed, step toward the condemnation of ponds occurred when their fate was tied to the greater prospect of the reclamation of marshlands. Much larger forces had joined battle against marshes in the name of health, agriculture, employment - in a word, progress. By then, the prospect of large-scale public works to ease critical tensions on all these fronts was irresistible, even if results proved elusive. Cooler heads could point to critical differences. Marshes were seen as unproductive by nature and because they were often held in common. Ponds were obviously private and profitable, at least most years, and their uses were, in fact, many. The confusion, nevertheless, had surfaced earlier, and proved perennial.[8] Most urgently, it actualised the political nature of debates: to oppose the draining of ponds was to risk standing among those who wished to breed hunger and idleness! The counter-revolutionary nature of such a stance was furthered by the association of ponds with the seigneurial system and, should there be need of another black mark, the church, in its rituals and in its most easily dismissed regular garb, as well as in its tithing powers.

Through 1793, the draining of ponds became one of the demands of more radical voices, even if liberal attachments to private property and the newly won right to dispose of it as one saw fit suggested that some form of compromise might be possible. Late in the year, both Robespierre and Danton found it convenient to enhance their radical credentials by joining what the latter grandly called the "conspiracy against carps". Room was made for a few exceptions (notably for mills, of obvious importance), but

ponds were banned. This was a political decision in the narrowest of senses, resting on an inconclusive set of discussions pushed along by a series of incidents, overstatements, outright confusions, and quick manoeuvres. Should something have gone differently, or perhaps should he have had more time, *l'Incorruptible* was ready: his papers show that he had prepared arguments in defence of ponds, to attack one of the proponents of the decree that he had supported (p. 164)! Logic reclaims its rights if one follows Abad in suggesting that the shallow roots of this political process explain the failure and, soon, disappearance of the decree.[9] Yet, debates about the value of ponds would soon resurface and the trade would decline surprisingly quickly. Here again, the author's reluctance to step beyond the bounds of his topic truncates what could have been an intriguing investigation into the impact of even a failed political outburst.

If this episode is about the relationship between the political and intellectual spheres, it is also, among other themes of importance, about the place of the Revolution in our understanding of attitudes toward the environment. Recent studies have replaced a negative vision with a more balanced assessment. The turn of the century ushered more resolute attitudes toward the transformation of nature, fostering many decisive projects, even if continuities mattered very much.[10] Most interesting may be, in the end, the growing understanding that in a long-settled environment, no simple distinction can be made between the natural and the artificial. This overlap is most evident in an area such as the Dombes, a watery complex that survived in spite of quasi-universal attacks on wet-lands. It did so, not because of any legislation or awareness of its environmental value in today's sense of the word, but thanks to the coherence of an "agro-system" that functioned in a rather satisfying manner from an ecological perspective.[11] Reminding us that this kind of stability deserves more attention is all to the credit of this solid, if narrowly defined study.

NOTES

[1] Reynald Abad, *Le grand marché. L'approvisionnement alimentaire de Paris sous l'Ancien Régime* (Paris: Fayard, 2002). Steven L. Kaplan, *The Bakers of Paris and the Bread Question, 1700-1775* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1996); *Provisioning Paris: Merchants and Millers in the Grain and Flour Trade during the Eighteenth Century* (Cornell, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1984). Marcel Lachiver, *Vins, vignes et vignerons : histoire du vignoble français* (Paris: Fayard, 1988); *Vin, vigne et vignerons en région parisienne du XVIIIe au XIXe siècle* (Société historique et archéologique de Pontoise, du Val-d'Oise et du Vexin, 1982). Jean Meuvret, *Le problème des subsistances à l'époque Louis XIV* - a series of 3 volumes, each in two parts: *La production des céréales dans la France du XVIIe et du XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Mouton, 1977); *La production des céréales et la société rurale* (Paris: EHESS, 1987); *Le commerce des grains et la conjoncture* (Paris: EHESS, 1988). Roger Dion, *Histoire de la vigne et du vin en France des origines au XIXe siècle* (Paris, 1959).

[2] Fresh water fish accounted for less than 1 percent of the close to 150 million *livres tournois* spent annually to feed Paris by the 1780s--for a short assessment of Lavoisier's well-known study of that trade, see Robert Philippe, "Une opération pilote : l'étude du ravitaillement de Paris au temps de Lavoisier", in J.-J. Hémarquinque ed., *Pour une histoire de l'alimentation* (Paris: A. Colin, 1970), pp. 60-67.

[3] For a fine introduction to the topic, one may turn to Richard Hoffmann, "Economic Development and Aquatic Ecosystems in Medieval Europe", *American Historical Review*, 101, 3 (1996): 631-699. Abad's title reflects the fact that the carp quickly imposed itself as the best-suited fish to pond conditions, pike being a voracious and distant second.

[4] Reynald Abad, "Un indice de déchristianisation ? L'évolution de la consommation de viande à Paris en carême sous l'Ancien Régime", *Revue historique*, 610 (1999): 237-275. This analysis is based on the records kept by the Paris Hôtel-Dieu, that held a monopoly over the sale of meat during Lent to people who had obtained a dispensation from canon rules (this monopoly was abolished by Turgot late in 1774; the rise in meat purchases during Lent is rather impressive). Jean-Michel Dérex, of the Groupe d'Histoire des Zones Humides (GHZH), also argues of such a trend ("Les étangs briards de la région de Meaux à la veille de la Révolution", *Histoire, Economie et Société*, 19, 3 (2000): 331-343).

[5] Jean Claudian and Yvonne Serville, "Les aliments du dimanche et du vendredi. Etudes sur le comportement actuel en France", in Hémardinou ed., *Pour une histoire de l'alimentation*, pp. 300-306.

[6] Even in a key producing region such as the Dombes, carps are often deemed "immeangeable" for their "muddy" taste! (Laurence Bérard and Philippe Marcheray, "Complexité sociale et fonctionnement du système agropiscicole des étangs de la Dombes", in *Actes du colloque Zones humides continentales*, 2003, pp. 181-185).

[7] Daniel Roche, *La France des Lumières* (Paris: Fayard, 1993), p. 553.

[8] Pierre-François Boncerf played a key role in the drafting of the legislation that made its way through the National Assembly over the second half of 1790 planning for reclamation of marshes. Earlier, while working for Turgot, he had authored a noted attack on seigneurial rights (*Les inconvénients des droits féodaux*, 1776, London) that included ponds in the opprobrium (Dérex, "Les étangs briards..."). To grasp the scale and pace of land reclamation in France, one will still revisit the comte de Dienne' survey, *Histoire du dessèchement des lacs et marais en France avant 1789* (Paris: H. Champion et Guillaumin et cie., 1891). More recent perspectives in Andrée Corvol, ed., *Les sources de l'histoire de l'environnement. Le XIXe siècle* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1999), and Andrée Corvol and Isabelle Richefort, eds., *Nature, environnement et paysage. L'héritage du XVIIIe siècle. Guide de recherches archivistiques et bibliographiques* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1995). This and other confusions surfaced again recently in the not without value film *Ridicule*.

[9] At least one of the reports drawn in preparation of the application of this decree adopted a position favourable to ponds, resorting to a logical economic argument - reclamation would be difficult and costly, while destroying a productive system (Raphaël Larrère, "Deux positions hostiles à l'assèchement des marais en pleine période révolutionnaire", *Aesturia*, 1 (2000): 19-30, special issue: "Marais et zones humides", or, same author, "Rauch ou Rougier de la Bergerie, Utopie ou réforme", in *Révolution et espaces forestiers* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1988), pp. 247-254).

[10] Andrée Corvol, ed., *La nature en révolution 1750-1800* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1993); Jean-Laurent Rosenthal, *The Fruits of Revolution. Property Rights, Litigation, and French Agriculture, 1700-1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Peter McPhee, *Revolution and Environment in Southern France: Peasants, Lords, and Murder in the Corbières 1780-1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

[11] See for instance the early reflections of Charles Avocat on the Dombes region where pisciculture retains its characteristic outward appearances ("La Dombes : milieu naturel ou milieu en équilibre ? Introduction à une éco-géographie de l'espace Dombiste", *Revue de Géographie de Lyon*, 50, 1 (1975): 35-58) and, more recently, Jean Untermaier, "L'évolution contemporaine du droit français des zones humides", in *Actes du colloque Zones humides continentales*, 2003, pp. 153-168.

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