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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.

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Part 2: 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

Sam Goodfellow:

France is the country to study if you want to understand interwar European fascism, for only in France can you see the entire range of fascist options. Paxton's new book fleshes out the rural variant–something which has been notably lacking in the Anglo-American repertoire and which has only been thinly considered in French. Almost all of the tempests which have stormed across the historiography–from Zeev Sternhell's notion of fascism as an attempt to revise Marxism to whether or not the *Croix de feu/Parti social francais* was fascist–have willfully ignored the stubborn presence of Dorgeres and his Greenshirts. Probably the most significant French fascist movement outside the cities were Dorgeres' Greenshirts. First as a writer, then as an activist, Dorgeres carved out a following among farmers in Northwest France, especially in Brittany, which peaked around 1935. He set up a network of *Comites de defense paysanne (CDPs) by 1933, which attempted to link grass roots participation to Dorgeres's vision. The CDPs joined forces in 1934 with the* Parti agraire et paysan francais*, led by Fleurant Agricola, and the* Union nationale des syndicats agricoles*, to form the* Front paysan *which gave Dorgeres a much wider audience and greater legitimacy. To supplement the CDPs, Dorgeres founded in 1935 the* Jeunesses paysannes_, or Greenshirts, which served as the paramilitary arm of his movement.

Ideologically, Paxton places the Greenshirts on a continuum between authoritarianism and fascism, because Dorgeres was "authoritarian in his organic conception of society, but he leaned toward fascism in his glorification of action, his uniformed young men, and his cult of the 'chief"' (p. 158). Paxton's examination of the French rural fascist movement is important for a number of reasons. First, it facilitates comparison with Germany, Italy, and the rest of Europe where numerous studies have demonstrated a powerful connection between rural activity and fascist growth. Second, given the demographic strength of the French peasantry, any assessment of French fascism's size and influence must consider the rural spin on fascist ideologies, especially since this group probably had the most difficulty of any with the pressures of modernity. Third, since the different French fascist movements tended to cling to their original sociological base, the relationship between fascism and modernity can be parsed more precisely. Were, for example, the rural fascists generally more reactionary (i.e., anti-modern, more backward looking, or more "traditional") than the urban fascists, or only on specific issues? This leads to a fourth point, which is that fascism meant different things to different groups. Industrialists probably viewed fascism as a means of maintaining their hegemony. Lower middle-class shopkeepers hoped that fascism would ward off department stores and peasants hoped to get higher prices for their goods and, at the same time, reinvigorate peasant culture. Rural fascists, therefore, had to shape ideology and organization differently for their audience. Such divisions were bridged in Germany and Italy, but not in France, and the case of Dorgeres helps explain why not. Finally, rural activity inevitably suggests the importance of region, and the relationship between fascism and regionalism deserves greater explanation.

French Peasant Fascism has several strengths. First,

it contextualizes the agricultural issues of the interwar period, which helps show the specific frustrations and anxieties affecting the peasants and pushing them toward more radical activity. The excellent chapter on "The Triple Crisis of the French Peasantry" sketches the grim scenario of a peasantry besieged by the depression, the cultural deterioration of peasant life, and the lack of coherent or systematic representation in the Third Republic. This was an essential context for the rise of Dorgeres' activity. Also important is the way that Paxton illustrates in a series of five vignettes how Dorgeres' political activity took place. Paxton's vivid account of market day rallies, anti-strike activity, and efforts by the peasants to regain control of produce markets demonstrates how different rural organization had to be from that of the urban fascist movements. Mobilization occurred around deeply visceral and communal issues such as the effect of the cost of canning peas on villages which grew peas. Activity tended to come in isolated bursts and, as Paxton puts it, "the enemy of Dorgerism was less active opposition than indifference" (p. 117). When pea harvesting season was over, the peasants dispersed.

Relative to Germany or Italy, French rural regions lacked the systematic exploitation on the local level that would establish a pattern of mobilization and connect the farmers' frustration with the agrarian crisis to a national critique. Most striking in these vignettes is not only the power and violence which lurked in the background, but the sporadic nature of mobilization as a result of seasonal schedules, regional fragmentation, different crops, and different levels of ownership. Regionalism is not, to be sure, the topic of this book, nevertheless Paxton points to the critical role that region often played in the interwar radical right movements. In the first place, Dorgeres' movement had to appeal to the farmers' sense of place and to their specific, localized grievances if it was to have any credibility. At the same time, the network of power within a village, canton, *departement*, or even region defined the possibility of success for particular fascist movements. Thus, a cure might encourage his parishioners to support the *Action francaise*, the mayor might favour the *Jeunesses patriotes*, or one of the municipal counsellors might belong to the *Front paysan*. Conversely, they might discourage the other fascist movements.

Other regional issues also set limits: Dorgeres had no realistic prospect of extending his movement to Alsace despite the potential similarities between Brittany and Alsace as regional and cultural outsiders in France, because Joseph Bilger's *Bauernbund* already filled that political space. The sociological and ideological diversity of the different French fascisms worked against the sort of unity which emerged in Italy and Germany. Groups like the CDPs also had to compete with other interest groups such as the *syndicats agricoles*, as well as existing political parties, all of which actively sought rural support. The mutual antipathy between rural and urban groups on economic and cultural grounds served as an additional barrier to fascist unity, especially as Dorgeres' success depended on stimulating rural resentment at the low prices of agricultural products and the corresponding cultural devaluation of the French peasant.

Dorgeres's story is emblematic of the failure of the French fascist movement. Hemmed in by durable leftist and centrist parties, burdened by a surplus of would-be Fuehrers leading a range of complementary, yet competing movements, and faced with a more resolute government than existed in Italy or Germany, French fascism had considerable difficulty transcending the narrowness of its constituent parts to form a national and mass party. As a result, the national success of any given fascist movement was highly contested, not just by opponents, but by the fascists themselves.

Probably the most overlooked facet of French fascism is the extent to which the different groups were interconnected. The most well-known example is the perfume magnate Rene Coty's extravagant willingness to subsidize virtually any radical right- wing group crossing his path. Another significant individual who acted as a thread between the different French fascist groups was Marcel Bucard, who was in the *Faisceau*, the *Solidarite francaise*, the *Croix de feu*, among other organizations. The linkages between the various groups on the right are essential to understanding interwar fascism not as a monolithic movement or even as a coherent and discrete ideology, but as an ephemeral mood which could easily shift to fit changing circumstances and constituencies. These ties across groups, especially in the 1930s, stemmed in part from the stark polarization between the left and the right.

In the interwar era, fascism was not outside normal experience and therefore not a marginal movement which could be cleanly excised. Nor did fascism spontaneously generate; it evolved out of existing conservative, socialist, and liberal strands. Moreover, through the interconnections, we can better discern and distinguish the balance of factors which made up fascism. Simon Sabiani of the *Parti populaire francais* (PPF) drew heavily on the manipulation of city patronage in Marseilles and the powerful appeal of fascist ideology to consolidate his personal power. Jacques Doriot's communist

background animated his view of the PPF as an extremist party. The *Action francaise* and the *Jeunesses patriotes* were more overtly conservative in their social constituencies and ideologies, promising radical methods to maintain the status quo.

These examples apply exclusively to the 1930s and do not address the even more controversial questions of linkages over time through Vichy and Jean-Marie Le Pen's *Front national*. What about Dorgeres? Although consistently concerned with agrarian issues, he too followed a fairly consistent pattern of organizational and ideological migration within the right. His first publication was with the *Action francaise* in 1919; he was a speaker for the *Ligue des contribuables*; he shared the podium with Joseph Bilger of the Alsatian *Bauernbund* (from which he also borrowed the idea of the Greenshirts), and the *Croix de feu* provided shock troops to protect his rallies. Supporters of the *Croix de feu* show up several times as sympathetic to the Greenshirts. These groups were all different: the *Action francaise* was royalist, the *Ligue des contribuables* was a pre- war, conservative anti-tax movement, the *Bauernbund* had Nazi affiliations, and the *Croix de feu* was initially a veteran's movement. Nevertheless, they shared a set of ideals (corporatism, community over individual, cultural conformity, and authority) which Dorgeres also accepted and which we might loosely consider fascist.

At first glance, it might seem a bit confusing that the title of the book boldly proclaims *French Peasant Fascism*, while the text identifies the Greenshirts as part authoritarian and part fascist. Defining fascism and categorizing groups as fascist is always fraught with problems. The term carries too much moral baggage to be used objectively. The problem is that all the fascist movements were different, depending on nationality, social constituency, and time, but they also share some commonalities. Balancing variation and similarity for a term which has become as normative as fascism is nearly impossible to achieve to everyone's satisfaction. In addition, movements like the Greenshirts blur the line between active and dogmatic fascists and those who, perceiving the international momentum of fascism, seek to harness it for their own ends. Paxton's solution is a relatively graceful one distinguishing Dorgeres from other fascist movements without separating his activity from the broader fascist current.

Steven Zdatny:

For all its density, the historiography of interwar France has comparatively little to say about peasants. In his new book Paxton's bibliographical essay recognizes only a scattering of general works on French agriculture in the twentieth century, a handful of primarily local studies of farmer's organizations, and an even smaller handful of articles, theses, and *memoires de maitrise* treating the inter war period. This is hard to justify in view of what we all know to be the demographic presence and disproportionate political weight of rural society in France. Clearly, when British historian E. P. Thompson complained about "the enormous condescension of posterity" he had the wrong group in mind.

Moreover, if we have to look hard to see farmers in histories of the "hollow years", we will not find them at all in the ample literature about French fascism. This is to be regretted not merely on the admirable principle that all voices should be heard. Rather, as Paxton aptly points out, success in the countryside gave both Mussolini and Hitler a pivotal boost. It was in breaking agricultural strikes in the Po Valley that the Fascists found the road to power. While the Nazis first garnered a mass electoral following among "farmers disillusioned with the traditional Liberal and Conservative parties". Paxton's logic seems impeccable: if we want to know about the career of fascism in France, we need to pay attention to its reception among that substantial proportion of the French who still worked the land.

Paxton's interest in "peasant fascism" seems to derive from a larger project, outlined in the most recent issue of the *Journal of Modern History*. There he laid out a model which would dispense with polemics and redirect attention away from the study of fascist doctrine–successful fascists being so notoriously unfaithful to their old, "immutable" programmes–and the creation of "bestiaries" of fascism. Instead, he insists, we will do better to concentrate on fascists' "rooting" in the political system and their acquisition of power. In other words, fascism is most profitably examined in action. Paxton pursues exactly this strategy in *French Peasant Fascism*. Relatively formless in organizational terms and without much intellectual substance, Dorgerisme revealed itself in its local manifestations, in its rallies and brawls and strikebreaking.

The book therefore does not linger very long over Dorgeres's life and philosophy. It tells us quickly and in bits and pieces how one more thug with political ambitions, some organizational ability, and a decent measure of demagogic appeal thrust himself into national prominence. Son of a butcher, Dorgeres missed service in the Great War because his home town near Lille was under German occupation. After the war he earned his law degree and launched a career as a right-wing journalist. He

came to agrarian affairs almost by accident, as a vehicle for his nationalist, populist, and anti-Republican ideas. But he turned out to have talent for stirring peasant political passions.

Opposition to the application of social welfare laws to farmers–that is, to new fiscal charges which farmers would pay but from which they would not benefit–was Dorgeres' wedge into agrarian politics. He expanded his repertoire as leader of a rural anti-tax league. Then, as economic conditions in the countryside worsened after 1932, he began to address general questions of peasant existence. As it grew, the strength of Dorgerisme came to rest on individual "committees of peasant defence" (*Comites de defense paysanne*) and their dynamic local leadership, buzzing around sharply-felt local grievances. It found its most effective voice not in Dorgeres' "modest press empire", but on the soap box at market-day rallies, where Dorgerist lieutenants could speak directly to angry peasants.

They were angry because of what Paxton calls the "Triple Crisis of the French Peasantry". The first dimension of this was the precipitous decline of farm prices during the Depression. The price of wheat, for example, fell from 160 francs per quintal in August 1932 to 55 francs in 1935. Other agricultural products–wine, cattle, dairy, cider, beet sugar–took the same plunge. Moreover, from the peasants' perspective, the Depression only exacerbated structural problems which had been pressing on them since the globalization of the market in food, in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Already feeling like victims of a long-term "rural crisis", they were in no mood to tolerate a new round of disasters.

The other two dimensions of the "crisis" are more difficult to fix, being primarily a matter of perception. The second dimension, according to Paxton, lay in French farmers' resentment of urban-industrial society's disrespect for their way of life, embodied in the person of the school teacher and manifested in the "rural exodus" promoted by the Third Republic. The third dimension consisted a "crisis of representation"; that is, a political life dominated from left to right by the interests and perspectives of city folk. In assessing this "triple crisis", Paxton mixes the material reality of hard times with the peasants' sense of cultural disadvantage. The problem is that while the first is palpable, the last two are largely imaginary. It is undeniable that prices were falling fast after 1932 and that this made the economic survival of all farmers very difficult–even more so for the smaller, less competitive producers who were drawn to Dorgeres. It is a good deal less certain that agrarian society was suffering contempt or a "crisis of representation". Farmers believed that the state was ignoring them and that rural culture was being left to decay by the urban-based Republic. But they believed wrongly.

It is probably true that *paysan* was often a derisive term in cosmopolitan France, as Paxton demonstrates in a brief discursion on its history. Insults aside, however, the Third Republic was hardly rigged against agrarian interests. Was the "rural exodus" so much a part of reactionary nationalism? It was slower in France than anywhere else in the industrialized world. "Low esteem for peasant life, values, and needs"? France was as soggy and romantic about its peasants as any country. Unfavourable public policy? Successive governments, from Andre Tardieu to Joseph Paul-Boncour to Pierre Laval to Blum, applied all sorts of remedies to the agricultural malaise. None of them worked. But, then again, none of the government's industrial policies worked either. "Crisis of representation"? How could farmers be under- represented in the Third Republic, given the way that the Senate privileged rural interests. It may be that the political system favoured some agricultural producers over others; big wheat and beet sugar farmers over small peasant holders, for example. That, however, would point to social conflict in the countryside, not the contempt of the *bourg* for the *pays*. And while the state certainly had an interest in keeping food prices low, it is also true that public policy kept these prices well above world market levels. Recall the 1892 Meline tariff.

Of course Paxton is right to say that Dorgerisme was more than an automatic response to economic pain. He strains to sympathize with the peasants' sense of disadvantage, so disproportionate (I would say) to the political and cultural reality of the late Third Republic: thus, while Paxton recognizes the slow pace of urbanization, he adds that, "In emotional terms… the pain felt by those aging remnants was no less sharp because the departures were slower" (p. 27). I suppose it is mean spirited to say that it should have been. In any case, Paxton is right to note that perception and not fact is the mother of grievance.

Dorgeres, the quintessential demagogue, played precisely to these grievances. He told his listeners that the Republic was sacrificing them to the needs of the city–an even greater injustice in view of the extra "blood tax" the peasantry had paid to save the country during the war. Above all–and this was as much subtext as text–he reassured his followers that peasants were the real France, which of course gave their interests both primacy and a sort of transcendental legitimacy. Dorgeres was hardly the only figure pitching this message, of course. The mys-

tique of "*les petits*" and "*la France rurale*" was one of the enduring themes of national discourse. French essayist and poet, Charles Peguy, is famous for regretting that "*tout commence en mystique et finit en politique*." Peguy, however, had the equation upside down. The fetishizing of "rural France" demonstrates once more that politics begin with interests and degenerate into mystification. This was true of no politics more than fascism, which is one reason why it is such a useless exercise to try to penetrate fascist ideology.

Paxton writes convincingly that we learn more from observing Dorgerist "performances" than from listening to its message. It was at the market-day rally, with its overheated speeches, heckling, drinking, and fist fights; or during the rescue of a poor family from the depredations of some town-based *fonctionnaire*; or in bringing in the harvest in defiance of striking labourers that Dorgerisme expressed itself and recruited peasant small holders and local ruffians.

In the end, the Greenshirts turned out to be more fizz than fascist revolution. Dorgerisme, despite Dorgeres' claim to half-a-million followers and his impressive ability to attract a crowd, never had more than a few tens of thousands of adherents. Its impact was episodic, and its *Comites de defense* never became a permanent power in peasant politics. The Dorgerists inserted themselves into an agrarian politics already well populated with organizations run by local rural elites. They tried to carve out a place by raising a new and non-notable cadre of peasant politicians and by behaving in more provocative and thuggish ways than established organizations could endorse–at least for themselves. Yet so far as this was French peasant fascism, it was a bust–however much it scared the authorities for a time.

True to his "model", Paxton takes care to explain why the French countryside provided such poor soil for the growth of native fascism; why, that is, Dorgerisme failed to take root in rural politics. Aside from Dorgeres' personal limitations as a political operator, the Greenshirts never managed to replace or make themselves indispensable to the old powers in rural politics, the notables. Perhaps this was because the "rural crisis" struck more gently in France than in Italy or Germany. This left French farmers less panicky and the class struggle among agrarians less intense. More critically, according to Paxton, the French state always maintained control of public order in the countryside. Big Agrarian Interests never needed gangs of fascist strikebreakers because government either managed to arrange some accommodation between conflicting groups or acted on its own to make sure that food would be available for the cities. Even the Blum government helped to break strikes of agricultural workers. In other words, the success of fascism was possible only when the established order of government and social authority broke down. Difficult as life became for many farmers in the 1930s, things never came to that sorry pass.

Dorgerisme was not only a failure in practice, it was a dead-end in conception–as was the whole project of rescuing rural France from its "crisis" through some kind of corporatist legerdemain and schemes to train a new generation of blacksmiths and coopers. Just how dead was made clear under Vichy. The National Revolution set up the *Corporation paysanne* to succour "the living elements" of agrarian life. In the rhetoric of the time, this meant small holders, rather than capitalist farmers, who did not need succouring. In typical fashion, however, Vichy placed businessmen-farmers in charge of this end of the National Revolution. The mass of peasants soon came to hate the Peasant Corporation for being little more that a machine for gathering food for hungry citadins and Germans.

In a second irony, the larger impact of the wartime regime was to push the political economy of French agriculture not backward but forward. Dorgeres' marginality to Vichy policy, despite a certain symbolic presence, is telling. So is his virtual disappearance after the war. He made a minor splash in postwar politics as a Poujadist fellow-traveller and a street brawler of the *Organisation armee secrete*. Yet when social revolution finally came to French agriculture Dorgerisme was irrelevant and Dorgeres invisible.

This helps make the book's larger point. Dorgeres himself was an overblown figure, who never stood the slimmest chance of overthrowing the Republic and establishing some kind of peasant-fascist regime–presuming anyone could figure out what that meant. For Paxton, however, failure as well as success has important lessons to teach. The first is that Dorgerisme marked a critical moment in the evolution of agrarian politics in France. With an ear cocked to the past, we can hear in the Greenshirts' inflamed rhetoric the echoes of jacqueries long past, of peasants who hate both towns and the agents of the state who come to pick their pockets: *Haut les fourches!* Dorgeres called one version of his memoirs. Yet in the limits of Dorgeres' appeal and in the new agrarian politics which were passing him by, we can also discern the profound and amazingly peaceful postwar agrarian revolution–although we should not forget the direct action that French farmers still employ to intimidate the

Authorities.

The second lesson pertains to the principle historiographical debate around French fascism; that is, its popularity and its nature. Paxton has no doubt that Dorgeres' anti-Marxism, anti-semitism, anti-statism, and demagogic populism place him squarely in the fascist camp. Against those, like Rene Remond, who maintain that fascism was a foreign import with no resonance in France, Paxton points to the tens of thousands of French men and women who responded to Dorgeres. The book also speaks to the controversy stirred up by Sternhell's work. Based on his reading of fascist ideology, Sternhell maintained that fascism was a product of the dissident left–a sort of revisionist Marxism. On the contrary, Paxton establishes the solid right-wing bona fides of Dorgerisme.

French Peasant Fascism will probably have a less decisive impact on these historiographical debates than *Vichy France* or *Vichy France and the Jews*, for it is less ambitious than those classic studies. The book nonetheless bears all the marks of Paxton's earlier work: it considers important matters with logic, clarity, and imagination.

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