

The Agricultural New Deal

By Federico D'Onofrio

Addressing the issue of state intervention in agricultural markets, *La Politique du Blé* by Alain Chatriot examines the political debate behind the creation of the *Office Interprofessionnel du Blé*, the French national wheat pool, that was established in 1936 by the leftist government.

Reviewed : Alain Chatriot, *La politique du blé : crises et régulation d'un marché dans la France de l'entre-deux-guerres*, Comité pour l'histoire économique et financière de la France, Paris, 2016.

The effects of the agricultural crisis of the early 1930s are still a matter of discussion among economic historians. But the collapse of the price of agricultural commodities, a globalized market since the 1870s, undoubtedly spurred reactions that shared some similarities across Europe and the United States and induced to reconsider the role of the state in the economy. A recent book by Kiran Klaus Patel on the *New Deal* shows the extent American agricultural policies were elaborated in a complicated dialogue with the policies of other countries, and were shaped by the debate of *-isms* (communism, fascism, liberalism, etc.) that was so characteristic of the Interwar.¹ A number of books and articles have explored the role of international organizations, such as the League of Nations, in trying to coordinate the reaction to the “agricultural crisis,” as a specific aspect of the more general economic depression of the 1930s.²

¹ Kiran K. Patel, *The New Deal: a Global History* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016).

² See for instance, Ruth Jachertz and Alexander Nützenadel, “Coping with hunger? Visions of a global food system, 1930–1960” *Journal of Global History* 6, n.1 (2011), pp. 99-119 and Amrith, Sunil S. and Patricia Clavin, “Feeding the World: Connecting Asia and Europe” *Past and Present* (2013) 218 (suppl 8), pp. 29-50 on the international policy of food in the 1930s.

Reorganizing the market

A volume edited by Alain Chatriot together with E. Leblanc and E. Lynch on grain trade in the Interwar already addressed the issue of the re-organization of the market for wheat in different countries.³ *La politique du blé* focuses instead on France. How did a controversial policy, such as the *Office du Blé*, become a fundamental element of French agriculture? How come that the *Office du Blé* was first vehemently opposed for years by the organizations of agriculturalists, fearing the beginning of Soviet-like collectivization, and then became an accepted actor of the modernization of French agriculture? This book explains the genesis of the Office in the 1930s (part one of the book) and the first few years of operation before the French defeat in the Second World War (part two of the book).

In almost 500 dense pages, Chatriot reconstructs the positions of different social and political actors that intervened in the debate over wheat in the 1930s. As a starting point, Chatriot chose the early 1930s, when France, despite the faith of its leaders in its economic health, was hit by the world economic crisis and the dramatic plunge in the price of agricultural commodities. Wheat was a world commodity since the 19th century and French prices followed the leading world markets of London and Chicago. Chatriot describes the almost panicked reaction of the wheat-producers and the complex interaction between the government, the producers, the millers, the traders and the parties in the parliament. State control was not easily accepted, especially in a sector, such as agriculture, which remained essentially immune from the phenomena of cartelization and merger that were typical of industry. In the 1930s, agriculture was still characterized by myriads of unorganized farmers, which implied a considerable political weight, especially in democratic countries. The rationalization and modernization of this sector was, therefore, a crucial issue for most European societies of the Interwar.⁴ Wheat was a key product for most farmers, and the regulation of wheat production and trade became the core of agricultural policies in many countries willing to increase yield through fertilizers and machines, and improved storage and transportation mostly thanks to the new technology of silos.

Democratic countries were generally slower than authoritarian ones in embracing the idea of monopolies, despite the experience of war planning during the WW1. In the early thirties, the socialist proposal of creating a state monopoly of wheat loomed over the debate, but outside the Socialist Party, it was only evoked as a scaremonger. According to Chatriot, before the electoral victory of the *Front Populaire* in 1936, the state monopoly of wheat seemed almost unthinkable to the producers, the millers and the traders alike, who only mentioned it as the possible degeneration of the price controls imposed in the early part of decade. After the abundant harvest of 1938, however, wheat producers came to see the *Office* as a lesser evil.

³ Alain Chatriot, Edgar Leblanc, Edouard Lynch (eds.), *Organiser les marchés agricoles. Le temps des fondateurs, des années 1930 aux années 1950* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2012).

⁴ The integration of agriculture in industrial societies in the first half of the twentieth century has been the object of the contributions collected in Peter Moser, Tony Varley (eds.), *Integration through Subordination. The Politics of Agricultural Modernisation in Industrial Europe* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013).

Shifting opinion and the international context

The main goal of Chatriot's book is to show the slow evolution of the debate from one position to the other, among experts (especially legal experts), business organizations (chambers of commerce, associations of producers, etc.) and politicians, under the pressure of sinking world prices and new political coalitions. In order to achieve it, the author mobilizes countless sources, from the specialized press of the different professions to theses in Law, from the archives of the prefects to parliamentary proceedings. The wealth of material examined by Chatriot is probably the strongest point of this book, which is "savory as the reading of *l'Officiel* in the wake of a passionate parliamentary debate" (to use the words employed in 1937 by an agricultural journal to describe the feeling inspired by the legislation on wheat prices). It is an unavoidable starting point for studies of French society and the making of economic policy in the 1930s, as it was the case with Chatriot's previous book on the *Conseil National Economique*.⁵ The material that Chatriot offers to the attention of the readers could be extremely useful for situating the debates on the main ideal alternatives of the thirties: sovietism, agrarianism, capitalism, corporatism, etc. in the actual working of French institutions and social actors.

These terms are continuously evoked and invoked in the documents cited by Chatriot. International comparisons are ubiquitous in the sources. The fear of Soviet communism appears to be widespread, but mentions of Italian corporatism are also frequent, alongside references to ways other countries dealt with the issue of overproduction of agricultural commodities. Despite the richness of his material, Chatriot avoids openly confronting the intellectual debate of *-isms* and he believes that it is the "French institutional legacy that matters for the creation of the *Office du Blé*" (p. 307). One could have wished for a more explicit discussion of this point, which is confined to a few lines and a footnote, especially since other recent books addressed the agricultural policies of the thirties in relationship with ideology, but there is still very little written on the French experience from this perspective.⁶ Chatriot insists in any case on a certain "insulation" of French administrative practices from the seduction of foreign models. The sources he cites, however, affirm indeed the continuity between the policies of the Interwar and war-time experience. Given the high degree of coordination between the war allies in matters of supply, one could have expected that some kind of exchange and contamination had taken place there. Moreover, as we stressed above, the crisis in the price of agricultural commodities was a global phenomenon that stimulated a global reaction, as the *International conferences on wheat* organised by the League of Nations demonstrate. The conferences, which saw the participation of French diplomats and economics experts, alongside the experts of the International Institute of Agriculture and of the League itself, became the showcase of national policies of the different countries. How actually insulate from the international debate were French actors?

⁵ Alain Chatriot, *La démocratie sociale à la française. L'expérience du Conseil National Economique, 1924-1940* (Paris : La Découverte, 2002).

⁶ Beside the above-mentioned book by Patel, see Lourenzo Fernandez-Prieto, Juan Pan-Montojo, Miguel Cabo (eds.), *Agriculture in the Age of Fascism: Authoritarian Technocracy and Rural Modernization, 1922-1945* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014).

This does not mean, however, that Chatriot is not right in assuming that French policy-makers had only a superficial knowledge of foreign experiments and only evoked them as rhetorical devices.⁷

What did shape the positions of the actors?

This book resembles Akira Kurosawa's masterpiece film *Rashomon*, where each character retells the story of a homicide from his or her point of view. *La politique du blé*, by carefully knitting together citations, let the actors of the decision making process almost "speak for themselves," and express their contrasting points of view on the French wheat economy. This choice is legitimate: politicians and business leaders acted based on their convictions about economic facts, not based on our pretended reconstructions of economic trends. Unfortunately, the only source quoted in the book about the economic situation of the French countryside are the reports sent by the prefects to the ministry of home affairs. Yet, statistics were massively used in the period, and an analysis of their production could have strengthened the arguments of the author. It would have certainly involved long and tedious details, had he engaged in a discussion of the technicalities of the estimates of French wheat production and of the price indexes used to demonstrate the effects of plummeting output prices and rising input prices. But the book might have probably benefitted from some more details on the figures that were known to the actors and the reader would have better understood why farmers abandoned their initial resistance to the idea of an *Office du Blé*, had they been provided with an indication of the economic trends experienced by political actors.

Chatriot also leaves out of the book the financial constraints that affected the *Office* functioning after it was founded in 1936. Chapters V and VI, which are dedicated to the activity of the *Office*, do not specifically address the working of the tax on producers and the budget of the *Office*. It would perhaps have been informative to the reader to know whether the *Office* was very expensive for the French state budget or the tax on producers covered most of the expenses in the end. This is not the subject matter of this already massive book, and it is only to be hoped that more studies will follow Chatriot's lead in exploring the technicalities of the *Office's* activity. Financial constraints being an integral part of the genesis of any public policy, they deserve special emphasis.

Chatriot's relentless scrupulousness in accounting for the positions of a multitude of actors makes the richness of the book. He does not limit himself neither to the investigation of the political coalition-making nor to the description of the administrative practices but attempts a pioneering effort in the historical *sociologie de l'État*. Even if the reader might

⁷ He thus responds to the position defended by Fritz Georg von Graevenitz in his, "L'Europe comme modèle de l'Office du Blé? Les origines et conséquences nationales de l'organisation internationale des marchés agricoles (1927-1939)" in Alain Chatriot, Edgar Leblanc, Edouard Lynch (eds.), *Organiser les marchés agricoles. Le temps des fondateurs, des années 1930 aux années 1950* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2012).

sometime get lost in the details, none, before Chatriot, had provided the reader with such a wealth of material concerning the genesis of the *Office national interprofessionnel du blé*, which had a longstanding influence not only on French agricultural policies, but also on the European Common Agricultural Policy. As it stands, this book is an inescapable reference for French agricultural history of the Interwar (the final bibliography is in itself a precious scientific achievement), but it is also a call for new research on the actual economics of the policies of the thirties.

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