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Nadine Vivier, ed., *Elites et progrès agricole, XVIe-XXe siècles*, Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2009. 346 pp. 19€ (pb). ISBN-10: 2753508259.

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It is interesting to note that whereas the number of conference proceedings published in North America has dwindled considerably (publishers selling too few copies to make this endeavour worthwhile), the genre is alive and well in France. Regional subsidies helping, provincial university presses have been churning out these specialized volumes with admirable insouciance and at a very reasonable price too. I had noticed this particular collection on a recent visit to France but, despite an article addressing physiocracy (my own specialization), I had not purchased it, and so was only too happy to be asked to review it. What more appropriate for a scholar of the physiocrats, after all, than a collection of essays on elites and agricultural improvements were it not that I'm suspicious of teleological history and of granting elites a *de facto* instrumentality in the "great transformation." Interestingly, I discovered that my skepticism was shared by many of the contributors to this collection although they all embrace the notion of progress as a universal drive that can be ascribed as readily to the sixteenth as to the nineteenth centuries.

Since it is a foregone conclusion that Europe and North America made the transition to modern agriculture, authors here eschew specific dates, allowing the reader rather to infer that the real change took place in the nineteenth century. Rather than the "why" or "when" of this modernization, they focus instead on the "how", or more narrowly on what "elites" did to further "it." From the outset, therefore, two significant "players"--the state and the peasantry--are left out of the equation, although they make furtive appearances (the peasants being understood, of course, as the objects of elite guidance). The only emulation considered here is that between elites and people. Emulation among nations and regions is not considered, although it was surely significant.

As Nadine Vivier states in her introduction, the innovation here is to approach "forward-looking" elites very broadly as those intermediaries who pushed for improvements, so that each contributor's brief was to define that "minority" that sought to improve agricultural production (or to pontificate to others about how this might best be achieved) and to gauge whether their motives were "economic, intellectual, or social" (p.9). However nuanced the definition of elites, it is top-down dissemination that is being tested. Vivier maintains that the "old interpretation" still survives, especially in France, that progress trickled down to the masses (p.10). Contributors on the nineteenth century were therefore urged in particular to revisit the role of big landowners in disseminating new methods.

The volume's three parts divide along rough chronological lines, with four essays on the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, four on the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and five on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Two "moments" are pivotal here: 1750 with the creation of agricultural societies and 1850 when educating a large public becomes a priority, so that most papers straddle one of these dates (p.317). On the European side, six of the papers are

devoted to France, and one each to England, Germany, Hungary, and Spain; three others treat the United States and Canada during the transitional 1750-1850 period and Mexico from 1870 to 1910. The extra-territorial essays tend to be more general than the essays devoted to France. Their purpose would appear to instruct the French about agricultural change in “other parts of the world” and, should one be looking, for example, for a recent interpretation of the Mexican hacienda or Hungarian estate management, this would be as good a place to start as any.

The progress addressed in these papers is standard issue—new crops, improved rotation, better tools and animal selection, chemical fertilizers (specialization playing a surprisingly small role here), higher investments, all of which are taken to require economies of scale. This allows some of the authors to demur, although too tentatively. Dissemination of new techniques through *texts* forms another consensus, although it is also understood, in the later phases, to involve generalized access to education. The most frustrating aspect, for the reader, is the catholic approach to “elites.” Some authors fasten onto aristocratic landowners, others onto the lower nobility; some look at farmers and estate overseers; others concentrate on membership in agricultural societies which, of course, varies depending on the period and place. Two sources are privileged: writings on agriculture (to quote Vivier again: “Tout commence à toutes époques par la publication d’ouvrages théoriques” (p.324)) and inventories. Ursula Schulde, in her treatment of the Elector of Saxony and his Danish wife, the Princess Anna (1567-1571) has the luxury of both state documents and correspondence. Laurent Bourquin confines himself to the nobles who composed husbandry manuals; Nicolas Rago is hard-put to discover even those, given the particular meagre output of the Alençon agricultural society. Notarial records, unsurprisingly, allow Jean-Marie Constant to compare the investments of Beauce seigneurs and farmers, while Richard Hoyle does the same for their English counterparts. Probate records show that the early modern Beauce military nobility took the lead in improvements, rather than recently ennobled magistrates, and reaped handsome profits. Even if they did not innovate dramatically, they renewed their stocks of animals, ensured that their fields were well-tended, and therefore paved the way for future developments. In England, on the other hand, Hoyle argues for the primacy of the gentry. Like the yeomen studied by Robert Allen, economic exigencies made them respond more readily to market demand in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries than aristocrats. His observation that “L’engagement dans l’agriculture n’impliquait pas nécessairement un engagement pour l’innovation agricole”, is in line with revisionist approaches to the early phases of the agricultural revolution (p.24).

Yet not all stress lucre as the prime motive. Schulde argues that the Saxon Elector’s prosperous estates testified to a well-ordered vision of the world, legitimizing new Protestant rule over once-Catholic lands. Bourquin likewise privileges the religious motivations of the French nobility. Land brought them prestige and legitimacy demanding, in return, that they fulfill God’s purpose by investing in their peasants’ welfare. “L’agronomie est une façon d’honorer l’oeuvre divine et de tenir en ce monde la place que la Providence a assignée aux gentilhommes” (p.52). Agronomy retained its moral and spiritual dimensions into the eighteenth century, Bourquin concludes, as the older feudal paternalism was recast as agronomic leadership (for François Quesnay) or the (coercive) instillation of a “work-ethic” (for the marquis de Turbilly). Modernizing impulses therefore emerged within older conceptions of honour that stressed the seigneur’s moral responsibilities. Allying *mentalités* to economics has long been a hallmark of French historiography and it is here sustained by the presumption that noble self-image translated into practical accomplishments. Surely the proof is in the pudding, and one cannot escape the conclusion that inventories and balance-sheets speak louder than condescending advice to social inferiors. This problem is variously addressed in the the middle essays on agricultural societies whose authors examine their role in furthering agricultural innovation. Instituted in France by order of the Control general in the early 1760s, these provincial societies were composed of second-rank notables more anxious to bolster their social prestige or to

garner literary credentials by writing occasional tracts than improving their lands (Nicolas Rago). Some nobles did experiment with new methods and encouraged their farmers and neighbours to do the same, but it is hard to get an overall sense of the French situation since most of the articles focus on local conditions, until, that is, Vivier herself offers an overview in her piece on nineteenth-century agricultural societies.

These achieved few concrete results until they offered monetary incentives in the form of subsidies and prizes. Local agricultural associations, created privately rather than through state initiatives as they had been in the Old Regime, were more engaged than their predecessors, and once allied with agricultural fairs and educational initiatives (like agricultural schools, although these were not always a success) appeared to be more effective.

In the United States, membership in agricultural societies likewise took off in the 1840s, boosted by county fairs and competitive prizes. Prior to that, most of the articles published in agricultural periodicals failed to address American climate, terrain, or the problems of Western expansion, and so the readership remained small. As of mid-century, however, agricultural journals focused increasingly on innovative methods that had been fully tested and their circulation took off. Agricultural societies demonstrated new techniques at county fairs and rewarded achievements, and their membership rose as well. Lucienne Néraud reminds us, moreover, the extent to which agriculture remained at the heart of political discussions. Arguments were phrased in moral terms. One side continued to associate virtue with country life while the other contended that America's destiny was industrial and adopted the gospel of progress.

In the Canadian case, examined by Daniel Samson, agricultural societies modeled on the British example, sought to increase productivity by teaching the rural population civic virtues—proper attitudes, therefore, more so than new technologies. Local elites created or joined these societies to reinforce their “statut social, légitimité et montr[er] publiquement leur place dans la hiérarchie sociale”, this role appealing to both resident notables and newly arrived well-to-do professionals (many of them doctors) who would fight for representative government (p.137). By disseminating advice, agricultural societies created a “distinction” between initiates and those boorish “others” who needed to be taught modern methods. The Canadian example (like the American) nicely demonstrates that farmers were not taken in by the missionary zeal of agricultural improvers. They saw through the preaching, and chose to follow what practical advice they could glean.

Vivier shows that a similar pattern occurred in France. Agricultural societies only made inroads once they began to distribute prizes and to value know-how (expertise gained on the ground, in schools, or through books). Elites had an edge over others, she concludes, because of their access to education and especially capital, which if they did not already possess it, was loaned to them at advantageous rates unavailable to their less socially prominent competitors, i.e. until the introduction of rural credit in the late nineteenth century.

Elites' openness to innovation in the nineteenth century is also examined by Brigitte Waché for France, Juan Carmona for Spain, Alejandro Tortolero for Mexico, and to some extent András Vári for Hungary. Did landed magnates modernize or not? It would seem that they all tried to, including the old Spanish landed aristocracy. The efforts of the latter were undermined by the geographic dispersal of their inherited holdings, many of them still in the cereal-growing and barren herding regions. Their mistake had been not to consolidate their properties earlier while new landowners had done so. The Hungarian example, as the author realizes, leads to a tautology: the nineteenth-century estate-managers of large Hungarian aristocratic properties who defined themselves as experts and innovators... innovated. The much harder question to

resolve, he readily acknowledges, is whether they influenced petty farmers to adopt similar techniques, or if the latter learned them elsewhere. The “diffusion” of modernization thus remains vague even if one can point to progressive intermediaries. This is of course the evidentiary conundrum that all the authors had to confront: do sources exist that “prove” that elites actually influenced anyone?

The Mexican case is put differently, situated within historiographical debates on the nature of the hacienda and its role in provoking the twentieth-century revolt of the Mexican peasantry. The standard line, until recently, was to treat the hacienda as an unproductive and oppressive feudal regime, and its owners as uninterested in innovation and unresponsive to change, representing a veritable impediment to modernization. Such interpretations have been challenged by in-depth studies of haciendas that show their owners as highly invested in new technologies, alert to market opportunities, and aware that it was peonage that gave them a competitive edge (so that they feared losing control over their workforce).

The first problem that arises in comparing the effectiveness of elites is the long time-span covered in this collection. The notion of progress itself becomes so diluted that it ceases to be meaningful, for the difference between the early modern and modern periods is not just one of degree. The efforts and tenacity of precursors is of a different kind from the emulation—with its own risks, delusions, and failures, assuredly—of those who innovated once the agricultural revolution was in full swing. By the second half of the nineteenth century, successes elsewhere, a battery of statistics, not to mention the insistent message of political economy, all pointed in one direction, so that if one subscribes to the modernization model, it is “backwardness” that requires explanation. Progress, in other words, has to be redefined for each period for success and failure to make sense.

The second problem is that the elites do not come off well based on their contributions to agronomic literature. They emerge as proselytising amateurs for whom agricultural innovations stood for something else: moral improvement, disciplining of the farming communities (in the Foucauldian sense), political clout or prestige accrued by spreading the “gospel of modernity.” The message of agricultural writers is complicated, moreover, as several authors point out, by the fact that agrarianism could be both forward and backward-looking. Once imbued with a moral dimension, how much did it matter if farming, per se, was profitable, as long as it induced the right sort of integrity? As Samson points out, no one paid attention to expanding butter production in Eastern Canada because it was handled by women. Penal model farms of nineteenth-century Europe (Ivan Jablonka) were not profitable but they served to instill values, in the same way that the Catholic agricultural societies of early twentieth-century France (Brigitte Waché) were only viable once allied with cooperatives. Vivier’s final conclusion that response to market demand and a belief in progress were shared by the peasantry seems to render the entire exercise pointless, even if she argues that the jury is still out on the influence of elites. My reading of the articles is different. Most expressed skepticism about the role of elites and this raises the question of why this topic was considered worth pursuing in the first place both at the Université du Maine and then in panels in Amsterdam and Madrid under the aegis of the European Social Science History Association. The Prebols catalogue suggests that there is an endless stream of conferences comparing rural conditions in various countries (Asia and Africa excepted), over the *longue durée* or brief time spans, such as the Irish Famine. Many of the authors in this collection have contributed to one or several of these endeavours, responding to what appears to be an European academic imperative.

These volumes resemble a mini-United Nations where national representatives present their respective briefs. Thus, French scholars (or those based in France and writing in French) speak for France, Hungarians for Hungary, and so on. I had already been struck by the omissions in

Vivier's 1998 study of *biens communaux* where only three Anglo-American authors figure in her extensive bibliography. In this volume, too, we find a total of three references to historians working in English: two Americans (James Wood and Russell Major), and one Australian (Peter McPhee in French translation). When Vivier footnotes her own article in the *Agricultural History Review* (2009) and edited collection, *State and Rural Society: Policy and Education, 1750-2000* (Brepols, 2008), she follows the same dictates: she "enables" English-language readers to learn about France. This *faux* internationalism is highly troublesome. First, only a small cohort rotates through these publications, second, they pay scant attention to those working on their country in other languages, namely English (although references to Italians or Germans are equally sparse). The best one might say is that these articles belong in some specialized journals where their narrowness might perhaps seem less offensive.

This speaks to a bigger problem for us Anglophone historians of France. We face what appears to be a two-tiered system. Some French scholars (mainly based in Paris) are both familiar with and open to foreign scholarship on France, while another group seems totally impervious to this literature. I have been slow to turn in this review because of these frustrations. This goes beyond annoyance at not being personally cited, although one always gets a bit miffed. It is the obliteration of decades of serious English-language research that makes me wonder what I am doing reviewing this collection. It comes out of an academic culture that seems so alien, that all I can say, in the end, is that one might learn something about Hungarian or Mexican agricultural history one had not known before, but get a very skewed impression of current scholarship on "elites" and "agricultural progress" in France.

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