

Historia Agraria
Crítica de libros

Book reviews

Laurent Brassart, Corinne Marache, Juan Pan-Montojo
and Leen van Molle (Eds.)

Making Politics in the European Countryside, 1780s-1930s

Turnhout, Brepols, 2022, 332 pp.

The book under review is the nineteenth volume in the Comparative Rural History Network (CORN) series published by Brepols, but it is, somewhat surprisingly, the first to directly address politics. Thirteen chapters, along with a general introduction and three thematic section introductions, consider how and when rural dwellers, particularly peasant villagers, became involved in modern politics. Such questions are not new and have long prompted vigorous debate in some fields, such as the history of nineteenth-century France (see, for instance, Berenson, 1987). Nonetheless, persuasive answers based on a sufficient sample of detailed case studies remain elusive. For one thing, national historiographies on rural matters tend to be more isolated from each other than bodies of work on urban areas, in part reflecting the denser networks of communication and transportation con-

necting cities. Sources, moreover, are scarce for illiterate and/or subaltern segments of society with the result that less is written about the countryside in general. And then there is the question of whether peasants who become involved in politics grasp the consequences of their actions. As Eric Hobsbawm wrote in 1973, ‘their [peasants’] unit of political action is either (in practice) the region or (conceptually) the human race: the parish pump or the universe’ (Hobsbawm, 1973).

Fully aware of these challenges and pitfalls, the editors of *Making Politics in the European Countryside* define politicization expansively as a process whereby inhabitants of rural areas appropriated ‘questions and debates relating to the organisation and the future of the communities to which they belonged’ (p. 14). This approach allows the volume’s contributors to discuss topics ranging from shifting peasant elec-

toral behaviour (a classic focus of politicization studies) to behaviour with less obviously political content, such as ‘meetings, demonstrations, petitions, passive resistance, obstruction, strikes, riots and violence, including lynching’ (p. 15). According to this framework, politicization may (but need not) entail consistent awareness of the national or state community. More important is the extent to which dwellers of the countryside expressed demands and aspirations with reference —either positive or negative— to concepts of social-political organization that emerged during the era of revolutions and revolutionary wars between the 1780s and the 1850s. At the same time, as Laurent Brassart states in his introduction to part I, the invocation of new mobilizing concepts such as ‘national sovereignty, representative democracy and social justice’ (p. 24) did not preclude using forms of action and language from centuries past.

The chapters in part I, ‘The shock of wars and revolutions, 1780s-1850s’, show that the deployment or adoption of new political concepts was uneven, reversible, and often locally specific in meaning. In the French villages between the Seine River and the North Sea examined by Jean-Pierre Jessenne, peasants embraced new ideas of citizenship and nationhood in the period 1789-91, but their enthusiasm waned considerably thereafter to the point that, after 1800, their ‘politicization’ meant renewed deference to local notables. Brassart and Maxime Kaci meanwhile demonstrate that in the years 1789-1815, highly charged local events along the current French-Belgian

border —migration of radical Brabançon refugees into France, departure of conservative *émigrés* out of France, and resistance to conscription— politicized villages in such diverse ways that it is difficult to generalise. Niels Grüne shows that the ‘translocalisation’ of issues as well as their framing with respect to new party programs (especially Liberalism) proceeded much further in the first half of the nineteenth century in the north Upper Rhine Plain than in the Hessian Uplands or eastern Westphalia — more socially stratified rural societies that remained beholden to traditional authority. For Denmark, Jesper Lundsby Skov emphasizes the hard ideological work that key peasant-friendly academics performed to legitimise the 1788 emancipation of the peasantry and the 1849 democratic constitution, casting doubt on entrenched notions of a centuries-old rural-urban consensus in Scandinavia.

Part II, ‘Shifting repertoires of collective action’, is arguably the litmus test of the volume’s highly elastic conception of politicization. Are things like mob violence and illegal wood-cutting political acts? The collective answer provided by the four chapters in this section and by Juan Pan-Monjo in the thematic introduction is yes, insofar as such deeds challenge the expanding modern state or its representatives. According to Alexandre Dupont, the French peasants who in 1870-1 took advantage of the collapse of the Second Empire to help themselves to forest resources invoked French patriotism in areas under German occupation, while loudly rejecting the incipient authorities of the Third Re-

public in other places. Even as French peasants adopted what Charles Tilly referred to as a ‘modern’ repertoire of collective action—encompassing union organizing, strikes, meetings, demonstrations and so on—older (‘archaic’) forms of action—charivari, field and forest invasions, violence, etc.—did not disappear and even augmented newer tactics well into the 1930s, as Édouard Lynch suggests. Above all, Nadine Vivier argues, French peasants were aware of the political choices they faced from 1848 onward and their apparent electoral capriciousness vis-à-vis republicanism and populist strongmen (Napoleon III) had less to do with ignorance than with their distinct attitudes towards the state; for instance, they voted against the war-mongering republic in February 1871. Political meaning suffused collective action in less participatory systems than France’s. Rural Spanish crowds that lynched, or attempted to lynch, those who had egregiously affronted popular notions of justice in the years 1895-1923 could, as Óscar Bascañán Añover proposes, either reinforce local clientelist politics (*caciquismo*) of the restoration era or challenge the entire system, creating opportunities for political adversaries.

Highlighting the political potential of such actions certainly contributes to the originality of the volume, though the contributors to this section could clarify the interpretive payoffs of doing so. What major outcomes in French and Spanish history can be seen in new light thanks to a capacious definition of political activity? Does Dupont’s contention that peasant poachers

were ‘fully modern, in their own way’ (p. 138) force us to reconsider what we know about modern France, or Spain, or anywhere else? Such questions remain to be confronted directly.

The third section of the volume, ‘Political parties in the countryside’, returns the reader to more familiar terrain along with uncontroversial notions of politicization. Nonetheless, the five chapters in this section address rural politics in refreshing ways, unencumbered by rigid left-right dichotomies or implicit urban frustration that underpin much previous scholarship on the subject. Together, they bear testimony to Leen van Molle’s pithy remark in the section introduction that the farming classes, particularly smallholding and middling peasants, are ‘political semi-nomads, time and again in search of the best defender of their own particular interest’ (p. 216). Milan Řepa charts the development of Czech agrarian politics in Moravia over the final third of the nineteenth century from a camp within the Moravian National Party to a multi-party system featuring two Catholic parties and the socialist-friendly anti-clerical Agrarians. Florencia Peyrou examines Spanish republicans’ translation of early nineteenth-century liberal ideas of nationalization (*desamortización*) and self-government into demands for land redistribution and federalism, which enjoyed brief ascendancy in 1868-74 and the First Spanish Republic (1873-4), before federalism bifurcated into platforms of clientelist conservatism and anarchist socialism. Looking at Catalonia between the 1890 introduction of universal male suffrage and

the Spanish Civil War, Jordi Planas and Raimon Soler-Becerro emphasize the role of various and competing agricultural associations in shifting rural support away from the previously hegemonic Liberal and Conservative parties to the mass political republicans and regionalists; the former attracted adherents of agricultural unions (for example the viticultural *rabassaires*) while the latter won support among landowners' associations. If mass political mobilization in the countryside led in 1930s Spain to polarization and Civil War, in Scandinavia it led, uniquely, to compromise and consensus between urban and rural interests. But Erik Bengtsson and Josefin Hägglund show the many twists and turns that led to this outcome, from the establishment of the patrician-led Country Party in the 1860s to the secession of left-leaning agrarians into urban-dominated populism to the establishment of competing anti-urban Farmers' Leagues in the 1910s and their eventual merging in the 1920s. Miguel Cabo's magisterial concluding chapter in many ways provides the framing for the foregoing studies, providing at once a macro-explanation for the rise of agrarian parties as a response to the late nineteenth-century agrarian economic crisis in contexts where cooperativism, agrarian pressure groups within conventional parties, and agricultural unions proved insufficient as well as a useful anatomy of agrarianism in practice. Drawing on copious scholarship in at least nine languages, Cabo argues that agrarian parties, despite their ambivalence towards the political left, contributed to an expansion of civil society

particularly through educational initiatives and, exceptions aside, generally defended liberal parliamentary structures.

The panorama of rural politics and politicization afforded by this volume constitutes a significant addition to our understandings of the European countryside in the modern era. Its value would have increased substantially with a wider geographical scope. Given that agrarianism arguably reached its apex in east central and eastern Europe in the first half of the twentieth century, it is regrettable that aside from Řepa's chapter on Moravia and parts of Cabo's herculean synthesis, the region is neglected, with critical cases of Bulgaria, Croatia, and Poland, not to mention Russia and Ukraine, left out. While political agrarianism did not reach the same heights in other parts of the continent, scholars of comparative rural politicization would also benefit from considering developments in Greece, Italy, and Ireland. In sum, the editors and contributors to this volume have, together, taken a large and bold step toward a fuller understanding of rural people's involvement in modern politics. Many more ought to follow their lead.

Jakub Beneš

[orcid.org/ 0000-0002-0528-2057](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0528-2057)

University College London

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