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Antoine Follain, *Le village sous l'Ancien Régime*. Paris: Fayard, 2008. iii + 609 pp. Tables, figures, notes, bibliography, and index. €27 E.U. (pb). ISBN 978-2-213-63554-5.

Review by Peter M. Jones, University of Birmingham, UK.

A book about rural communities is to be welcomed if only for the reason that these corporate bodies are conspicuous by their absence from the standard historiography of ancien régime France. Antoine Follain sets out to plug a gap in the literature, but his book offers readers more than a survey. It amounts to a full-scale investigation of the developmental cycles of the village across the early modern period. In a connected narrative we have both a synthesis of research on village institutions and a pioneering attempt at comparative history. As anyone familiar with the rudimentary generalisations which pass for a history of the village in the period prior to 1789 will know, this is an audacious undertaking. But the author goes further. His account strives to capture something which is not often attempted even in studies with a less ambitious geographical remit: the rhythms of change over whole centuries of time. For reasons which are readily understandable, historians of the village have preferred to focus their attention on the eighteenth century and the decades leading up to the Revolution. The conclusions of such studies then tend to be regressed speculatively to earlier centuries. Sustained attempts to synthesise both the seventeenth- and the eighteenth-century history of the village are far and few between, whilst accounts with a linking narrative spanning the little researched period from 1500 to 1650 (as well as the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries) are extremely rare.

This said, however, the subject matter of the book has a pretty familiar ring to it. Follain tackles most of the usual questions: how should we define a village? How far were early modern villages emanations of the seigneurie? Did they possess representative institutions? Were they equipped with officers empowered to act on behalf of the collectivity? In what senses may we talk of a village-based political culture before the Revolution? How should we characterise the relationship between central government and the village? To have an answer to any one of these questions that holds for more than a single region or locality is a bonus, but to have answers that capture, albeit tentatively, the flux of institutions and power relationships over very long periods of time makes for absorbing reading. Longitudinal village history adds layers of complexity and does not make for easy understanding, but it offers a powerful corrective to the linear assumptions that still underwrite most depictions of the ancien régime village. After reading Follain, historians—particularly eighteenth-century historians—will find that institutions such as community syndics, Norman parish *trésoriers*, and the consuls of the semi-urbanised villages of Provence and Languedoc are not as static and unchanging as we had once assumed. The author also drives another nail into Alexis de Tocqueville's coffin as far as characterisations of the functioning of the ancien régime at parish level are concerned. In fact, de Tocqueville's *L'Ancien Régime*, long required reading for students of French history, is not mentioned in the bibliography at all, and the author briskly dismisses the notion that the *intendants* were everywhere extending their supervisory authority.

Antoine Follain is good at telling us what he disagrees with, but it is less clear that a new agenda for local history emerges from his research, or even that the claim to have written a comparative history of the village has been entirely vindicated. The book is part survey and part synthesis, in fact, with the

comparative component featuring in an intermittent and rather allusive manner. It is predicated on two objections that are given free play in a long and discursive historiographical introduction. The chief defects in the literature on the village (according to the author) can be attributed to a tendency towards the abusive generalisation of findings and to a tunnel-vision obsession with the rural community, or village, as an agrarian construct. Nearly all previous historians whose researches have touched on the early modern village have tended to generalise from their case studies, Follain argues. Thus the template for Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie is Languedoc, for Maurice Bordes it is the southwest, for Serge Dontenwill and Jean-Pierre Gutton it is the Lyonnais, and so on. Jean Jacquart's anchor point in the Ile-de-France invites the same criticism, although it receives more generous treatment in this account. We might expect, therefore, that Follain will not opt for the same approach. In practice, however, he uses his very considerable researches on Normandy as yet another benchmark. The text is peppered with allusions to "l'exemple normand," and yet this Normandy case-study evidence is never formally presented in the book, and for the most part stays resolutely out of focus. It is as though the author is anxious to forestall the criticism that his book is just another regional study writ large. True, the Norman village is woven into the narrative at intervals, but the reader has to work hard to uncover what was so special and significant about—for instance—the evolution of the office of *trésorier* in the parishes of Normandy.

The author's perspective leaves him vulnerable on another count, too. He complains of a lack of balance in the literature on the village, and yet his survey is constructed almost entirely on the basis of books and articles written in French. The only English-language authors who feature in his historiographical overview are Eugen Weber and Hilton Root. He appears completely unaware of the substantial contributions made to the subject by the likes of Jonathan Dewald and Michael Kwass (Normandy), Liana Vardi (the northeast), Jeff Horn (Champagne), Julian Swann (Burgundy), Don Sutherland and Tim Le Goff (Brittany), Charles Tilly, Tessie P. Lieu and Anthony Crubaugh (the southwest), and the present reviewer (Massif Central and elsewhere). This leads to some questionable assumptions and a tendency to play down the import of research on the eighteenth-century village. For instance, there exists quite a lot of writing about the village that crosses over the revolutionary watershed. Jacques Godechot's lament of 1972 is thus substantially remedied. By the same token, the suggestion that no one has taken further the question raised by Jean-Pierre Jessenne's work on the Artois of how we might explore the sense of "community" when official records fall silent is in need of considerable qualification.

The reluctance of Antoine Follain to construct his account of the village within the parameters established by Marc Bloch and the Annales historians is more understandable. For a generation obsessed with the transition from feudalism to capitalism, the village in its agrarian dimension was a source of perennial fascination. The retreat of this paradigm (Follain calls it a "vulgate" [p. 163]) has allowed other approaches to flourish. The same may be said of the ethnographic turn which briefly occupied the foreground in the 1970s and 1980s. Historians are now much more willing to acknowledge the role of the state as an actor and to explore its presence at the grass roots, if only as a vehicle for revenue extraction. They also show a greater readiness than before to grant the village autonomy as a community of the faithful. Follain is only tangentially interested in the religious history of the village; instead he emphasises the significance over the long term of fiscal systems in shaping village structures, or to be precise, the financial articulations between the village and outside authorities. It is only from this angle that he will grant the importance of seigneurial power, of common land and of collective rights—for many years the stock-in-trade of Annales-inspired historians.

It follows, therefore, that he is unimpressed by the village typologies and classificatory models which are currently on offer. Seigneurialism, pace the Marxist social historians and the Annalistes, is not an "original characteristic"—not in the early modern era of village history at any rate. To allocate villages on a Richter scale of oppressive lordship is unhelpful. Occupational analysis will not serve as an adequate discriminator either, and nor will land-holding structures. As for the notion that there existed a distinctive meridional model of highly structured rural communities that were empowered to function

avant la lettre like veritable village municipalities, he finds it a dubious proposition. It is true that historians of the south and southwest do not always pay enough attention to distinction between villages and mini-townships. It may also be true that the powers claimed for the consuls of the Midi do not always withstand scholarly scrutiny.

However, the classification which the author comes up with as an alternative is scarcely satisfactory either, and he does not put it forward with much conviction. Of course, this begs the question of why we need to have a typology at all—a question which appears to have more to do with the requirements of French academic culture than the subject matter of this book. In the light of his investigations, Follain outlines a trajectory for the ancien regime village which has a common starting point and a common destination. The root lies in the seigneurial communities of the high Middle Ages, whereas the universal municipalisation of village life by the legislators of the National Assembly in 1789-90 provides the natural terminus. But crucially he discerns a bifurcation of institutional experiences in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Some villages, which he labels *communautés paroissiales*, lost the ability to administer their own taxation and to manage their day-to-day financial affairs. Yet, paradoxically, they were able to retain a greater measure of collective participation in decision making, and their officers were not beholden to the seigneurie as the source of their empowerment. Such villages could be found in western France, in Normandy, the Ile-de-France, the Bourbonnais and the Lyonnais.

In the north, the east, in Provence and the Midi and in Gascony, by contrast, he detects a species of village that can be grouped together as *communautés municipales* for analytical purposes. Villages of this type were originally linked more closely to the seigneurie in the sense that consuls and their like were mandated with powers belonging properly to the local lord. In the course of the eighteenth century such officers were able to detach themselves from seigneurial supervision and carve out areas of jurisdictional independence, although this may be to push the author's argument too far. But if consuls and jurats were magistrates, he is at pains to emphasise that this scarcely distinguished them from certain representatives of villages in the north of France and in Lorraine. Whether or not we accept this distinction will depend upon the time frame at issue, but it is hardly clear-cut. And in any case, by the eighteenth century, the forces of institutional convergence were hard at work. Antoine Follain does not help his schematisation when he acknowledges the probable existence of variant types of *communauté municipale*, together with the fact that in large expanses of central southern France it is impossible to say—in the current state of research—to which prototype the villages belonged. But as he disarmingly informs the reader in the final sentence of this pioneering book, none of the chapters should be regarded as complete and finished.

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