



Venus Bivar. *Organic Resistance: The Struggle over Industrial Farming in Postwar France.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018. 240 pp. \$29.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-4696-4118-8.

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The rapid industrialization of agriculture across much of the post-World War II world transformed economies, cultures, and societies, changing the labor by which people had for millennia made a living, newly rearranging most people into urban spaces, and leaving massive environmental disturbances in its wake. Venus Bivar's *Organic Resistance: The Struggle over Industrial Farming in Postwar France* makes an original, thought-provoking, and most welcome contribution both to historical debates about agriculture and contemporary concerns about food security with her exploration of food, culture, politics, and environment during the time of intense agricultural industrialization in France, in the 1940-80 period. While France is generally known today as a modern industrial country that nevertheless boasts world-famous gourmet food and wines located in the *terroirs* of idyllic rural communities, her study details the brutal process by which those idyllic scenes were created, and the industrial processes that they obfuscate.

As Bivar demonstrates throughout this meticulously researched book, the “methods by which this modernization was achieved were ruthless” (p. 15). Rather than drawing exclusively on the triumphalist narratives of state and corporate promoters of the new industrial farming that led to France's “eventual triumph as a global trade pow-

erhouse” (p. 53), her focus is on those at the center of the transformation: the farm families who bore “the human cost of creative destruction” (her introduction's title). Between 1955 and 1975, forty thousand to fifty thousand farms per year were taken out of production as the state transformed agriculture from a family-run, risk-averse, and time-honored way of making a living, to a vast, coordinated industrial machine. Bivar supplements statistical evidence with thousands of letters from farm families that, often in poignant detail, outline the devastating effect that the shift to industrial agriculture was having on rural lives and communities. Centralized planning focused on radical increases in production that were effected by rationalizing farm landscapes and by heavy reliance on fossil fuel-powered machinery, pesticides, and chemical fertilizers. Many farmers simply could not afford, or were not deemed sufficiently market-oriented by the state, to take part in the new industrial farm economy, and so lost their lands. But even the farmers who, in the 1950s and early 1960s, had been willing and able to take on the new levels of debt required by industrial farming, were by the 1970s forced out by the ever-increasing scale of the industry. As Bivar points out, “at every turn, the state forced sacrifice on the countryside.... Farmers lost their land, took on crushing amounts of debt, compromised

their health with the application of chemical inputs and left behind their communities—all in the name of modernizations” (p. 15).

As the title *Organic Resistance* suggests, much of the book focuses on various kinds of resistance to the rapid introduction of industrial farming. Chapter 2 focuses on the alternative, anti-industrial movements that grew in 1948-58 period. Bivar links these to earlier organic and biodynamic farming ideas that were often rooted in particular religious, mystical, and secular ideas about purity and authenticity. Through the first half of the twentieth century and beyond, these ideas were often tied (uncomfortably for the left-leaning organic supporters of the post-1960s era) not only to ideas about the need for a more harmonious relationship to nature, but to more or less explicit ideas about the purity of the race and conservative agrarianism. Bivar skillfully takes the reader through a range of ideas and beliefs and the role of key individuals such as Raoul Lemaire, Jean Boucher, and Andre Louis in forming alternative agricultural principles and practices. Chapter 3, “Operating at Full Tilt, 1958-1968,” explores the intensification of industrialized agriculture as France struggled to find a more dominant place in global agriculture, primarily through its relationship to the burgeoning European Union. Bivar documents the wave of protests from a variety of quarters as farmers objected to the imperatives of industrial-scale farming and the restructuring of rural life that it demanded. But the state’s goals were realized: French agricultural exports grew by 390 percent between 1963 and 1974, when France became the world’s second-largest exporter of agricultural goods. By the late 1960s, it was clear that farming as it had been lived by previous generations was over; farmers “consequently began looking to alternative means to maintain their livelihoods, from rural tourism to niche markets in quality and organic goods” (p. 113).

Anti-industrial ideas about farming remained firmly on the margins of the massive agricultural-

industrial complex that had, by the late 1960s, become a key part of France’s successful new economy. But “if their ideologies often fell by the wayside, much of their infrastructure survived” (p. 52). Through the remaining chapters, Bivar outlines how the “organic ideal”—nonindustrial, nonchemical, high-quality, locally produced food—grew out of the early organic practices and institutions in ways that met some pressing new needs, not just of a minority of farmers, but of the industrial state. By the 1970s, when most people had moved to the city, a new kind of consumer was emerging, one aware of and sensitive to the increasing critiques of modern industrial society. Responsive to the demands of this new, typically wealthy, consumer, and with the assistance of the long-standing if tiny organic farming movement, the French state moved to certify and promote “a greener approach to farming, from a decrease in the use of chemical inputs to the recognition of organic methods” (p. 143). By the twenty-first century, *terroir* and all that it represented about food, community, health, and the benefits of rural life had gone mainstream. Not only agricultural products were consumed; the sites of food production became tourist destination in their own right, a part of the newly constructed French countryside, whose vineyards, villages, farms, parks, and rural vistas had been remade in the interests of the cash-rich urban populations. These changes did not mark the end of industrial agriculture, however, as farms continued to grow larger. As Bivar sums up, “environmental considerations in the farm sector and a growing interest in quality production were supplements, not substitutes, to industrial agriculture” (p. 143).

Organic Resistance provides rural historians with a much-needed corrective to triumphalist narratives of the success of twentieth-century industrial agriculture. It provides an impressively cogent and synthetic overview of the diverse and often conflicted motives spurring individuals and organizations to resist industrial agriculture, and of the means by which the state imposed its agen-

da on both the rural and the urban population. For anyone interested in the origins, nature, and possible future of organic, non-industrial agriculture, it provides some troubling food for thought. Indeed, for anyone contemplating where and how we will obtain our food in a postcarbon future, this study of one country's brutal transition to industrial, fossil fuel-powered agriculture provides an introduction to the range of social, economic, and political forces that this transition to a post-carbon agriculture might involve.

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