

France's multi-faceted agricultural empire

by Romain Blancaneaux

Although France is a significant player in world agriculture; it still benefits from a rural image made up of small producers. Venus Bivar tackles this paradox and shows how the industrialization of French agriculture has fostered niche productions, including organic farming.

About: Venus Bivar, [Organic Resistance. The Struggle over Industrial Farming in Postwar France](#), Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 2018, 240 p.

France, the world's second-largest agricultural power after the United States, has some of the most powerful agro-industrial companies (Lactalis, Danone) in the global food chain. At the same time, it retains the image of a country of gastronomic tradition, made of small producers recognized by place-based designations, known as Geographical Indications. These two different realities fall under two different ideals and conceptions of quality (one relating to bacterial asepticization, the other to geographical origin), which together serve the affirmation of the same agricultural empire, in which commodity production and *terroir* go hand in hand. These two facets meet in the figure of the farmer, who embodies both economic and symbolic values, enterprise and peasantry, industrial and alternative ideals. In the latter category falls organic farming (OF), which stems from a conception of quality as opposed to synthetic chemistry, and the State, the two being linked in the post-war period.

Venus Bivar shows how the state's land management program, which oversaw the French "agricultural modernization," contributed to the development of OF. Numerous documents testify to this, issued from the national archives, regional land banks, and grey literature (letters from farmers, agricultural unions, replies from the Ministry of Agriculture, Finance, and the President's office). Focusing on the local level, Venus Bivar sheds light on the dark side of the success of French agriculture: quasi-abrogation of property rights, indebtedness and disappearance of thousands of farmers, some of whom found a way out through OF: a process akin to a "creative destruction," taking shape over the long haul.

The birth of an agricultural "industrial ideal"

After World War II, agriculture was at the heart of a vast "modernization" movement aimed at transferring workers to cities, supplying cheap food, supporting an industrial service economy, and becoming an agricultural exporter rather than an importer. A planning policy was instituted to produce more with fewer workers while also creating large areas and using mechanization and monoculture to achieve economies of scale.

The potential productivity of farms was set as the metric of their (un)viability. Those deemed insufficiently competitive disappeared at a rate of 40-50,000 per year in the 1950s. Yet in those deemed viable, incomes grew less rapidly than mechanization, investment and indebtedment (from 18% in 1954 to 50% in 1964, in proportion to the agricultural debt), while the enlargement of the Common Market accelerated. Mixed farming, marginal southern and mountainous areas were ignored by the State and by the agricultural trade unions, which defended a productivity-driven model followed by, yet harmful to small farmers, lured by the prospect of better revenues and caught in a downward spiral of rising investment and indebtedment.

An emerging "alternative ideal"

Yields improved, yet with higher economic and environmental costs. Faced with animal diseases, the existing idea of treating the farm as a living ("biodynamic"), holistic organism (Rudolf Steiner), or emancipating it from synthetic chemistry (Albert

Howard) and the institutions that promoted it, gained ground. A common belief framework emerged. After World War II, anti-State, anti-bureaucratic and anti-Semitic radicals thought they had a “mission” to purify food, race, and the Nation.

Lemaire, notably, held a ruralist discourse on the purity of whole wheat, relayed through an association (*L'homme et le sol*, created with Boucher), a newspaper (*Sol et Vitalité*), seminars and transnational ties (with Swiss, German, and British biodynamists). A commercial network emerged through a newspaper (*La Vie Claire*, in 1946), stores banning synthetic chemistry (1948), a newsletter (*l'Aliment sain*, in 1951), a consumer association (*l'Association française de recherche pour une alimentary normale* - AFRAN - in 1952), endowed with its own newspaper, label and certification.

Professional organizations emerged in 1958 (*Groupement d'Agriculture Biologique de l'Ouest* - GABO), as sites of critical and practical education, which included small farmers in mixed farming weakened or marginalized by "agricultural modernization", attracted by the promise of financial autonomy.

The expansion of organic farming

Faced with increasing land scarcity and prices, productivity was emphasized. Land consolidation became more radical with the establishment in 1960 of a national network of regional land banks (*Sociétés d'aménagement foncier et d'établissement rural* - SAFER), which allocated land. The only criterion for land allocation was its potential productivity, which became the metric for determining agricultural viability. Between 1955 and 1975, 1 million farmers lost their farms. Yet French regulations, and the European common market alike, did not deliver on their promises to reduce the disparities in living standards. On the contrary, European integration increased income gaps, rather than offering equal opportunities to farmers.

Small farm owners from all over France, feeling betrayed by the State and Europe, found a way out in developing OF. Its professional network expanded, with (regional) GABO becoming the (national) *Association Française d'Agriculture Biologique* (AFAB) in 1961. However, there were two opposing visions, one aimed at a limited audience, and the other at a wider one. Lemaire and Boucher's “method” consisted of using seaweed (lithothamnion, produced in their Morbihan factory) sold as a substitute for synthetic chemistry. However, this method was criticized by Louis and

Tavéra for keeping farmers in a commercial dependency, destroying a natural resource, and being in a conflict-of-interest situation. Louis and Tavéra left the AFAB in 1964, promoting self-sufficiency through fertilizers made by the farmers themselves, which allowed their organization (*Nature & Progrès*) and vision to spread (there were 40 groups abroad in 1974), contrary to the Lemaire and Boucher's method. This lack of unity within OF put the State in a strong position when OF was institutionalized.

OF as a complement for the French agriculture industry

Agricultural surpluses, and the oil crisis, led the State to focus less on quantity. The alternative ideal then served the design of higher quality labels (such as the *Label Rouge*), which joined the already existing development of the *Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée* (AOC) system to (re)gain buyers' confidence. Besides export and mass production, small-scale products also gained prominence as environmentalism gained ground in public policies, with agriculture now being considered for its amenities. OF revitalized rural communities, that had been exhausted by "agricultural modernization". Farmers unable or unwilling to abide by it, together with 'back to the landers', created alternative rural production and consumption spaces, thus solving State-created issues.

The prospect of organizing the OF market with the State grew, relegating (Lemaire and Boucher's) anti-State and (Louis and Tavéra's) anti-commercial views. New, consensual leaders created inclusive structures, developed research and distribution networks to obtain subsidies. In 1978 a non-partisan organization (the *Fédération Nationale d'Agriculture Biologique* - FNAB) and a national association of scientific advisors, then in 1980 a Charter established the key definitions and production standards.

Although OF was institutionalized as of the 1980s, its former lack of unity prevented it from competing with the dominant agricultural unionism. The development of AOCs (which were very closely linked to the dairy industry), and the concept of *terroir*, was used to assert France's identity in increasingly globalized production and marketing systems. Facing this, OF has remained a niche, to which little has been devoted.

In Venus Bivar's book, the story of post-war French agriculture brings together two intertwined stories, linked together by the public policies led by the State and the CAP after World War: a brutal intensification mandated by the State, which fueled opposition to and created the necessary conditions for developing OF as a 'by-product' of 'agricultural modernization'. In the 1970s, these stories converged with environmentalism. Ten years later, organic farming became a complement to the agriculture industry, which has cultivated the illusion of authentic French agriculture.

The French agricultural sector initially built its success with industrial cereals, then developed trust and exports with wine and dairy products under AOCs and quality signs. At the same time, the agribusiness sector has mastered products such as Camembert, Brie, foie gras, etc. OF has remained on the back burner. In many European countries, the scarcity of AOC and quality labels gave free rein to OF. In comparison, France devoted to it only 1/5th of what the Netherlands and half of what Austria did in the 1990s; the prevalence of the AOC and other signs of quality permanently slowed down OF from making its own coming into prevalence.

Venus Bivar didactically unites two trends in French agriculture, usually treated separately, yet both stemming from the "agricultural modernization". Indeed, the brutal consolidation of the land, while (dis)favoring farmers, deemed (non-)viable, paved the way to conventional agriculture, and its "by-product", OF. Bivar's archival work of the SAFERs (the linchpin of the State in this evolution), and the many first-hand testimonies, are both worthy and embody Bivar's point. This (these) narrative(s) are without complacency with "agricultural modernization", nor with its reaction(nary alternative), OF, initially driven by an extreme-right wing ideology (which disappeared), and a conception of quality (which remained) opposed to synthetic chemicals used in conventional agriculture. On this point, Vénus Bivar's book lacks to address the construction of food quality from a broader historical perspective than the post-war period. Indeed, before it already, a vast movement of industrialization (in the wine sector) aroused the construction of a quality (the *terroir*) in reaction, with the *Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée*, of which little is said in the book.

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