

Dear Agrarian Studies colloquium participants:

What you have here is the final chapter of my finished dissertation. In getting plans together for a book manuscript, I have decided that I will expand the content of this chapter substantially and have it run in parallel, throughout the book, to the industrialisation story. In the dissertation, the industrialisation narrative comes in the first four chapters and then this final chapter is reserved for those who opted out, resisted, found new ways of doing things. I want their story, in the book, to be as substantial as that of those who did industrialise. So I'm looking for feedback on how the content of this chapter might be pursued in greater depth – both in terms of the kinds of questions I should be asking, but also in terms of source materials. I will be in France this summer gathering materials for the book and the biggest challenge there is going to be putting together a list of sources that I can look at in order to give this part of the story more heft.

In order to read this chapter, you'll need to know a little about the two land reform programs that I discuss here: *remembrement* and the SAFER. As the French term suggests, *remembrement* is a process by which the lands of a given commune are exchanged and rearranged in order to consolidate holdings. It was first used in the late 19th century, but only sporadically. It was not pursued as part of the state mandate to industrialise agriculture until the 1950s, at which point substantial state resources were allocated to the program. Generally, *remembrement* was effected in a given commune at the request of a majority of local land-owners. Once the vote was put through, the mayor would submit an application to the Ministry of Agriculture, which would then send out a surveyor to the commune in question in order to redraw property lines. To give you a sense of how things changed, a very typical pre-*remembrement* situation might be for a farmer to own 10 hectares that were distributed over 30 dispersed plots. After *remembrement*, that farmer might own 10 hectares distributed over 5 plots. The purpose was to consolidate holdings in order to facilitate the use of new technologies and to maximise efficiency. The problem with *remembrement*, however, was that because all that was needed to move things forward was a majority, many residents were opposed to the program and protested vociferously (though rarely to any effect). As a result, it was a very controversial process.

As for the SAFER (*société d'aménagement foncier et d'établissement agricole* – and in English: society for land planning and agricultural settlement), it was created in 1960 as part of a larger body of agricultural legislation known as the Orientation Laws. Together, these laws were meant to foster modernisation within the agricultural sector. And specifically, the SAFER was intended to oversee the land reform component of this legislation. Organised regionally, the SAFER was to act as a landbank of sorts, acquiring and redistributing farmlands in its area. All sales of agricultural land were to be reported to the regional office by the officiating notary, and the SAFER was endowed with the authority to preempt these sales if it was determined that the land in question could better serve the modernisation mandate if redistributed to someone else. In short, the SAFER was able to intervene in the real estate market in order to cede lands to farmers that its administrators deemed more worthy than the proposed buyer. Needless to say, such a practice generated an enormous amount of controversy. Much of my research involved reading letters of complaint sent to SAFER offices – and I've pulled from these letters in a few places in this chapter.

I've inserted a few comments to explain a couple of things, but tried not to over-do it. I also included my full dissertation bibliography – to give you a sense of what materials I have been working with. I hope that covers it. And I'm really looking forward to the discussion.

Best,
Venus

Conclusion: Losing the Farm

By the 1980s, French agriculture had triumphed on the world stage. And it had done so, in large part, by cultivating a reputation for quality. Indeed, wine and spirits along with meat and animal products accounted for a full third of its exports.¹ As high-end products, alcohol and fine cheeses fetch a higher price on global markets than such exports as wheat or corn. As a result, even though France became the second largest exporter of agricultural goods (as defined by dollars), it was sixth in terms of volume of output.² The added value of *terroir* allowed France to compete on the global market with countries that traded in much greater quantities. In this respect, perhaps France attained grandeur after all, and the focus that historians have placed on technological grandeur (e.g. nuclear power, the TGV, the Concorde) has obscured the international success that was achieved as an agricultural powerhouse.³

This success, however, was achieved at a great cost. For while some farmers profited handsomely from the modernization of the agricultural sector and the push toward export-based production and distribution, the vast majority were forced to retrain, retire, or to give up their lands to farmers who had been deemed more productive, more efficient, and more promising. As discussed in chapter one, the benefits of price-support policies were skewed toward larger farmers. Moreover, streamlined distribution networks and market requirements for standardization likewise favored large-scale operations. For instance, under new methods of milk distribution, a single distributor circulated refrigerated cars to collect milk. These distributors operated in bulk in order to cut costs and maximize efficiency – they were not going to send

¹ Naylor, “Peasant Protest and the Reform of French Agriculture,” 264.

² <http://www.info-france-usa.org/atoz/agriculture.asp>

³ For the importance of grandeur to postwar economic development plans, see chapter one.

expensive refrigerator cars to small-scale producers in order to collect a few random liters of milk.⁴

That many farmers would have to be eliminated in order for the agricultural sector as a whole to succeed was for many in policy-making circles a difficult, though accepted, truth. When not implied, through restrictive lending practices by the *Crédit Agricole* or regulations regarding minimum farm sizes, the sacrifices expected of smaller producers were candidly discussed. The CNJA in particular was open about the necessity of surrendering small-holders to modernization. Secrétaire Général Raoul Serieys rather matter-of-factly stated, “It is unreasonable to hide the small- and medium-sized farmers from the truth with dazzling solutions that will never be anything but mirages. It would be wrong to foster false hopes in those who are duty-bound to modernize.”⁵ Similarly, François Tanguy-Prigent, who had served as minister of agriculture after the war and as a deputy for Finistère in the 1950s and 1960s, wrote in *L'Express* about what precisely structural reforms and adhering to guidelines regarding minimum farm size would mean for both producers and consumers:

This means, contrary to the declarations of certain demagogues, that the number of family farms still needs to be reduced if we want them to be economically viable, if we want farmers to achieve and to maintain a decent standard of living, if we no longer want them to be an added expense for French consumers, nor a handicap with respect to European and global markets.⁶

The promises to protect the family farm, explored in chapter four, were viewed by these highly influential players as nothing less than the false promises of ambitious politicians.

⁴ Fel, “Les révolutions vertes,” 10.

⁵ *La Nation*, “Un devoir de modernisation,” October 21, 1966.

⁶ François Tanguy-Prigent, “Les affaires françaises – agriculture,” *L'Express*, February 25, 1960.

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Comment: Second biggest farm union in France – had a modernising ethos

Between 1954 and 1975, the agricultural population in France fell from 9.5 million to six million and the number of farms went from 2.3 million to 1.3 million. In that twenty-year period, when consolidation was at its height, 40,000 to 50,000 farms were disappearing every year.⁷ And in spite of increased productivity and general economic success, those farmers who did manage to survive were not all compensated equally. In 1977, 60% of all farmers were making less than the minimum wage.⁸ Statistics like these are often repeated in the literature on the agricultural revolution that took place in postwar France. But what is often missing is an examination of how these numbers translated into human experience. In twenty years, one million farms were lost. While it is presumably the case that many of these farms were transferred willingly and to the profit of their previous owners, it is also the case that many French men and women, whose labor had become unnecessary thanks to the advances of modernization, lost their farms in spite of great pains to hang on to them.

The question of what happens to segments of the population once their labor has been rendered obsolete, through technological progress, the international migration of manufacturing, or changing conditions in production, has in the twentieth century concerned not only farmers, but also miners, auto workers, fishermen, and steel workers. In the case of French farmers, this obsolescence was met with resistance by way of individual protest (e.g. letters and law suits), organized resistance (e.g. breakaway unions and collective actions), and the development of alternative practices (e.g. niche markets, local distribution networks, and organic farming). Together, these forms of resistance highlight the magnitude of what was at stake in the cutthroat transformation of the agricultural sector. In examining more closely how French farmers

⁷ Gavignaud, *Les campagnes en France*, 74.

⁸ Jean Flavien, "A qui la propriété de la terre?" *France Nouvelle*, December 5, 1977.

responded to a new system of production that made the vast majority of them superfluous, I hope to emphasize that beyond the impressive statistics regarding increases in productivity and economic growth, there was a very real human cost to be paid for such accomplishments. While the collective nation may have achieved grandeur in the end, it did so at the expense of countless individual citizens.

Individual Protest

A central preoccupation within the literature on agricultural France, from Eugen Weber and Hendri Mendras to Susan Carol Rogers and Winnie Lem has been the degree to which modernization has eclipsed peasant civilization.⁹ For Weber and Mendras, the titles say it all: *Peasants into Frenchmen* and *La fin des paysans*. For Rogers and Lem, however, the process was more complicated. Rogers documented the many ways in which French farmers maintained old ways while simultaneously adopting new ones, while Lem focused on a brand of political organizing that posited the peasant as a symbol of resistance. All four make compelling cases for their own interpretations of how the French peasant has fared through political centralization, agricultural industrialization, and the dawn of consumer capitalism. And all four are at their best when they move away from generalized discussions of “peasants” and toward more anthropological observations of how the daily routines of life and labor changed for their subjects. Mendras’ descriptions, for instance, of how farmers in the southwest adopted American hybrid corn only to mire themselves in insurmountable debt, or Rogers’ account of how marriage practices were bound up with the agricultural economy, give a clear sense of how continuity and change operated over time because they engage with individuals and communities. This is not to

⁹ Lem, *Cultivating Dissent*; Mendras, *The Vanishing Peasant*; Rogers, *Shaping Modern Times*; and Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen*.

say that analytic discussions that take place on a larger scale are without merit. On the contrary, I have argued throughout this dissertation for the powerful influence that has been exercised by such monoliths as the state, the media, and international trading blocks. But when it comes to assessing the give and take between continuity and change at the level of lived experience, we must turn our attention to the individuals who experienced it.

In 1969, Roger Roblot, an electrician working at a plastics factory in the Eure-et-Loir attempted to purchase farmlands and was preempted on behalf of an established farmer. In a letter of protest addressed to the Minister of Agriculture, Roger Roblot explained that he had been forced to leave the family farm for the factory for lack of sufficient surface area. When he saw an advertisement in the paper for a piece of land in his commune, he jumped at the chance to return to agriculture and quickly made arrangements with the seller to effect the purchase.¹⁰ The SAFER then exercised its right of preemption on the grounds that a) Roblot was not employed as a farmer, and b) the piece of land in question could be used to reinforce a neighboring operation.¹¹

There was no question that the SAFER was acting according to its mandate, that it support area farmers to improve the size and distribution of their holdings. In this regard, this particular attribution was like many others effected throughout France. What makes this case interesting, however, is the way in which Roblot defended his interests. He began with the usual personal attack on the SAFER beneficiary, an almost universal tactic that was more often than

¹⁰ CAC, Fontainebleau, 800389 Ministère de l'Agriculture, Correspondance concernant les particuliers en relation ou en conflit avec les SAFER, Art. 34: Centre, 1965-1970, letter from Roblot to the Ministry of Agriculture, May 13, 1969.

¹¹ CAC, Fontainebleau, 800389 Ministère de l'Agriculture, Correspondance concernant les particuliers en relation ou en conflit avec les SAFER, Art. 34: Centre, 1965-1970, letter from the SAFER of Centre to the Ministry of Agriculture, June 6, 1969.

not fuelled by a complete lack of knowledge (and this case was no different, with Roblot accusing Pierre Eveno, the beneficiary of the SAFER redistribution, of being neither a farmer nor in possession of lands contiguous to those he received). But then he pushed further, questioning the foundations of the market and of the Fifth Republic itself.

In Roblot's first letter, he questioned the limits of his rights as a consumer. In a frantic series of increasingly urgent questions put to the minister of agriculture, Roblot asked, "What is the SAFER for? What is its goal? What are the limits of its power? Who then has the right to buy lands? Why do the notaries use the press to advertise that lands are for sale when only the SAFER has the right to buy them?"¹² Roblot had freely purchased lands on the market, with a consenting seller, and had signed all necessary papers with the notary. And yet they were taken away from him. Roblot therefore came to the conclusion that the market was simply not functioning as it should. In his final letter, referring to the political climate following the events of 1968, Roblot went so far as to question the very democracy and rule of law upon which the Fifth Republic was founded: "In an age when we talk a lot about progress, about democracy, about dialogue and legality, I ask myself if all of this is actually embodied in the case that I have presented."¹³ Unable to appeal his case, for the SAFER was indeed acting according to the letter of the law, and faced with an intractable bureaucracy at every turn, Roblot finally gave up. After seven months of exchanging letters with various administrative officials, Roblot conceded that he would be unable to return to farming and that he would have to continue commuting eleven kilometers to a factory job he never wanted in the first place. While many of these letters to the

¹² CAC, Fontainebleau, 800389 Ministère de l'Agriculture, Correspondance concernant les particuliers en relation ou en conflit avec les SAFER, Art. 34: Centre, 1965-1970, letter from Roblot to the Ministry of Agriculture, May 13, 1969.

¹³ CAC, Fontainebleau, 800389 Ministère de l'Agriculture, Correspondance concernant les particuliers en relation ou en conflit avec les SAFER, Art. 34: Centre, 1965-1970, letter from Roblot to the Ministry of Agriculture, October 21, 1969.

SAFER and to the Ministry of Agriculture communicated a certain level of desperation and frustration, the persistence with which Roblot pursued his case, and the utter helplessness he expressed in doing so, demonstrates the degree to which certain life options for individual citizens were foreclosed by the state.

It often fell to the SAFER to deal with the complaints of those, like Roblot, who were simply not able to meet the requirements established by modernizing agricultural policies. As discussed in chapter two, the SAFER was a means for the state to displace some of its responsibility for the welfare of its citizens to the vicissitudes of local politics. As part of the deliberations process behind the Orientation Laws, it was openly acknowledged in a report written up by the inspecteur général of the Ministry of Agriculture that 56% of all French farms were smaller than ten hectares. Declared as “marginal” the report concluded: “Thus, one half of our farms either need to evolve or disappear.”¹⁴ To be sure, it was also the case that many of the individuals behind the Orientation Laws and the SAFER, and in particular Eugène Forget and Michel Debatisse, had hoped that these new measures would not only further modernization efforts, but that they would likewise soften the blow for those who were unable to carry on as farmers – through funding for retraining or retirement. But given the general refusal of the both the Ministry of Agriculture and the office of the president to intervene in SAFER decisions, it was clear that state administrators, exhausted by the legal troubles that *remembrement* had produced, had come to see the SAFER as a means of deflecting responsibility for the agricultural revolution that they had mandated. Moreover, as local institutions, the SAFER were often the first point of contact for farmers trying to engage with an incomprehensible state apparatus that was seemingly calling for their eradication.

¹⁴ CAC, Fontainebleau, 800010 Ministère de l’Agriculture, Direction de l’Inspection Générale. Art. 27: Dossiers de M. Forestier, Inspecteur Général, Dossiers de documentation, 1952-1976, “Introduction aux problèmes fonciers,” March 28, 1960.

As citizens, as members of the national community, many of these farmers expressed a sense of entitlement that had been betrayed. And many farmers, in order to argue their own cases, turned on each other. Unable to comprehend a particular SAFER redistribution or the general objectives of the agricultural reforms, they cited in their letters a particular set of characteristics that they believed made them more entitled, more in tune with the general interest, than their neighbors. Age and family status were the most commonly cited attributions. Farmers between the ages of twenty and fifty were certainly privileged by the SAFER as it was believed that they would be more amenable to modern techniques than their older counterparts. Some of the plaintiffs, however, took this preference too close to heart. In a case that highlighted the arrogance of youth, Jacques Madalle, a twenty-two year-old farmer in Languedoc-Roussillon, complained to a local deputy that he had been traded in for the oldest possible candidate.¹⁵ The chosen beneficiary, however, was forty-two years old, which, the Ministry of Agriculture explained, was hardly the age of retirement. Moreover, he had three children and was the owner of parcels contiguous to the ones in question.¹⁶ In a similar case, an angry Mr. Brancher in Centre protested the preemption of his land purchase and argued that as a young farmer he was to be supported by the SAFER rather than derailed in his honest attempt to improve his holdings.¹⁷

¹⁵ CAC, Fontainebleau, 800389 Ministère de l'Agriculture, Correspondance concernant les particuliers en relation ou en conflit avec les SAFER, Art. 53 : Languedoc-Roussillon, 1971-1973, letter from Jacques Madalle to the deputy of Hérault, February 29, 1972.

¹⁶ CAC, Fontainebleau, 800389 Ministère de l'Agriculture, Correspondance concernant les particuliers en relation ou en conflit avec les SAFER, Art. 53: Languedoc-Roussillon, 1971-1973, letter from the Ministry of Agriculture to the deputy of Hérault, June 2, 1972.

¹⁷ CAC, Fontainebleau, 800389 Ministère de l'Agriculture, Correspondance concernant les particuliers en relation ou en conflit avec les SAFER, Art. 34: Centre, 1965-1970, letter from Brancher to the SAFER of Centre, February 12, 1966.

At times, the competition for SAFER lands led farmers to pit youth against family. In a particularly eloquent defense, Rober Subias protested to the Ministry of Agriculture that he had not been chosen as a beneficiary for lands because he did not have the required four years of farm experience. He explained that he had chosen to study agronomy at the nearby Lycée Agricole as a means to improve his knowledge of modern techniques and methods and that as a young and energetic farmer, surely he was the best candidate.¹⁸ The minister himself, Jacques Chirac, responded to explain that Subias had not met the requirements. He then added that several of the other candidates had families and professional experience and were therefore more urgently in need of expanding their farms.¹⁹ Given that the ideal farm, as discussed in chapter four, was both modern and family-based, many cases that were handled by the SAFER produced conflicts between candidates who claimed to represent one or the other. As a result, age versus number of children was a common trope for judging relative entitlement to the land – if a farmer possessed both attributes, even better.

While the administrators of the SAFER fought hard to protect those farmers they could, the organization ultimately functioned as a brutally competitive selective aid program. Those farmers deemed worthy of investment were provided with support and the rest were left to their own defenses. For the poorer owners, and for the elderly, this often meant being passed over for farmers who promised to fulfill state plans for modernization. The bottom line was that the public good required a healthy and competitive agricultural sector. Consequently, the SAFER was designed to restructure holdings in the *aggregate* – and not to come to the rescue of

¹⁸ CAC, Fontainebleau, 800389 Ministère de l'Agriculture, Correspondance concernant les particuliers en relation ou en conflit avec les SAFER, Art. 53: Languedoc-Roussillon, 1971-1973, letter from Roger Subias to the Ministry of Agriculture, November 12, 1972.

¹⁹ CAC, Fontainebleau, 800389 Ministère de l'Agriculture, Correspondance concernant les particuliers en relation ou en conflit avec les SAFER, Art. 53: Languedoc-Roussillon, 1971-1973, letter from Minister of Agriculture Jacques Chirac, December 5, 1972.

individual farmers, a difficult truth that was often misunderstood by its applicants. If individual claimants could not convince the SAFER that their own particular interests intersected with those of the state, they were simply out of luck. Men and women like Roblot, who would have preferred to farm modest holdings than work in a factory, were denied access to farmland on the grounds that a more deserving individual would better serve the collective needs of the nation.

Organized Resistance

Dissatisfied with how the common good had excluded their individual interests, many of those farmers who proved unsuccessful in their personal attempts to challenge the demands of modernization joined together to represent their interests collectively. Indeed, French farmers, from the rise to political prominence of José Bové to the consistent breakdown in trade talks between the United States and the EU over agricultural issues, have garnered something of a reputation for their ability to organize and defend themselves. While the FNSEA and CNJA continued to dominate the syndical sphere, several rival organizations emerged during *les trente glorieuses*. Additionally, farmers banded together informally, at the local level, to address specific problems that emerged in their areas.

As discussed in chapter one, the first substantial union to be formed in response to dissatisfaction with how the FNSEA and the CNJA were representing their interests was the Mouvement de défense des exploitants familiaux (MODEF). Established in 1959, amidst negotiations for the Common Market and the push for price supports, the MODEF was meant to advocate on behalf of those smaller-scale producers who were not going to benefit to the same degree as their larger-scale counterparts from the subsidy structure of the Common Agricultural Policy. Moreover, those who joined the MODEF tended to be worried that the proposed

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Comment: The largest farm union in France
– fairly conservative ethos

structural changes to the agricultural sector (e.g. larger, consolidated farms, increased mechanization, streamlined distribution) would put them out of business.²⁰

Decidedly on the political left, the MODEF had ties to the communist party (the PCF). Its leadership argued that land ought to be seen as a tool of production, and as such, access to land ought to be guaranteed. They called for thirty-year loans at 1% for land acquisitions. They also demanded lower taxes for small-scale farmers, a reduction in prices for agricultural equipment, and an increase in agricultural prices. They passionately opposed the Orientation Laws, rejecting the distinction between economically viable and non-viable farms. When Michel Cointat, who had participated in the creation of the Orientation Laws, was named minister of agriculture in 1971, the secrétaire général of the MODEF released the following statement: “The nomination of Mr. Cointat does not mark the introduction of a change in agricultural policy. As a member of Mr. Pisani’s cabinet, he was one of the primary architects of the Orientation Laws, which threatened not only the small-scale producer, but the medium-scale producer as well.”²¹ Through the 1970s, thanks in part to the economic crisis and the resulting drop in agricultural incomes, the MODEF became increasingly popular.

Membership in the organization was modest though significant. In 1964, it was represented in twenty-one departments, and in elections to the Chambres d’Agriculture won 4% of the vote. By 1976, however, representation had expanded to seventy-one departments, and it garnered 51% of the vote.²² Membership was strongest in the south of France and in the Massif Central, with small-scale wine producers in the former and poor mountain-region farmers in the

²⁰ Cleary, *Peasants, Politicians and Producers*, 137.

²¹ Jean Domenge, “M. Cointat, le nouveau ministre de l’Agriculture,” *Le Figaro*, January 11, 1971.

²² Cleary, *Peasants, Politicians and Producers*, 138.

latter.²³ While numbers such as these posed only a limited challenge to the dominance of the FNSEA, the fact that the MODEF was able to build a respectable support-base in spite of being barred from negotiations with the state is indicative of how intensely some farmers felt about being left behind.²⁴

While the MODEF opposed agricultural modernization from the political left, the second breakaway union to form during *les trente glorieuses* was the conservative Fédération française de l'agriculture (FFA).²⁵ The FFA was formed in 1969, when FNSEA members in Indre-et-Loire, Morbihan, and Puy-de-Dôme seceded in order to protest the drastic cuts proposed by both Mansholt and Vedel. These members opposed the working relationship that the FNSEA maintained with the government, which they viewed pejoratively as a form of collaboration.²⁶ The FFA tended to attract an older generation of farmers, and ideologically, had much in common with interwar agrarian movements.²⁷ In rallying to protect the family farm, the FFA claimed to be working to protect western civilization.²⁸ Additionally, the new organization supported free enterprise (though it did advocate for price supports) and opposed state-regulated

²³ Keeler, *Neocorporatism*, 85.

²⁴ The state worked very closely with the FNSEA and CNJA to devise policy. In exchange, the two major agricultural organizations were expected to maintain order within their ranks. In 1981, the new Mitterand government widened this model of *concertation* to include several other unions, including the MODEF. With respect to membership numbers, it is also the case that many farmers who might have otherwise agreed with the platform of the MODEF did not join the organization because of its communist ties. See Keeler, *Neocorporatism*, 86.

²⁵ For earlier incarnations of conservative resistance to state-mandated agricultural modernization, see the Poujadist newspaper *Fraternité paysanne*. The Orientation Laws and the SAFER were denounced as state interventions into private property and enterprise. In one article, the SAFER was referred to as a kolkhoz. For example, see *Fraternité paysanne*, "Cela se fait déjà : La S.A.F.E.R. du Languedoc-Roussillon," July 13, 1961.

²⁶ Keeler, *Neocorporatism*, 78.

²⁷ Cleary, *Peasants, Politicians and Producers*, 140.

²⁸ Gervais, Jollivet, and Tavernier, *La fin de la France paysanne*, 488.

structural reforms. Many of these farmers were small-scale producers and expected to be hit hard by the recent devaluation of the franc.²⁹ Membership remained modest – just 5-6% of the vote in Chambres d’Agriculture elections through the 1970s,³⁰ thereby preventing the FFA from exercising as much influence as the MODEF.

The formation of the FFA in 1969 was just one indication of how much the syndical structure in France had been compromised. On the heels of the Mansholt Plan and the Vedel Report, many farmers and agricultural representatives began to question the promises that had been made regarding the Common Market. In addition to the creation of the FFA, widespread protest, often in defiance of syndical orders, signaled that many FNSEA and CNJA members were dissatisfied with their leadership. As one writer for the *Nouvel Observateur* cynically commented, after wondering how it was that both major farm unions could continue to support the Common Market: “But the Common Agricultural Policy will not save the small-holding peasant, nor even the medium-scale farmers: the only question left to be asked is, with which sauce they will be eaten.”³¹ Indeed, the secrétaire générale of the MODEF, protesting the conclusions of the Vedel Report, threatened further protests in the pages of *Le Monde*, arguing that if the state is left to its own devices, “in fifteen years, the agricultural profession will be reserved for a privileged 250,000 farmers, whom will have already been given the means to create large farms.”³² And dissatisfaction was not reserved for the militant left either. In a study released in 1973, it was revealed that a full 55% of French farmers believed that the leadership of

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Comment: Report released in 1968 by the European Economic Community – it called for a drastic reduction in the number of farmers and farms in Europe

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Comment: French version of the former – similar, though less extreme, conclusions

²⁹ Pierre-Marie Doutrelant, “L’état-major de la F.N.S.E.A. va tenter mercredi et jeudi à Versailles de retrouver son autorité,” *Le Monde*, December 17, 1969.

³⁰ Keeler, *Neocorporatism*, 78.

³¹ Michel Bosquet, “La sélection des survivants,” *Nouvel Observateur*, September 11, 1969.

³² *Le Monde*, “Les réactions des dirigeants paysans amènent M. Duhamel à préciser ses intentions sur le rapport Vedel,” September 25, 1969.

the FNSEA and the CNJA allowed itself to be influenced by the government, and that 46% wanted the state to recognize both the MODEF and the FFA.³³ The majority, therefore, was dissatisfied, to some degree, with how their interests were being represented at the policy-negotiations table.³⁴

Representatives as well were beginning to lose faith in the current syndical model. Most notably, Bernard Lambert left his post as head of the FNSEA de l'Ouest in 1971. A member of the socialist party, Lambert's politics were always considerably left of center, and the persistence on the part of the FNSEA to support the status quo was something he could no longer abide. In a statement following his resignation, Lambert lamented that the FNSEA, along with the CNJA, were fundamentally pro-capitalist organizations with no interest in supporting small-scale farmers: "Nominating Debatisse to the post of president [of the FNSEA] allows the Conseil d'administration to respond to the protests of poor peasants by holding up the myth of modernization, which holds that instead of fighting large-scale growers and agro-industry, farmers need to strive to belong to this capitalist agriculture."³⁵ Lambert went on to be instrumental in the founding of the last significant alternative organization to be founded during *les trente glorieuses* – the Association nationale des paysans-travailleurs (ANTP).³⁶

The ANTP, the end result of a lengthy development within the CNJA and FNSEA of a more militant ideology, was formed in 1974 as a loose network of members who aligned

³³ Noël and Willaert, *Pompidou*, 346.

³⁴ Charges that the two major unions had grown too close to the state to advocate for their constituents' interests were based on strong material evidence. For example, by 1975, thirty-one departmental heads of the FNSEA also held leadership positions in the local SAFER. See Cleary, *Peasants, Politicians and Producers*, 132.

³⁵ Yves Rousseau, "Lambert : une conscience de classe se développe chez les paysans pauvres," *Politique-Hebdo*, November 18, 1971.

³⁶ For more on Lambert, see Chavagne, *Bernard Lambert*.

themselves with urban working-class movements.³⁷ These farmers, largely concentrated in the western regions of France (and especially in Brittany), were angry that they had participated in the modernization program and updated their farms, only to find themselves divested of their autonomy by insurmountable debt.³⁸ Indeed, the summer of 1974 was marked by deep unrest, as the oil crisis precipitated a spike in prices for agricultural inputs (fuel was up 80%, while fertilizer was up 40%), while agricultural incomes had decreased by 15.9% in the previous year.³⁹ Farmers protested throughout the country, regardless of syndical affiliation. Those sympathetic to the ANTP were especially disillusioned with how cooperation with the state had affected their lives and labor, and supported a radical rejection of corporatist modernization. As a result, they refused to participate in elections to the Chambres d'Agriculture and focused instead on direct local actions.⁴⁰ Ideologically, members of the ANTP tended to be anti-capitalist, and opposed the growth of agro-industry in order to maintain greater control over the processes of production and distribution.⁴¹

Outside of the structure of syndical activity, French farmers likewise organized to make themselves heard on a number of issues. With respect to land reform, for instance, an entire commune in the Meurthe-et-Moselle collectively took the Ministry of Agriculture to court – the Tribunal administratif of Nancy, to demand that the order for *remembrement* be rescinded. They

³⁷ For more on the development of a new leftist politics in agriculture, see Martin, *Histoire de la nouvelle gauche paysanne*.

³⁸ Cleary, *Peasants, Politicians and Producers*, 140.

³⁹ Keeler, *Neocorporatism*, 78.

⁴⁰ When Mitterrand, however, opened negotiations to unions other than the FNSEA and CNJA, the Paysans-travailleurs came to believe that a higher degree of syndical organization and participation might serve their interests. As a result, they merged with several other smaller organizations in order to form the Confédération Paysanne, widely known as the union of José Bové, in 1987. See Keeler, *Neocorporatism*, 90.

⁴¹ Fel, “Les révolutions vertes,” 10.

lost their case, but not without a fight. In a letter to the president of France, the mayor wrote that *remembrement* had been “arbitrary and illegal from one end to the other,” and that he and his commune were “disgusted” by how the redistribution had proceeded.⁴² Finally, he threatened to refuse to adopt the new cadastral map, writing that there was nothing in the law that obligated landowners to take up their new lands and that “the transfer of property can only be accomplished by the consent of those involved!”⁴³ Upon investigation, the Ministry of Agriculture determined that everything had been carried out to the letter of the law and that the final redistribution of lands served the general interest.⁴⁴

In Normandy, a local contingent of seven hundred farmers infamously stormed the country house of Jean Gabin in order to protest the monopolizing of agricultural lands in the area (Gabin was something of a gentleman farmer when not making movies and had bought up three hundred hectares in the department of Orne).⁴⁵ Moreover, when a large area in the Cévennes was slated to become a national park, farmers throughout the area protested and in 1967 formed La

⁴² While those resisting this case of *remembrement* made claims on the entire commune’s behalf, there were landowners in the commune who were perfectly happy with how the redistribution had been handled. See CAC, Fontainebleau, 880333 Répertoire numérique des archives de Jean Roche, ingénieur du Génie rural et des eaux et forêts, Art. 41: Correspondance diverse: réclamations des particuliers, relations avec les géomètres, 1961-1965, letter from Ingénieur Général du Génie Rural Reynders to Roche, April 20, 1962.

⁴³ CAC, Fontainebleau, 880333 Répertoire numérique des archives de Jean Roche, ingénieur du Génie rural et des eaux et forêts, Art. 41: Correspondance diverse: réclamations des particuliers, relations avec les géomètres, 1961-1965, letter from Renault, the mayor of Montois-par-Pierreport to the president of France, March 17, 1962.

⁴⁴ CAC, Fontainebleau, 880333 Répertoire numérique des archives de Jean Roche, ingénieur du Génie rural et des eaux et forêts, Art. 41: Correspondance diverse: réclamations des particuliers, relations avec les géomètres, 1961-1965, letter from Ingénieur Général du Génie Rural Reynders to Roche, April 20, 1962.

⁴⁵ *Le Monde*, “Les manifestations paysannes continuent contre les cumuls d’exploitation,” July 31, 1962; and *Paysans*, “Chroniques,” no. 38 (October-November 1962), 76-77.

Terre cévenole, a direct-action group.⁴⁶ Lastly, perhaps the most documented case in which farmers banded together in order to defend their access to the land, was the struggle for the Larzac, a large plateau in the Massif Central. This was also one of the few cases in which farmers proved successful in challenging the state on issues of agricultural land use. In 1970, the French military announced that it would expand a small military camp in Aveyron into a large base. Under threat of expropriation, farmers began a ten-year long effort to prevent the expansion, which was ultimately canceled by Mitterand upon his election in 1981.⁴⁷ Significantly, the movement in Larzac, to maintain farmers on the land, highlighted a new mode resisting state-mandated modernization.

Opting Out

For some farmers, the best means to resist the tide of agricultural industrialization was simply to opt out. This form of resistance, however, ought not to be confused with capitulation. For many, opting out meant finding new ways of making the farm profitable. One such tactic was to build local distribution networks in those mountainous regions that had suffered massive out-migration. Another was to produce for niche consumers, such as those demanding quality goods, or those in search of organic products.

As discussed in chapter four, many of the dissidents of 1968 became back-to-the-landers. They tended to move to areas that had been emptied out by the rural exodus, as land prices there were lower than elsewhere. Many ended up in the Massif Central. Some (most famously José Bové) went to the Larzac in order to help local farmers resist the expansion of the military base. The vast majority who tried their hand at farming did not last long and eventually returned to the

⁴⁶ Gavignaud, *Les campagnes en France*, 109.

⁴⁷ For more on the Larzac, see Martin, *Larzac*.

city. But those who did stay behind often had very positive long-lasting effects on their adopted communities. Young and dynamic, those who succeeded at farming often did so by developing local markets for such specialty items as goat's cheese. While these new farmers initially operated apart from the small-scale locals who had been fighting for over a decade to maintain their farms, the new distribution networks that they established eventually provided a means for locals to improve their situations as well.

In their sociological study of back-to-the-landers, Léger and Hervieu reserved the epilogue for an interview with an organic farmer who worked in the village where they had conducted their research.⁴⁸ They wrote that organic production, while largely unheard of in France prior to 1960, had since then been adopted by 4,000 – 5,000 farmers, most of whom practiced a small-scale combination of polycultivation. The farmer they interviewed, J.-F. Vallot, produced fruits and vegetables, as well as some honey, for local markets. When asked why he practiced organic farming, Vallot responded that organic practices required less expensive inputs. He owned a minimum of machinery and his yields for many of his crops were equal to those obtained with chemical inputs. For the yields that were smaller, such as potatoes, he was able to make up for the difference by fetching higher prices for a premium organic product. The interview ended with Vallot's thoughts on how organic production might be a means of saving the small-scale producer: "Because of the extra human labor that is required for organic agriculture, and thanks to direct sales, the renewal of the small-scale farm is helping to promote the repopulation of the countryside. This development goes against those policies that have been adopted by the public authorities and which are designed to liquidate the small-scale producer."⁴⁹ So not only did organic production provide small-scale farmers with alternative markets and

⁴⁸ Léger and Hervieu, "Les immigrants." This study is discussed in chapter four.

⁴⁹ Léger and Hervieu, "Les immigrants," 71.

distribution networks; organic farming would ensure the survival of rural communities threatened by demographic decline.

In the aftermath of the Vedel Report, and its demand that farmers either successfully commercialize or give their lands to someone who could, Jean-François de Virieu, a well-respected agricultural journalist, attempted to push small-scale producers toward these niche markets. While de Virieu placed the emphasis on the quality of the product over the methods of production, the end result was largely the same – the development of alternative markets and local distribution networks. De Virieu began by describing how the situation for farmers had grown so difficult:

The generous notion that most farmers would quickly be able to integrate themselves into the economic development, thanks to structural reforms, is today abandoned by the facts. The mobilization of the entirety of this section of society had two disastrous effects: productivity-based income supplements led to surplus-production, while the excessive amounts of debt – carelessly encouraged – prevented farmers from benefiting from these gains in productivity. [...] Because it did not know to say, ‘no,’ in these last few years, the Crédit Agricole allowed many small-scale producers to waste the best years of their lives in a hopeless effort to modernize.⁵⁰

The situation as a whole, however, was not without hope. The problem, as de Virieu understood it, was that agricultural modernization was being sold to all farmers in the same way, namely as a means to take advantage of the Common Market. It was simply assumed that those who could not would be unable to survive. But de Virieu, along with those farmers who were taking up chèvre production and bee-keeping in the Massif Central, saw an alternate path for those who could not produce on a larger scale. He suggested that these farmers begin producing expensive,

⁵⁰ François-Henri de Virieu, “Vers l’agriculture du métier,” *Le Monde*, June 24, 1969.

quality goods for consumers who were themselves beginning to react against the industrialization of agriculture.⁵¹

A similar argument was made in the pages of *Le Monde*. In a discussion of Henri Mendras' pronouncement that the peasant was on the verge of extinction, the article highlighted possibilities for survival. Among these possibilities was the production of value-added artisanal cheeses and other quality agricultural goods. For amidst the triumph of "la société de masse, the consumer is increasingly in search of quality." The reporter suggests that these consumers will most readily be found among the second-home owners, whose presence in the countryside will facilitate local distribution and ensure the survival of the French peasant. This discussion ends on a reactionary note, in which it is stated that these little enclaves of direct producer-consumer networks will become something like "'reserves' for peasant society, just as there are national parks for the protection of flora and fauna."⁵² To be sure, this is precisely the sort of thing that most farmers were struggling against – the threat of being reduced to anachronistic curiosities, existing only to serve the purposes and the fancies of urban France.⁵³

Organic production was yet another means of refusing state-mandated modernization. And while the early years of the postwar period witnessed little development in this area, by the 1970s more and more industrial farmers, many of whom were hit hard by the financial crisis,

⁵¹ Echoing the words of Vallot and de Virieu, an article in *France Catholique* suggested that small-scale organic production could not only ensure the survival of rural communities, but could also cater to consumers, who, "for philosophical and dietary reasons, will be ready to pay a lot more for organic products." See Pierre Marchant, "Mort et résurrection de l'agriculture française : l'agonie des petites terres," *France Catholique*, June 25, 1971. In this respect, France was not so unlike the United States, where many small-scale farmers similarly moved into niche markets in the 1970s.

⁵² G. Friedman, "Agitation paysanne, "La fin des paysans," d'Henri Mendras," *Le Monde*, October 5, 1967.

⁵³ This fear is discussed in chapter three. For a discussion of how farmers co-opted this desire on the part of urban residents in order to market their quality goods, see chapter four.

began to take notice of the successes of those who had refused to go the same route. By 1972, 400,000 hectares were under organic cultivation.⁵⁴ *La France Agricole*, as a conservative publication, initially featured skeptical assessments of organic methods. It was not until 1973, in an interview with an organic farmer, that they were represented in a more positive, or at least neutral, light.⁵⁵ Mr. de Monbrison, the article explains, started farming in Aquitaine in 1961 with industrial methods. He grew cereals and heavily fertilized his soils. But he was nevertheless unhappy with his yields. In 1964, he attended a conference on organic farming and, convinced by the successes of those other farmers in attendance converted his own operations. He moved from industrialized cereals to organic livestock production, and began exporting his meats at a decent profit. The reporter described de Monbrison as a modern young farmer who kept up with new methods, but was quick to caution that de Monbrison's success alone was not sufficient cause to believe that organic methods were superior.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ *La France Agricole*, "Questions à propos de 'l'agriculture biologique,'" March 3, 1972. This accounted for 1.3% of the total agricultural lands in France. It is interesting to note that in the last forty-five years, this number has grown by only 0.5%. Interest in organic farming in France remains slight compared to either the United States or Germany. For more statistics on contemporary organic production in France, see <http://www.agriculturebio.org>.

⁵⁵ *La France Agricole*, "En Aquitaine : de la viande pour l'exportation sur des prairies sans azote ni potasse chimiques..." February 16, 1973.

⁵⁶ In the interview, de Monbrison cited André Voisin as an influence. André Voisin was an agronomist and a dairy farmer in Normandy. He was a member of the Académie d'Agriculture de France and wrote extensively on biodynamic pasture-based farming. His most influential work, *La productivité de l'herbe* ("The productivity of grass"), appeared in 1957 and influenced an entire generation of young farmers like de Monbrison. Translated into several languages, his work became an essential text for anyone interested in alternative farming practices – even Fidel Castro was a fan and invited Voisin to Cuba in 1964 (during this trip that Voisin suffered a fatal heart-attack). While Voisin's work remains influential and is regularly cited by proponents of grass-based farming throughout the world, there is very little secondary literature that addresses his historical significance. As an early and enormously influential figure in the history of organic farming, André Voisin is someone I intend to study more closely in a future research project. See Voisin, *La productivité de l'herbe*.

Lastly, there were those farmers who simply refused to change at all and who insisted on doing as they had always done, regardless of what it cost. One such farmer was profiled in *Le Monde* in 1974 as part of its ongoing coverage of the problems facing French agriculture. At eighty-seven years old, this man was hanging on to his 200 hectares and his 150 livestock in spite of the fact that he was operating at a 20% deficit. While he admitted to being at the “bottom of the barrel,” he refused to give in, pointing out that in the last thirteen months he had not sold a single animal because “rather than ceding [his] herd to the cabals,” he preferred “to let them starve.” Refusing to allow any portion of his farm to be transferred to a “modern agricultural enterprise” had also prevented him from selling his house and some of his lands. Located in the Loire, his lands were valuable, and too expensive for the sorts of farmers to whom he would be willing to sell (he refused to deal with an agent, which would have also eliminated the SAFER as a possibility). So instead he set up something of a cooperative with a handful of his farm-workers, which he humorously referred to as his “kolkhoz.”⁵⁷ Defiant to the last drop, this aging “country squire,” would not be going gentle into that good night.

Conclusion

The elegiac tones often employed to lament the passing of a peasant civilization were largely without justification. For one, that this peasant civilization ever existed is an open question; incantations about the natural rhythms of farm life or the “eternal order of the fields,” may have had as much to do with the urban experience of modernity as they did with the changes being effected in the countryside.⁵⁸ Rather than proclaiming *la fin de la civilisation paysanne*, perhaps it would have been more accurate to announce *l’invention de la civilisation paysanne*.

⁵⁷ R.C., “Le hobereau et son kolkhoze,” *Le Monde*, October 14, 1974.

⁵⁸ See Maspétiol, *L’Ordre éternel des champs*.

More importantly, however, focusing on the mythical loss of the peasantry, and what this loss would mean for all of western civilization, obscured the very real losses that individual farmers sustained every day. Roblot lost his place on the farm not once, but twice. Many of the farmers addressed by de Virieu had lost their life savings and financial security by taking on too much debt. For the small-holders of the MODEF and the FFA, they had lost their independence with the emergence of the Common Market and the new streamlined distribution networks that were designed for mass agricultural production. Farmers in the isolated mountains of the Massif Central had lost the rural communities that had once sustained them. Many lost the farm entirely.

In response to their obsolescence, different farmers reacted in different ways. To be sure, some simply sold off the farm and took up a new line of work. Others retired. But a great many tried to fight back, through protests, the creation of breakaway unions, the illegal occupation of lands, and the development of alternative local markets. That so many chose to resist the changing tide of agricultural industrialization is evidence of just how much was at stake in this process of transformation.

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