

Peasantry and Society in France since 1789. By Annie Moulin: translated from the French by M. C. and M. F. Cleary. Cambridge and Paris: Editions de la Maisons des Sciences de l'Homme and Cambridge University Press, 1991.

France is perhaps the nation where the peasantry has been historically the most politically organized, and played the greatest role in shaping government policies. As I write this, French farmers, who by 1987 produced just 4 percent of GDP and employed only 7 percent of the active work force, are seriously threatening talks on GATT, which makes the question of the "peasantry" almost as topical for political writers as to the professional historian.

Annie Moulin has contributed an immense service to historians in bringing together the most important of recent works on the French peasantry and presented them in this short and highly readable text (in fact, a translation of the author's *Les Paysans dans la société française, Editions du Seuil, 1988*). Moulin's peasants are more than just farmers, and a major success of the author is to present the economic, social, and political background to changes in agriculture, and to show that the peasantry itself was instrumental in determining the direction of change. The breadth of this task, especially within such a slim volume, ensures that most specialists will be disappointed at some point or other but, despite the for once modest claim on the dust cover signalling the book as being "intended for a student readership," it deserves a wider audience. Yet a number of shortcomings do require comment.

First, the "peasantry" in the book is a vague category, and all too synonymous with "farmer," while the landless labor is rarely mentioned. The result is that conflicts of interest between peasants and large commercial farmers on the one hand, and peasants and landless workers on the other, are often overlooked.

Second, the author is solely concerned with France and, if a comparative vision might have given a few more insights into French agricultural history, the role of the Common Agricultural Policy, of which there is virtually no mention, is essential for understanding developments over the last couple of decades. The absence of wider reflections is a pity, because it is the different historical development of agriculture in countries such as France and Britain that makes policies so difficult for today's politicians.

Third, there is little attempt to explain either how the "spectacular transformation" after 1950 was achieved, or what exactly the transformation was. Greater emphasis on the timing of the introduction of new production inputs (tractors, fertilizers, new seed varieties but also

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combine-harvesters and irrigation, of which there is no mention), together with the problem of the surplus that they helped cause, could have been dealt with in greater detail. This leads to a more general criticism – the economic sections of each chapter are sometimes confused. For example, it is doubtful if sales of mowing or harvesting machinery were low prior to 1870 because the economy was “still based to a large extent on barter” (p. 52), or in the period 1789–1815, that the failure to modernize farming techniques was because “many peasants had exhausted their financial resources in the purchase of a plot and could not afford to modernize their farming techniques” (p. 43), rather than, say, traditional methods were simply the most profitable, or minimized risk for farmers. They would appear, in any case, to be contradictory. Other examples exist.

Finally, the footnotes are irritating, with the reader required to have to look at two distinct pages to the one being read to follow up references.

It would be unjust, however, to end on a critical note. The author has written a highly competent interpretation of French agricultural history, kept it short, and made it full of interesting observations.

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