

---

H-France Review Vol. 13 (July 2013), No. 86

Laurent Brassart, Jean-Pierre Jessenne, and Nadine Vivier, eds., *Clochemerle ou République villageoise? La conduite municipale des affaires villageoises en Europe du XVIIIe au XXe siècle*. Villeneuve d'Asq: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2012. 356 pp. 27.00€. (cl). ISBN 978-2-7574-0346-4.

Review by Stéphane Gerson, New York University.

*Clochemerle or république villageoise?* The title of this collection captures succinctly its place within the historiography. On the one hand, the editors reject depictions of rural communes and municipalities as inward-looking and preoccupied with insignificant local matters alone. Such portrayals, they say, surfaced in the reports of nineteenth-century prefects and sub-prefects and then made their way into historical studies. On the other hand, the editors wish to build upon and at the same time go beyond scholars who have recently portrayed communes (especially urban ones) as sites of civic education and self-government—exemplary “little republics” that made it possible for French citizens to enter the political realm.[1] This scholarship, they agree, has accomplished a great deal. It has challenged the notion of a Jacobin France that eliminated all counter-powers and left only rural passivity in its wake. It has broadened our understanding of politics and situated rural communities in broader networks. Finally, it has shown that traditional forms of expression and even contestation could endure and coexist with newer practices within a modern nation-state. What is missing, the editors conclude in their excellent introduction, is a fine-grained understanding of a process of integration into the modern nation-state that goes beyond elections, political personnel, or violence.

One of the book's working assumptions is that *étatisation* entailed projects devised in the center as well as local initiatives. A second assumption is that villages constitute promising laboratories in which to grasp this *étatisation* as well as national integration (and its limitations) and the changing contours of citizenship in modern France. Villages are political, but politics as it is understood here also encompasses the administrative practices of mayors and municipal councils—the first and primary link in a chain that, since 1789, began in the country's 40,000 communes and ended in Parisian ministerial offices (unless, of course, it began in Paris and ended in the communes). Focusing on administration and especially practical questions that rural mayors and municipal councils had to resolve—roads, water and forests, communal land, secular and religious edifices, schooling, poverty—illuminates “le fait municipal dans ses pratiques quotidiennes” (p. 68), yields insights about changing modes of territorial organization, and apprehends local actors and institutions as key protagonists in a national story that played out in different ways across the French provinces.

The editors frame this ambitious agenda around a series of questions: Did the central state assert and maintain an equally forceful presence in this realm throughout the modern period? How did communes respond to interventions from above and balance their dual functions as managers of local affairs and as both representatives of the central state and enforcers of its directives? How much autonomy did they retain?

To answer these questions, they first distinguish villages (connected to landscapes and modes of habitation), communities of residents, and communes or *collectivités locales* (administrative entities). All three are intertwined, but the book focuses around the latter, beginning with their evolution since the

mid-eighteenth century. The opening section provides a comprehensive and precise overview of the scholarly literature and the current state of research on the question. In limpid chapters, Peter Jones, Laurent Brassart, Jean-Pierre Jessenne, and Nadine Vivier retrace the transformation from the Old Regime's diversity of rural situations toward increasing administrative uniformity during the French Revolution and ensuing decades. In the eighteenth century, villages had little municipal authority and were rarely free from seigneurial or domainal oversight. Still, going beyond schematic dichotomies that pit strong village municipalities in the North against weaker ones in the South, Jones finds nearly-constant negotiations between local communities and lords' representatives. During the last decades of the century, the monarchy sought to standardize administrative and financial practices, but this bureaucratic state's presence remained uneven. Jones nonetheless concludes that the reforms initiated by Calonne and enacted by Loménie de Brienne in 1787—which "municipalized" French villages by creating provincial assemblies whose elected members oversaw budgetary and administrative matters—constituted a key moment in a story, not merely of centralization, but also of what he calls a culture of administrative dialogue.

In 1789, French revolutionaries eliminated the assemblies and created a framework of communes whose municipalities deliberated on local questions. By 1793, however, Paris sought to curtail the attributions of these municipalities—"ambivalent" entities that were at once a foundation of the new regime and potential impediments—to a narrow fiscal terrain. It also increased surveillance. Brassart and Jessenne nonetheless advance that the Revolution bolstered communal authority and legitimacy in countless ways. It created new means of electoral participation and debate, fostered collective decisions, and most importantly drew the new municipalities into national political life. By serving the revolutionary state, relaying its orders, enacting laws, and improvising responses to an unpredictable wartime situation, these municipalities broadened their area of competence, as well as their autonomy before traditional elites and religious institutions.

Most of the book revolves around the nineteenth century, during which the commune became a permanent component of the new administrative framework and also expressed local vitality. If the municipal councils' mode of election changed from one regime to the next, the same is not true of their attributes, which remained nearly identical until the Third Republic. Among others, they included mayoral appointments, the parceling of pastures and fruit harvests, the upkeep and repair of public buildings and paths, and deliberations over the budget and public debt. Drawing from recent scholarship on collective property, charity, and local byways, Nadine Vivier argues that municipalities retained a margin of action despite the oversight of prefects and the enduring influence of local notables, or *coqs de village*. Their flexibility and ability to tolerate such oversight while pushing back in certain situations made it possible for municipalities to flourish as both instruments of the central state and bodies that local residents deemed legitimate.

The book's second section fleshes this out through a series of local case-studies. I will only mention a few. By studying municipal budgets in Lorraine, Jean-Paul Rothiot unveils patterns of convergence with directives from above as well as cautious "financial strategies" that betrayed misgivings about significant expenses, investments, and debt. Corinne Marache likewise shows that the municipality of Échourgnac (Dordogne) took a leading role in the clean-up of the Double River—responding at once to the private interests of local elites and a sense of public duty. In their analysis of municipal responses to prefectorial inquiries under the Consulate and Empire, Vincent Cuvilliers and Mathieu Fontaine uncover both compliance and tardy or incomplete responses (in a few cases, they also find falsifications of data meant to lessen requisitions). The central state's priorities and those of local representatives did not always mesh, and yet only four percent of mayors were removed due to negligence or refusal to comply. Most mayors, the authors conclude, proved agile rather than incompetent. They did enough to fulfill what was expected of them while protecting what they perceived to be the interests of their community.

The empirical texture of such case-studies fleshes out the editors' arguments by detailing the contribution of municipalities to urban management and also outlining the constraints that limited their action. The municipal realm comes into focus, not as an idealized little republic, but instead as a fluid and sometimes uneasy interface between elected officials, local elites (with their particular interests), and representatives of the central state. Jean-Michel Derex thus shows how the issue of water rights forced mayors from northern France to back some of the locality's leading landowners while calling upon these same individuals to contribute to public works, imposing fines when needed, and responding to ministerial inquiries.

The book ends with two useful methodological chapters--about archival sources and methods for the analysis of communal deliberations and budgets--as well as essays by the editors that sketch out further directions of study. This last section captures the spirit of a collection that, by combining an overview of recent scholarship, current research, and a program for future investigations, will prove useful to graduate students, specialists of these questions, and non-specialist historians of early modern and modern France. Unlike so many collections of papers given at conferences, this one achieves true coherence, rarely repeats itself, and provides both empirical data and thought-provoking ideas. It is in many respects a model of the genre--even if, as the editors acknowledge, it ends up posing more questions than it can answer. It remains unclear, for instance, whether the apparent incompetency of mayors and municipal councils should always be seen as strategic--and then how to categorize such strategies. The same is true of the ways in which municipal councils handled issues such as water: did they themselves launch new procedures or did they accompany broader changes? Ultimately, the editors and many of the contributors fall back on the notion that these communes were both modern and retrograde, both autonomous and dependent--a conclusion with limited analytical benefits.

Moving forward, scholars should take seriously the editors' commitment to international comparison, but with greater rigor. The book's chapters on Belgium, England, or Italy are too scattered to yield meaningful insights (the same is true of the chapters on the twentieth century). Future research should also encompass French holdings outside the metropole--notably in the Caribbean and North Africa--to provide a truly comprehensive analytical framework regarding the municipal realm in all its incarnations. Doing so, it could build on this collection to further a history of administrative practices that intersects the social, economic, political, and environmental realms and draws us into the core of a modern national state (and a nascent liberal state) that expanded its purview yet struggled to determine how far it should intervene and where civil society should be allowed to act on its own. It is no wonder that the central authorities had such a difficult time allocating responsibilities and defining spheres of action in this administrative domain.

Reading this book, it is difficult not to think of James C. Scott's depictions of modern states that, in order to control and make productive physical and human resources, sought more knowledge and legibility, more records and observations, more inventories of lands and peoples. This yearning for regularity, uniformity, and abstraction may have been frustrated (according to Scott), but what impact did it have on what he calls "local monopolies of information" in modern France?<sup>[2]</sup> This collection points toward a process that was riddled with internal spaces for alternate forms of deliberation, dialogue, information management, and decision-making. The breadth of these spaces and their implications in terms of norms, economic production, or environmental control still remain elusive, but the editors of this book should be commended for outlining the stakes of such questions and charting a path forward.

## NOTES

[1] See, for instance, Christine Guionnet, *L'apprentissage de la politique moderne: les élections municipales sous la Monarchie de Juillet* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1997).

---

[2] James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 78.

## LIST OF ESSAYS

Dominique Dupilet, "Preface"

Philippe Vasseur, "Preface"

Laurent Brassart, Jean-Pierre Jessenne, and Nadine Vivier, "Introduction générale"

Première partie. Collectivités villageoises, communes rurales, municipalités: histoire française, histoire européenne

Jean-Pierre Jessenne and Nadine Vivier, "D'une histoire nationale à une histoire européenne de la commune rurale : cheminements et problèmes"

Peter Jones, "Diversité et convergences dans l'administration villageoise en France au XVIIIe siècle"

Laurent Brassart and Jean-Pierre Jessenne, "Les préoccupations et les actions ordinaires des municipalités rurales au temps des révolutions (France du Nord, 1789-1830)"

Nadine Vivier, "Changements socio-politiques, compétences et priorités des municipalités rurales en France au XIXe siècle"

Deuxième partie. Des pratiques sociales, économiques et financières des communes rurales en Europe

John Broad, "La dynamique du pouvoir dans les villages anglais du XIXe siècle : logement et protection sociale"

Clemens Zimmerman, "Commune villageoise et État dans le contexte allemand, 1750-1850"

Vincent Cuvilliers and Matthieu Fontaine, "Les réponses des maires des communes rurales du Pas-de-Calais aux enquêtes sous l'empire : entre impératifs administratifs et reflets des préoccupations locales"

Andrea Zannini, "Bois, bétail et bras. L'économie des communautés alpines vénitiennes face aux changements des XVIIIe-XIXe siècles"

Corinne Marache, "Meneuse ou suiveuse? Le rôle de la municipalité dans le développement rural. L'exemple d'Échourgnac des années 1830 aux années 1930"

Jean-Michel Derex, "La gouvernance de l'eau par les communautés rurales du Nord de la France de la fin du XVIIIe siècle à la fin du XIXe siècle"

Jean-Paul Rotheriot, "Budgets, comptes de gestion et priorités d'actions des municipalités rurales lorraines à la fin du XVIIIe et dans la première moitié du XIXe siècle"

Maria Teresa Perez Picazo, "Les budgets et la politique dans le municipe de Murcie, 1750-1900"

Serge Bianchi, “Finances et gestion de municipalités briardes de la fin de l’Ancien Régime à la Troisième République (1750 - années 1930)”

Marie-Christine Allart, “Les élus villageois du Pas-de-Calais dans la seconde moitié du XXe siècle : entre enjeux agricoles et politique générale”

Leen Van Molle, “‘Tant vaut le Village, tant vaut le Pays’: Plaintes et ambitions des villages belges au milieu du XXe siècle”

Troisième partie. Les municipalités rurales en Europe: ni clochemerle, ni république villageoise. Perspectives de recherche européennes

Catherine Denys, “Policer les villages dans l’Europe des XVIIIe et XIXe siècles”

Jean-Paul Rothiot, “Pour une méthodologie d’analyse des délibérations et budgets municipaux”

Dominique Rosselle, “Les moyens de la recherche : contribution à une approche des sources sur les communes rurales”

Laurent Brassart, Jean-Pierre Jessenne, and Nadine Vivier, “Les communes rurales en Europe du XVIIIe au XXIe siècle : des thèmes névralgiques d’une recherche comparative”

Stéphane Gerson  
New York University  
[stephane.gerson@nyu.edu](mailto:stephane.gerson@nyu.edu)

Copyright © 2013 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172