

---

H-France Review Vol. 17 (January 2017), No. 20

Alain Chatriot, *La politique du blé. Crises et régulation d'un marché dans la France de l'entre-deux-guerres*. Paris: Comité pour l'histoire économique et financière de la France / IGPDE, 2016. 620 pp. 39.00€. (cl). ISBN 978-2-11-129398-4.

Review by Venus Bivar, Washington University of St. Louis.

Late in his *La politique du blé*, Alain Chatriot quotes two legal scholars who bemoan the massive amount of political energy that has been devoted to the wheat problem: "L'ensemble des textes législatifs et réglementaires qui, de 1929 à 1936, ont constitué la législation du blé forment une des plus vastes expériences d'agriculture dirigée qui ait jamais été faite en France; expérience dont l'ampleur se manifeste aujourd'hui plus par le volume imposant des textes que par la portée effective qu'ils ont eue" (p. 293). This energy has failed to produce an adequate solution to the problem. As the second legal scholar points out, the real product of this energy is paperwork, and lots of it: "Toute une législation concernant le blé née depuis lors, soit une douzaine de lois et plus de 275 décrets ou arrêtés ministériels, qui s'annulent, se répètent souvent et quelquefois se contredisent... Cette législation apparaît un peu chaotique; les textes sont votés pour parer aux dangers du moment, sans se rattacher à une politique suivie, que n'existait d'ailleurs peut-être pas" (p. 293). Needless to say, in taking on the wheat problem of the interwar period, Chatriot has his work cut out for him.

As his *habilitation* for a professorship with Sciences Po, *La politique du blé* is a masterfully researched contribution to the agricultural and political history of twentieth-century France. As Chatriot points out in his introduction, historians of rural France have to date tended to focus on earlier historical periods, while the twentieth century has fallen under the jurisdiction of rural sociology. Drawing on a combination of private (e.g., FranceAgriMer, AGPB) and public (e.g., ministries of justice, finance, and agriculture, Banque de France, Chamber of commerce) archives, Chatriot aims to put twentieth-century French agricultural history on the map.

The book is divided into two sections, the first dealing with the wheat problem up to the mid-1930s and the second dealing with the implementation and operation of the Office national interprofessionnel du Blé (ONIB). The wheat problem consisted of several different elements. First, after WWI, the global food trade experienced a major wheat surplus. The United States had ramped up production during the war in order to feed the warring nations of Europe, and when European farmers got back online after the war, adding their wheat to the market, prices began to plummet. Because wheat was central to national food security, the French government did not want to leave French wheat production to the vicissitudes of the market. The obvious solution was to ensure better prices for French farmers, but higher wheat prices risked leading to higher bread prices, and affordable food was tied to social and political stability.

In the three chapters of the first part of the book, Chatriot examines how various actors sought to address the wheat problem. Producers, millers, bakers, the Crédit agricole, the Banque de France, consumers, the Association générale des producteurs de blé (AGPB), the Chamber of commerce,

members of parliament, the stock exchange, and wheat brokers all battled to determine agricultural policy. One of the great strengths of the book is Chatriot's inclusion of such a motley group of historical agents and his ability to parse out their various motivations. For example, the stockbrokers were accused of profiting from speculation on wheat prices, the millers were accused of colluding with the stockbrokers, and the socialist deputies were accused of wanting to implement a Soviet-style command economy.

The final result of these struggles was a minimum price system, introduced in 1933. But the system did not last long. Just a year later, institutional support was on the wane, with many complaining that the system was simply too complicated. A representative of the Académie d'agriculture joked that farmers had but two choices in the face of the new price system: either get a law Ph.D. or ignore the new rules. Needless to say, most farmers chose the latter option.

The debate over how to handle the wheat problem resumed in 1934. One of Chatriot's major arguments is that the interwar debates over agricultural policy mark an important transitional moment between the tariff-friendly era of Jules Méline and the postwar modernization drive of Edgard Pisani. Drawing on the work of esteemed rural sociologist Bertrand Hervieu, Chatriot explains that the state had previously engaged with a farm sector defined by poly-cultural subsistence and local markets. But thanks to growing rates of urbanization and the changes in production that had been wrought by the war, the state had to learn how to engage with a farm sector that was increasingly commercially oriented. Tariffs were still on the table as a possibility but, thanks to improved storage technologies, direct purchase and warehousing were also options. In the end, the new socialist government decided to establish a professional organization that would oversee the wheat industry--the Office national interprofessionnel du blé (ONIB).

In the three chapters that constitute the second part of the book, Chatriot delves into this decision to establish the ONIB and then examines how the organization operated through the end of the interwar period. The brainchild of the new Popular Front government, the ONIB was established in the summer of 1936. On an interesting side-note, Chatriot tells us that Claude-Lévi Strauss, a young Normalien working for the socialist Minister of Agriculture, participated in the creation of the new organization (Albert Camus and the reclusive, yet all-powerful wheat magnate, Louis Dreyfus, also make cameo appearances). The ONIB, run by a group of producers, consumers, millers, and traders, effectively enjoyed a monopoly over the importation and exportation of wheat, flour, and related products.

If the price minimum of 1933 prompted liberals to accuse the state of communist sympathies, the ONIB elicited attacks from all sides. The professional association of wheat producers, which represented large-scale farmers, complained that the new organization had been created to favor particular class interests, rather than the agricultural sector as a whole. In 1937, angry deputies signed a resolution against the Office, protesting what they deemed to be an overconcentration of market control in the hands of a few. The millers, a powerful group in interwar France, similarly objected to the creation of the ONIB, upset by the loss of their ability to manipulate prices and to import and export freely.

As a result of these attacks, the mandate of the Office was altered in 1939 in order to limit its powers somewhat by introducing more state oversight. As Chatriot argues, however, what is significant is that the ONIB was not dismantled altogether, and that it managed to survive the turbulent Popular Front, the Vichy government, and Reconstruction. Transformed after the war into the Office national interprofessionnel des céréales (ONIC), the organization played an important part in the negotiation of the EEC's Common Agricultural Policy.

Chatriot laments the absence of records documenting the day-to-day functioning of the ONIB, but admirably makes up for the lacuna with such sources as parliamentary debates and the reports of the Conseil économique. On the topic of the parliamentary records, Chatriot concedes that this form of

---

research does not always make for a scintillating read, but then argues that in this particular case, these records warrant special attention: "L'ampleur des débats, les sept navettes entre les deux assemblées et l'achèvement à la veille de la clôture amènent à s'interroger sur la nature du travail parlementaire sous la Troisième République, ou plus précisément, sur une série de formes possibles de l'obstruction parlementaire. Alors que le Front populaire parvient à faire voter bon nombre de lois assez rapidement, l'Office reste un des cas les plus exceptionnels d'opposition du Sénat. Ce long débat parlementaire mérite à ce titre aussi d'être étudié précisément, tant l'Office est un projet investi par de nombreux acteurs sur le plan politique au Sénat, qui brille ici comme temple du conservatisme et défenseur des intérêts 'bien compris' des ruraux, mais aussi à la Chambre" (p. 320).

In short, studying the parliamentary records concerning the ONIB reveals important insights about the inner workings of the Third Republic, about the relationship between the Senate and the National Assembly, and about the relationship between the parliament and special interest groups. For North American readers, the amount of unedited quoted text might be difficult to absorb. But given the great importance of original research to the successful completion of the *habilitation*, the inclusion of massive amounts of unprocessed archival material is appropriate. More importantly, for anyone interested in the political history of the interwar period, and of the Third Republic more generally, Chatriot has provided a valuable research model.

Venus Bivar  
Washington University of St. Louis  
[vbivar@wustl.edu](mailto:vbivar@wustl.edu)

Copyright © 2017 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 redistribution/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