

The Agriculture We Deserve

by Pauline Guéna

While agribusiness is the object of ever more criticism, Matthieu Calame claims that no real agricultural transition will be possible as long as political and cultural leaders do not change too.

Reviewed: Matthieu Calame, *Enraciner l'agriculture : société et systèmes agricoles du Néolithique à l'Anthropocène* ("Agriculture Puts Down its Roots: Society and Agricultural Systems from the Neolithic to the Anthropocene"), Paris, Puf, 2020. 365 p., €26.

More than a work of global deep history, *Enraciner l'agriculture* is an essay that starts from a historical analysis. Its main thesis is simple, and supported by a sturdy intellectual genealogy: any society is the product of a triple regime – productive, political and symbolic – with all three of these aspects necessarily being in harmony. As such, the transition from one form of society to another happens when its elites reach an ideological tipping point and produce a new political system, one likely to gain support from the majority of the population through a transformation of the symbolic regime and of its shared values (p. 37). It is therefore useless to direct our current criticisms at agriculture and agribusiness without considering the systems that have produced them.

The context for the book is of course the ecological transition. Following in the footsteps of numerous thinkers and activists, from Dominique Bourg to Cyril Dion, who call for a transformation of the dominant forms of discourse and of the great narratives of our time, Matthieu Calame attempts to show through history that agriculture, and more generally the system of production, is not an area that we will be able to reform without refounding the very basis of our societies.

Farming Communities, Agrarian Empires and Merchant Thalassocracies

The heart of Calame's argument is thus a semi-chronological, semi-typological narrative, which recounts the main historical transformations of our systems of production. He puts forward the following scenario: the Neolithic era saw the emergence of societies based on domestication, which led to settlement and to the birth of farming communities. This marked the end of hunter-gatherer societies organised "against the state", as defined by Pierre Clastres, meaning in order to avoid the concentration of political power in certain hands¹. Some hierarchisation developed, but remained limited. The works left behind by these societies were dominated by animal representations, and their religions defined by shamanic aspects that appear through a multitude of zoomorphic divinities. Then a more aristocratic spirit developed, which is visible in the sagas and the appearance of monumental tombs: the chiefs were born.

Hierarchical societies then followed, from the 4th millennium, as writing, cities, but also monarchic forms developed. We find here some elements of the demonstration put forward by James C. Scott in *Homo Domesticus*², although our author does not embrace his thesis of domesticated individuals being enslaved within the state. Matthieu Calame suggests including in the category of agrarian empire any centralised organisations that function thanks to an administration that is subjected to a monarch, from Uruk through to the absolute monarchies of the 18th century. From Hammurabi to Napoleon, the monarch is the figure who dispenses the law and bread, thanks to a wide-ranging frumentary policy often based on the cultivation of cereals. Cereal-growing land is concentrated near to the capital city or in accessible places (more on waterways than on roads), while the margins are devoted to cash crops whose price justifies their transportation. This political and economic unification incidentally allows for pronounced agricultural specialisations and the selection of specific species, for example in the field of arboriculture. The art of gardening, which reflects an imperial view, then focusses on a mise-en-scène of ordered nature.

In the face of these two extreme categories – community and empire – the author puts forward a third model: that of merchant thalassocracy. Carthage,

¹ Pierre Clastres, *La Société contre l'État : recherches d'anthropologie politique*, Paris, Éd. de Minuit, 1974.

² James C. Scott, *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2017.

Syracuse, Venice, the Netherlands, but also – to a certain extent – the Roman Republic or 17th-century England are thus connected in that some social classes share political responsibilities. Unlike with agrarian empires, the aim is not the maximal exploitation of peasants, since the existence of a shared identity creates a desire to protect them, even if this entails moving this exploitation outside of one's own borders. Indeed, thalassocracy focusses on high-added value production, and trusts the market to get its cereal supplies from elsewhere. This regime is equipped with a more instrumental and adaptable worldview, but is nevertheless dependent on external economic and ecological conditions.

Agro-philosophy in the Face of History

Calame says it clearly: his book is an essay in agro-philosophy, a discipline he hopes will develop further. It is therefore useless to look here for a global view of past agrarian systems. His argument often focusses on the Mediterranean through to the end of Antiquity, and then on Europe, since, for example, the Abbasid Caliphate is not presented as an example of an agrarian empire. But the categories he puts forward, for their part, are designed to be global, from the Meso-American empires to China and Japan, which are mentioned several times in the book.

The only slight change we might suggest is more related to the chronological structure of the narrative. Indeed, our knowledge of ancient societies depends on archeology, which, as the author notes, in fact leads to denominations that are based on production techniques (the Bronze Age, the Iron Age...). This is indeed an excellent demonstration of the influence of the productive regime on the organisation of societies. But it is also an aspect that should encourage us to be very careful in formulating any view of prehistoric societies, from hunter-gatherers through to the first village communities, as being non-hierarchical or only weakly so. Likewise, we might wonder about the position of these village communities after the 4th millennium, since they always remained politically active within the various successive forms of state they were part of.

However, the profusion of references in this book makes it a real pleasure to read, and the historical connections it makes allow the author to present a few powerful observations. For example, the fact that all the forms of state that he identifies, be they empires or thalassocracies, developed frumentary public policies

supported by the financing of large-scale supply and storage infrastructures. One example: even Venice had its own warehouses, took measures to fund a fleet at vast economic and ecological cost, and ensured its population received the food supplies necessary for social stability. These connections push us to view our own systems from a comparative perspective.

From the Limits of Growth to Social Unease

In the face of our current symbolic system, the author brooks no argument: he asserts that it is already undergoing a crisis. Indeed, science has progressively imposed itself as a political principle, for example by justifying the use of economics to legitimise the social order. Thus, everything that is not quantifiable has been relegated to a blind spot in the political field, be it biodiversity, the quality of soils, or even social stability. While Big Data looks set to be the next revolution, this symbolic regime leads us to a dead end, since science itself also warns us against climate change, and thus ceases to be at the service of a purely industrial productive system. As such, the values of overcoming one's own limits for elites, and of leisure and consumerism for most of the population, are no longer enough to receive everybody's support.

How can we reestablish social stability without the myth of perpetual growth? From one chapter to the next, the author puts forward the recurrent idea that "the emergence of a new existential perspective will probably be the main challenge in the transition from industrial societies to ecological societies" (p. 229). Among other examples, the author reminds us that agricultural cooperatives and trade unions have become some of the most fervent supporters of industrialisation, and even uses this to illustrate Jared Diamond's thesis according to which the impossibility of certain societies to extricate themselves from their dominant cultural model can contribute to their collapse. The advent of this cultural transition is thus a necessary prerequisite, which has already been initiated by some groups and some schools of thought, but which we must now shift from a place of marginality into the heart of our discourse and of our institutions.

Reforming our Agriculture: a Global Political Challenge

We then enter into the field of politics, through a series of proposals, the most interesting of which concern agricultural systems. The first arises out of the historical observations above. In all periods, the model of the large estate depending on an absent owner is presented as a frequent cause of under-exploitation. As for systems that rely on farming, when an owner leases their land for a limited period to a farmer, they do not encourage a very sustainable form of agriculture. In order to avoid the constitution of vast, poorly-exploited properties, fiscal incentives, and in particular the creation of a strong tax system on land then appear as a solution whose historical efficacy has already been demonstrated.

Translated into European terms, these observations amount to a criticism of the CAP, which does not provide for any European land tax. It also explains the success of agro-industrial corporations to the detriment of familial agriculture, which used to allow some farmers to continue to own their land despite chronic debt. This industrial agriculture, which is dependent on public subsidies, employs less and less workers (around 2%), while its productivity is impossible to quantify while taking into account all parameters (purchases of inputs and highly-specialised equipment, mineralisation of the soil, destroyed surplus production, etc.). However, no transition can take place without at least changing the fiscal and legal frameworks that have produced this system.

The list of recommended measures also concerns the orientation of subsidies, in particular those that have led to the hegemony of grains. Indeed, the increase in cereal production in the second half of the 20th century occurred to the detriment of other plants, such as pulses, even though the latter bring nitrogen to the soils in which they are cultivated. In addition, surplus cereal production has allowed for the development of soilless livestock farming by providing a new source of fodder for livestock. This call for us to take into account the material realities of our political choices is appearing at last in the economic field, where several environmentalists are putting forward the idea that a system of monetary pluralism would be beneficial, in particular if it created a scale of value that was not indexed to gold but, for example, to biomass or to a carbon footprint system. There is no simple solution, then, but much grist to the mill to push us in the right direction.

Conclusion

Enraciner l'agriculture is an unusual book due to the variety of fields it touches on. It is also a very optimistic book, which postulates that the ecological transition has already begun through experiments carried out on a small scale, and that it will necessarily be characterised by more cooperation and conviviality. But its message remains solidly down-to-earth, by ceaselessly repeating that a transformation of the legal and fiscal system is necessary for these experiments, which are still in the minority, to be able to impose themselves on the whole of society and on the productive system. The aim is to change our narratives, yes, but to do this in order, ultimately, to change our political framework too.

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