

John Bulaitis, *Communism in Rural France: Agricultural Workers and the Popular Front* (London: I B Tauris, 2008), ISBN: 9781845117085 .

The French Popular Front has been largely remembered as an urban, often Parisian, phenomenon; the representation of factory occupations and strikes as pieces of urban theatre, played out in a carnival atmosphere, dominates the historical analysis of the social explosion of May – June 1936. In a similar fashion histories of French Communism have tended to concentrate upon the industrial ‘proletarian’ character of the Party’s politics and culture, despite the fact that certain rural areas became electoral strongholds for the Parti Communiste Français (PCF), as analysed over a decade ago in the work of Laird Boswell. In his monograph, John Bulaitis seeks to add much-needed nuance to our understanding of the complex histories of both the Popular Front and the PCF by re-establishing the importance of the organisation of agricultural workers within Communist thought and strategy, as well as emphasising the role played by rural workers themselves in the wider Popular Front period.

While the industrial workforce benefitted from the Popular Front’s introduction of paid holidays and the forty hour week, agricultural workers, whom Bulaitis identifies as landless farm labourers, were excluded from the Matignon Accords in which the social programme enacted by Léon Blum’s government was negotiated. This, argues Bulaitis, is one of the key reasons for the neglect of the agricultural workforce in Popular Front analysis: their experience simply does not fit with the traditional image of solidarity and progress which the alliance has tended to symbolize. This historic neglect of farm workers stands in direct contrast to the importance with which their movement’s new found political consciousness was accorded at the time. Bulaitis notes that the spread of rural militancy beyond its traditional confines of vineyard and forestry workers to the large farms of the North and Parisian basin was a process eyed with great suspicion by the French political elite, including those within the Popular Front coalition. The development of a distinct political identity of agricultural workers challenged a deeply entrenched agrarian ideology within France, which was founded upon the paysan as the bulwark of traditional French values and identity against the contamination of industrialism and the social and political unrest that went with it.

Ultimately, Bulaitis argues, the strength of French agrarianism was too strong for even the Popular Front to contend with.

Bulaitis' treatment of the Popular Front is largely concerned with the social unrest which that movement occasioned in the countryside. Strikes feature heavily - a not unreasonable approach when analysing the events of the mid to late 1930s. These sections of the book are also the moments when the agricultural workers themselves (who feature in the subtitle to the work) make their appearance in an analysis which otherwise largely concentrates upon the leadership and strategy of the farm workers' movement, a leadership provided by members of the French Communist Party.

Bulaitis' treatment of the development of Communist strategy in rural France is one of the many strong areas of this book. Rejecting a simplistic reading that reduces Communist engagement to a question of Moscow control, Bulaitis adopts a Gramscian formula to depict the Party as a 'living organism' 'conditioned by its immediate environment; that is, the social, political, cultural and economic contexts in which it operated' (p. 177). The work depicts French Communism as being far from monolithic; instead it is presented as a complex and variegated phenomenon with activists mediating and negotiating Communist tactics and strategy in accordance with the particular conditions on the ground. Bulaitis devotes half the analysis of the book to the debates within Communist and Socialist strategy in the early-twentieth century prior to the events of the Popular Front. While giving due attention to developments in the international Communist movement, this longer term approach allows Bulaitis to demonstrate continuities within French Marxist ideology through the many twists and turns of the Communist line. These continuities, Bulaitis argues, demonstrate that agrarian strategy within the French Communist Party was not 'grafted from the outside' nor was the Party simply 'a transmission belt for ideas from Moscow' (p. 171).

This is an important work which draws upon a wealth of archival research centred in large part upon the North and Paris basin, though also drawing upon departmental archives from the centre and east of the country. It rightly expands our understanding of both Communism as a political movement in France and the experience of the Popular Front, away from the urban, and particularly Parisian, centres by highlighting the vibrancy of the

role played by the agricultural workforce in these key elements of twentieth century French history.

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