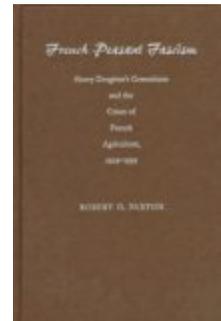




Robert O. Paxton. *French Peasant Fascism: Henry Dorgeres Greenshirts and the Crises of French Agriculture 1929-1939*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997. xii + 244 pp. \$53.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-511189-7; \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-511188-0.

Reviewed by William D. Irvine (York University, and Kathryn E. Amdur, Emory University)
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Part 1: Forum on Robert O. Paxton's *French Peasant Fascism*

Comments for this forum by William D. Irvine (forum editor), Kathryn E. Amdur, Sam Goodfellow, and Steven Zdatny, for H-France Review of Books, January 1999

Introduction, by William D. Irvine

It is almost axiomatic to assert that any book by Robert Paxton is a major contribution to the historical literature on Modern France. All contributors to this forum on his *French Peasant Fascism* agree on that much. Moreover, they agree that the much neglected story of the French peasantry is critical to our understanding of the politics of the troubled decade of the 1930s. Finally, no one can dispute that, in light of experiences elsewhere, any attempt to come to grips with the issue of French fascism, must take into account the agricultural sector. Beyond that, there is less consensus. Not all contributors are convinced that Henry Dorgeres and the Greenshirts are central to or typical of the French peasant experience of the 1930s. More important still, all contributors (much like Paxton himself) exhibit an uneasiness with the very concept of French fascism. Most, it seems safe to say, would agree with Paxton's preference for a "functional" rather than a "programmatic" definition of fascism. But none are entirely confident in saying exactly what fascism is, where it begins and where it ends. Locating fascism on a continuum, at the other end of which is "authoritarianism" is suggestive but ultimately unhelpful. After all, how useful is it to describe a protest movement, one quite literally challenging the existing authorities, as "authoritarian"? "Reactionary" is not much more helpful either. The farmers in the United States and Canada who

mobilized against low commodity prices, the banks, and a political system which appeared to ignore their plight, are not usually described by historians as "reactionary".

All this is to say that this forum, like the previous one, will raise as many questions as it answers. This is probably not a bad thing.

Comments: William D. Irvine

Studies of France in the 1930s typically concentrate on such urban events as the riots of 6 February 1934, the occupation of the factories of June 1936 or the Clichy riots of early 1937. Robert Paxton reminds us that the decade also experienced an unprecedented crisis in the French rural community. At the heart of it was the spectacular decline in commodity prices: wheat, wine, and dairy products all experienced a precipitous drop in prices. The attendant suffering of the French peasantry was only aggravated by a variety of irritants: ministerial instability and perceived governmental incompetence; growing administrative *tracasseries*, be it the paper work (and costs) associated with the recently introduced social insurance legislation, the rapaciousness of the *fisc*, or the bureaucratic hassling of hard cider brewers and the belief that in the eyes of official (read urban) France, Jacques Bonhomme, proud peasant, had been replaced by a crude caricature of the country bumpkin. The result was a series of violent peasant protests, above all

in the years 1933-35, at the head of which, more often than not, was the demagogic and self proclaimed peasant radical, Henry Dorgeres. A crude, violent orator, he was the uncontested master of the market day podium. His angry denunciation of the governments of the day both reflected and fuelled the pent up anger of an often desperate peasantry.

Peasant anger is both understandable and somewhat paradoxical. However ineffective (and at times contradictory) the agricultural policies of succeeding governments in fact were, there can be no denying that all of them took the agrarian plight very seriously. Indeed, as Gordon Wright long ago demonstrated, rare was the Third Republican politician who felt he could ignore peasant interests. As Paxton reminds us, in one of his many intriguing revelations, at the height of the crisis in 1935, the French government was spending nearly 50% more on supporting the wheat market than it was spending on national defence! (p. 17). While farmers usually feel unappreciated by city dwellers, Charles Rearick has recently reminded us that the urban cinema goer was at least as likely to be treated to a heroic and romantic portrayal of the peasantry as to an image that might have come out of Zola's *La Terre*. But none of this was calculated to diminish the frustration and anger of French peasants in the middle years of the 1930s.

One of the most virulent manifestations of this anger was the appearance of Dorgeres and his Greenshirts. While most French historians have always been dimly aware of the man and his movement, the full story has never before been told and never before has the plight of the French peasant in the 1930s been recounted as vividly and with such clarity.

Why have Dorgeres and the Greenshirts been so long overlooked by mainstream historians? A partial answer, one suggested by Paxton, is that most historians, city folks in the main, are uncomfortable with the rural world and more attuned to the plight of the industrial working class or the reactions of an urban middle class. All of this might well explain an historical pre-occupation with the militants of the Confederation generale du travail (CGT) or the activists of the *Croix de feu*. Still, the historical inattention to the Greenshirts inevitably poses the question: at the end of the day, how important were they? Dorgeres himself was a major political actor for a relatively brief period. He came to national attention in June 1933 and had probably attained his maximum influence by the late spring of 1935 at the time of his unsuccessful bid for electoral office. After that point he was increasingly rel-

egated to the political margins.

What is striking in Paxton's account is just how little we learn about the size of the organization or its geographical implantation. This is no criticism of the author who has diligently scoured the national and local archives and who is justly renowned for his ability to ferret out findings from the most elusive sources. The problem lies with the curious silences of the official and archival documents.

And yet. And yet, it is uncommonly difficult to avoid the conclusion that archival silences speak not just to the perverseness of mid-century sub-prefects (or to late century departmental archivists), but to the real question of the inherent importance of Dorgeres and his movement. Absent any hard data on membership, Paxton must rely on Dorgeres' own estimates. At the beginning of 1935 Dorgeres claimed 35,000 members; he also claimed that membership in the Greenshirts had quadrupled by the end of that year, the year of his greatest public impact. Given the rapid political mobilization of disaffected elements in French society in the mid-1930s, these claims, even if taken at face value (and here Paxton can only say that they "are not inconceivable" (p. 125), do not seem very impressive. To be sure, two years later Dorgeres would claim some 550,000 members, a claim that Paxton writes off as "improbable". Certainly these numbers pale in comparison with the 1.2 million members of the older conservative *Union nationale des syndicats agricoles* (UNSA). Dorgeres was predictably dismissive of the UNSA's membership, arguing that its members were mostly opportunistic veterinarians and notaries rather than true peasant militants. He may have been right, but the UNSA incontestably had a solidly implanted organization, something that Dorgeres' organization always lacked. Dorgeres seems not to have given a great deal of thought to organizational questions. His Greenshirts were largely limited to the north and the west of France and even here their hold appears to have been precarious. Dorgeres could attract huge crowds to hear his market day oratory. But the organizations springing up in the wake of these meetings often withered away within months. By the later 1930s Dorgeres and his people were often beginning regional organizational drives for the second or third time. Paxton has a lengthy discussion of the first annual congress of the Greenshirts in December 1935 which attracted 8,000-10,000 members. The fact that the Greenshirts never held a second congress receives one sentence. In 1935 Dorgeres was behind the creation of a Peasant Front, a *Comite d'action paysanne*, and a peasant tax strike. The effective result of all of this,

to quote Paxton, was “a fizzle” (p. 132). It is hard not to agree with his assessment of Dorgerism: “a lot of theatre and verbal fury but meager concrete results” (p. 133).

Numbers are not everything, of course, and Paxton assigns great significance to the demonstrated anxiety that Dorgeres provoked among Ministers of the Interior in 1935. Against this, however, has to be the fact that the Popular Front government, keen though it was to dissolve the para-military leagues, apparently saw no reason to dissolve the Greenshirts. Throughout, it is never entirely clear what the criteria of political significance are. Paxton dismisses the *Parti agraire française* which elected only eleven deputies in 1936 as a “failure”. Fair enough, but this was still eleven deputies more than the Greenshirts ever elected. Paxton suggests that one way to assess the influence of the Dorgeristes is to trace their presence in Vichy’s *Corporation paysanne*. During the Vichy period four out of approximately 80 of the Corporation’s departmental *syndics* had been Dorgeristes (although one of these turns out to have been “an old Parti Agraire militant friendly to Dorgeres” (p. 120). These numbers do not suggest that Dorgeres had won over many of the pre-war agricultural activists. Indeed, everything in Paxton’s scrupulous analysis suggests that Dorgeres and his movement were a flash in the pan, briefly appearing on the national scene during the two worst years of the agricultural crisis and declining rapidly in importance thereafter. The gradual improvement in commodity prices after 1935, the firm stance of (and relatively sympathetic approach by) the Popular Front governments and the effective dominance of movements like the UNSA pushed Dorgeres and his movement to the margins of peasant political life.

A second (and related) issue is the question of fascism. The debate about French fascism has lately become so disputatious that any historian, and above all one as judicious as Paxton, is bound to tread carefully. Yet the book’s main title is *French Peasant Fascism*. Now it is tempting, (not to say mischievous) to wonder if the title (as opposed to the sub-title) were not the work of Oxford’s publicity department rather than that of the author. Yet Paxton clearly takes the issue of fascism seriously. In a critical passage he notes “In a curious failure of historical imagination, no one has ever explored rural fascism in [France]. The abundant works on French fascism deal, without exception, with urban movements and intellectuals. The fault lies with the writers’ overestimation of their own kind and with insufficient attention to comparison” (pp. 154-55). The relevant “comparison”, of course is the experience of Italy and Germany,

where fascist movements made their first major breakthroughs in rural areas, the Po Valley and Schleswig-Holstein. This is an argument which must be taken seriously. Yet from the outset it raises the question: was Dorgeres really a fascist, and if so by what criteria? Paxton, however, is clearly uncomfortable with this question and his discussion is uncharacteristically ambivalent and inconclusive. The style of the Greenshirts—their uniforms, insignia, rallies and symbols are reminiscent of fascist movements, but of non-fascist ones as well. Dorgeres’ illiberalism, anti-parliamentarianism and anti-socialism might put him “squarely within the ‘magnetic field’ of fascism” (p. 156), but his “commitment to family and to the professions as organic building blocks places him closer to authoritarianism” (p. 157). In the end one learns that he belongs “somewhere along that continuum of fascist-authoritarian mixtures” (p. 158). This is almost certainly true but not very helpful either. Much the same, after all, could be said about Colonel Francois de La Rocque, but that has not shaken the conviction of most historians that he was no fascist. Paxton seems to realize the unsatisfactory nature of his discussion and leaves it with evident relief.

By contrast, what Paxton’s account does masterfully explain, is why agrarian fascism—if that is what it was—never had a chance in France and how it was radically different from agrarian fascism elsewhere in Europe. In marked contrast to the French case, the first great manifestations of rural fascism in the Italian Po Valley had little to do with commodity prices and were almost entirely the result of the reaction by large landowners to the post-war militancy of the *braccianti*—the agricultural day labourers. France, of course, has no exact agrarian equivalent of the Po Valley, but the large scale and labour intensive wheat and sugar beet agriculture of the Parisian basin was roughly comparable. Moreover, as Paxton reminds us, in 1936 and 1937 landowners in these regions did face an unprecedented wave of labour militancy. The Popular Front was in power, the newly triumphant CGT was making a serious effort to organize rural labourers and the result was a wave of agricultural strikes heretofore largely ignored by historians. Because these agrarian actions had the potential to inflict great economic loss, the large landowners of northern France were, much like their Italian counter-parts, briefly terrorized. But here the similarities end. The Popular Front government’s complacency with respect to the factory occupations of June 1936 manifestly did not extend to the comparable claims of rural workers and it, and its local administration, worked actively to prevent a massive dis-

ruption of the rural economy. Moreover, and it is to the point, no Third Republic administration, and certainly not that of the Popular Front era, was prepared to tolerate the kind of counter-revolutionary violence unleashed by the Italian *squadristi*. Dorgeres' Greenshirts did see the opportunity to provide strikebreakers—or as they preferred to call them, “harvest volunteers”. But they were hardly alone in this activity—indeed Paxton suggests that their role was decidedly secondary and Colonel de La Rocque's (much larger) *Parti social français* seems to have been at least as active.

The difference between the French and Italian experiences is best illustrated by Paxton's case study of the department of the Seine-Maritime. Here the Greenshirts, led by Dorgeres' lieutenant, Pierre Suplice, played a key role in dealing with 1937 agricultural strikes in the region of Dieppe. As strike waves go, this one was modest, involving at its height 200 farms and 650 workers. Both sides in the strike seem to have behaved with some considerable moderation; for the landowners the chief sticking point was not higher wages but the issue of recognition of the CGT. Most of the employers seem to have settled within four days; Suplice settled within 12. Early in the strike Suplice let it be known that he had some 20 Greenshirts (although they did not actually wear that garment) ready to break the strike. The local gendarmes clearly anticipated trouble but, despite a certain amount of low level provocation by both sides, there seems to have been no violence. There is in fact no evidence that the Greenshirts did anything at all. In short, nothing in this case study even remotely reassembles the events in Italy in 1920-21. The agrarian elites felt far less vulnerable than their Italian counter-parts, the influence of the CGT among day labourers was a fraction of that of the Italian *Federterra* and above all the government always maintained effective control over the French countryside. Moreover, and despite the high profile of Suplice, the Greenshirts seem to have derived little advantage from this episode since their organization “melted away” almost immediately thereafter.

Even had objective conditions been more promising than they were, it is doubtful that Dorgeres could ever have attained the success of his German and Italian counter-parts. He was, at best, a single issue politician, unable, in Paxton's words “to transcend an exclusive peasant interest” and incapable of forging alliances with the urban middle and lower middle classes. Some of this might have been an accident of timing; the *grande peur* of the Popular Front years took place after the worst of the agricultural crisis was over. But in February 1934

rural and urban protests did coincide, yet Dorgeres had no contact with the leaders of the 6 February riots. Nor did he have clear ideas about how to attain power. He dimly recognized that a direct assault on the state was impossible but seems to have thought, somewhat implausibly, that a series of violent and illegal peasant protests would cause the republican regime to collapse of its own weight. He certainly did not see any merit in ensuring electoral representation for his movement. This was presumably a reflection of his visceral contempt for parliament (to say nothing of his own failure to get elected). But elsewhere anti-parliamentarianism notoriously did not prevent fascists from seeking election. The agricultural crisis of the late 1920s in Schleswig-Holstein bore striking similarities to those experience in many parts of France in the early 1930s. There the peasantry deserted their traditional political representatives and gave the Nazis their single most important electoral breakthrough. This was an electoral response, made possible because disaffected peasants had a protest party for which to vote. To be sure, the results of the 1936 elections suggest that traditional French parties retained a far more secure hold on their peasant clientele than did their German equivalents. But, given Dorgeres' disinclination for electoral politics, that allegiance was never severely tested.

A critical pre-condition for fascist success anywhere is the support or at least the complicity of the traditional conservative elite. For a brief time Dorgeres did enjoy the cautious support of the rural notables and their organizations. In principle they distrusted his demagogic rhetoric and his penchant for violence. At the height of the agricultural crisis, however, they were prepared to overlook these characteristics and recognized Dorgeres as a useful, if somewhat distasteful auxiliary. For his part Dorgeres was prepared to moderate his suspicions of these representatives of the rural elite. The presence of Jacques Leroy-Ladurie, head of the powerful UNSA, at the congress of the Greenshirts and the formation of the short lived Peasant Front were the practical manifestation of these temporary accommodations. But, at the first opportunity—that is to say when the worst of the agricultural crisis had passed—Le Roy Ladurie and his allies, wasted no time in marking their distance from the unruly peasant orator. Absent elite support, Dorgeres became a minor actor on the French agricultural stage.

In a way *French Peasant Fascism* is the history of a fascism that might have been. If the agricultural crisis had lasted into the late 1930s; if the authority of the French state had been less effective, if the traditional agricul-

tural elite had been less secure, and if Dorgeres had been blessed with more political acumen, he might not have been relegated to what has heretofore been the status of a footnote. This is not to minimize Paxton's contribution. It may be, in some respects, the history of the Dog That Did Not Bark. But, as admirers of Sherlock Holmes will know, the fact that the dog did not bark and the reasons why it did not bark, are matters of great importance and often the core of the story.

Comments: Kathryn E. Amdur

In the autumn of 1997, at virtually the moment of publication of *French Peasant Fascism*, and in honour of Robert Paxton's coming retirement, a symposium at Columbia University celebrated his seminal work on Vichy France and its lasting legacy for modern French history. Perhaps to his own regret, Paxton's durable reputation has loomed large over his later work, no doubt hindering his access to French archives. In characteristic modesty, the author mutes the Vichy connection in *French Peasant Fascism*, stressing instead the centrality of the peasantry in French society and of the countryside as "the most rewarding setting within which to study the potential and the limits of French fascism in the 1930s" (p. 6). But Greenshirt leader Henry Dorgeres' own appointment to Vichy's *Conseil national*, plus his election to parliament in 1956, are but a hint of deeper links among prewar, wartime, and postwar peasant politics and of the ways by which Vichy's "old guard and new order" formed a bridge from the social crises of the Third Republic to the social reconstruction of postwar France.

Combining political biography with a broader analysis of "the triple crisis" (economic, cultural, and political) of French agriculture, Paxton sees the Greenshirts' movement of the 1930s as a response to declining farm prices, rural exodus, low esteem for peasant life, and the failure of local or national leadership to draw public attention to the plight of France's peasantry. Dorgeres himself, no peasant, was a small-town activist and publicist with early ties to the *Action française* and a taste for its corporatist and anti-republican biases. Defeated in a first run for parliament in 1935, Dorgeres helped to found the Peasant Youth (*Jeunesses paysannes*) as action squads to battle hecklers, quash strikes of farm workers (or "save the harvests"), and block seizures of property for nonpayment of taxes. The movement, often led by sons of landowners or tenants who worked on their fathers' farms, claimed to seek rural unity across class lines, unlike leftist unions which targeted smaller peasants and wage labourers. Clearly right-wing in style,

and with fascist trappings from its coloured shirts to its slogans, oaths, and rallies, the movement (Paxton concludes) was more ritual than substance but still lay within what Philippe Burrin has termed the "magnetic field" of fascism in the 1930s, or "on the fascist side of this great divide" (pp. 5, 157).

For Paxton, the rural setting was no sideshow but the main stage for the theatrics of a movement too often reduced to its urban and intellectual players. Both Hitler and Mussolini, he notes, first gained mass support in the countryside. Dorgeres had more in common with the reactionary authoritarianism of the dictators Antonio Salazar or Francisco Franco. Having once boasted of being a fascist, Dorgeres later hedged his bets with "third-way" slogans ("neither fascism nor anti-fascism"; "neither fascism nor communism"), rejected the statism of both extremes, and preferred a "reform of the State based upon the family and the profession (*metier*)" (pp. 155-56).

What most distinguished Dorgerism from its foreign analogs was its failure to come to power, a result (Paxton argues) of France's unique social and political context. Fascism found more obstacles than affinities in France, including the state's relative vigour (even under Popular Front premier Leon Blum) in defending big farmers against the labour strikes which in Italy had driven landlords into Mussolini's arms. Dorgerism, at best a "weapon of the weak" (p. 112) among growers lacking a well-organized union to defend them, also dimmed once agricultural prices began rebounding in 1936. Like the Republic itself, France's rural elites were "shaken" but not toppled in the 1930s (p. 50), and they rejoined the traditionalists' camp after a brief flirtation with Dorgeres's radical right. The regime's greater legitimacy in France, plus the less catastrophic social crisis of the 1930s, meant that the Republic was "not seriously shaken... until foreign armies had occupied its soil in 1940" (p. 162)—a remarkable conclusion from the author of *Vichy France*.

So, what to make of the crises of malaise, "decadence", and political polarization widely blamed for France's military defeat and the rise of a defeatist and quasi-fascist successor regime at Vichy? "Fortunately for the Third Republic," says Paxton, "[Dorgerism's] 1935 peak did not coincide with the peak of urban anti-republican activism, the Stavisky riots of February 1934, or even with the polarization of 1936" (p. 124). Later threats to the Republic, not recounted here, apparently had no greater resonance in the countryside. Was "*la France profonde*" more deeply democratic, or at least anti-totalitarian, and some-

how immune from the social and cultural traumas which panicked the urban middle classes? Paxton further cites Vichy's agrarian ideology as a key reason why the regime fell closer to the authoritarian than to the fascist model, "at least until its last desperate days" (p. 164). Dorgeres became one of nine directors of Vichy's "Peasant Corporation", but its "real backbone" was the network of agrarian unions which Dorgeres and his militants had so despised (p. 143).

Like many corporatists, Dorgeres had greater faith in Philippe Pétain's National Revolution than in the centralized institutions which evolved to meet German demands for goods and which left their mark on postwar professional organizations, both agricultural and industrial. Paxton traces this postwar legacy (termed here "cogestion") among agrarian notables, including some former Greenshirts, who chose to work *with* the state toward corporatist self-administration of agriculture. Dorgeres held parliamentary office from 1956 until the Gaullist landslide of 1958, and he sought to form a new *Rassemblement paysan* in partnership with right-wing peasant and shopkeeper followers of Pierre Poujade. But he remained tainted by his Vichy past and ignored by most rural elites. With direct action "normalized" into calculated pressure tactics (just as a generation earlier among in-

dustrial workers), Dorgerism survived in wildcat strikes sometimes targeting farm leaders blamed for complicity with the state.

A final note on sources. Paxton revolutionized Vichy historiography by using German sources when French ones were not yet open for scrutiny. With access to "sensitive" public documents still often subject to state or local interdiction, Paxton's reputation must have proved less a help than a hindrance in his subsequent research. In a recent report on the strength of the "custodial tradition" among archivists, especially in France, Paxton stated: "We all know that librarians are happiest when their books are on the shelf" (B. Giudice, "France Re-assesses its History and its Historical Records," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 4 April 1998). In the case of Vichy and fascism, still among the most troubling of France's "realms of memory", the nation's need for this two-fold reassessment is particularly crucial. This fine book, already published in French translation, is a valuable extension of the process which Paxton helped to begin.

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