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Gilles Laferté, 2018, *L'embourgeoisement: une enquête chez les céréaliers*, Raisons d'agir, 363 p

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Published just months before the first wave of “Yellow Vest” protesters took to France’s streets in a show of force that, at least according to some accounts, pitted rural France against the country’s urban centers, Gilles Laferté’s new book is a welcome contribution to our understanding of life beyond France’s cities. To be sure, much historical and social science research has already examined the French countryside—especially the fate of French farmers, a focus of Laferté’s book as well. However, as Laferté notes, through the 1980s, farmers—or, more frequently, “peasants” (*paysans*)—were more or less treated in academic accounts as a homogenous category. Described in either miserabilist or nostalgic terms, they were held up as the opposite of a modern, class-based society, and their demise was presented, whether for better or for worse, as a marker and a summary of increasing integration into an ever more hegemonic State and of the elimination of region-specific cultural diversity. Such a view mirrored French ethnology’s interest in recording—in order better to preserve—“traditional” peasant lifeways. Building on more recent sociological investigations of the French countryside that have eschewed this perspective in favor of topics of study hitherto privileged in urban settings, such as social class or political action, Laferté proposes in this book a reconceptualization of rural spaces that neither treats them as urban miniatures nor overestimates their rural specificity. Focused on the adoption of bourgeois culture by cereal farmers in eastern France, his study is as much a theorization of upward social mobility, a wide-sweeping process that extends far beyond the world of agriculture, as it is a demonstration of the contextually contingent nature of such change.

Laferté’s book draws on ethnographic research he conducted as part of a team project begun in 2007 within the Centre d’Économie et de Sociologie Appliquées aux Espaces Ruraux, part of the French National Institute for Agricultural Research (INRA). The majority of the data analyzed in this book cover the period spanning 2008 and 2012. As is standard practice in the reporting of ethnographic research, all people and place names in Laferté’s account are anonymized to protect the privacy of his interlocutors. What he calls the “Germanois” is a sparsely populated eastern French

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region where, today, large-scale cereal farms predominate. Alongside historical and statistical research, Laferté undertook interviews with farmers and their families, he visited their homes, and he observed them at work. He also interviewed employees of local branches of Crédit Agricole, a cooperative bank with deep ties to farming in France.

In his analysis, Laferté introduces and then makes use of the concept of “localized social spaces” (*espaces sociaux localisés*), which he defines as “the division in a given territory of economic activities and of specialized social activities (industry, tourism, agriculture, forestry, etc.), and therefore of singular fringes of the population” (p. 13). According to Laferté, starting with the idea of localized social spaces is vital when examining macrosocial phenomena, such as the process he calls “embourgeoisement,” because this approach does not deny local (rural) specificities. Thus, he notes that a “farmer perceived as a bourgeois in the rural area where he resides may very well be stigmatized in Paris by his manner, his clothing, or his accent, far removed from those of the most endowed social categories” (p. 44). In other words, the term “bourgeois” is in circulation in both urban and rural settings, but its content, meaning, and, ultimately, consequences for those using it, as well as for those being described by it, shift depending on the context.

Laferté is careful to contrast his understanding of embourgeoisement with the idea of gentrification, a word more commonly encountered in English-language publications to describe increasing affluence and its correlates. Embourgeoisement, he suggests, most often begins with an accumulation of economic capital, leading to the recognition, acceptance, and gradual adoption of dominant, conservative (right-leaning), bourgeois norms and values. According to Laferté, gentrification, by contrast, generally starts with an accumulation of cultural capital. He goes on to explain that rather than conforming to dominant bourgeois culture, gentrification presents a progressive, oppositional (left-leaning) ethos, like that of the Parisian bobo or of the Brooklyn hipster, groups that reside partly out of necessity and partly out of choice in (previously) working-class districts. In neither instance, Laferté argues, can these processes be fully understood without first describing their local specificities and then positioning them in relation to macrosocial phenomena.

In the case of the Germanois, both local (rural) and extra-local (national and supranational) forces shaped production in the region, ultimately leading, according to Laferté, to the embourgeoisement of its cereal farmers. Laferté explores these forces in the first part of his book, comprising chapters 1 to 4. In chapter 1, he traces migratory patterns in the Germanois. Although in the early nineteenth century, the region’s economy turned on agriculture and lumber, economic upheaval in the second half of the century provoked a massive rural exodus, including the departure of many *notables*. Vacant land, whose soil was generally poor, was bought up for relatively little money by migrant families priced out of property ownership in their home regions, including parts of Belgium and Luxemburg; chapters 2, 3, and 4 follow some of these new property owners and their descendants and their strategies of capital accumulation and social reproduction. Laferté describes a transitional period during which “moneyed lower classes” (*classes populaires argentées*) emerge. Although economically better off than other residents of the region, particularly workers who congregated in towns and cities, these families were still far removed from bourgeois culture, especially its leisure pursuits. Transformations in the decades following World War II, including the

abandonment of dairy farming in favor of mono-cereal crops, encouraged by both the development of modern agricultural machinery, fertilizers, and pesticides and the implementation of a subsidy-driven productivist paradigm, contributed to closing this cultural gap, particularly by offering cereal growers what previously they lacked: free time away from their fields.

The second, ethnographically richer part of Laferté's book looks at what some of these farmers do with this free time, focusing on education and political activity (chapter 5), housing preferences and characteristics (chapters 6 and 7), and leisure activities (chapter 8). A full summary of Laferté's detailed observations in this section of the book are beyond the scope of this review, but I will highlight a few of his insights regarding housing, which nicely capture his larger argument about these farmers' incomplete embourgeoisement. Even with their greater free time, Laferté observed among his interlocutors what he calls an "*ethos du faire*," or a sort of a hands-on mentality. With regard to housing, this resulted in a fair amount of these farmers building their homes themselves, often with the assistance of their heavy agricultural machinery. This "*ethos du faire*," as well as these farmers' clear preference for new construction, Laferté argues, continue to set them apart from urban bourgeois elites, some of whom possess secondary residences in the Germanois in the form of stately old *châteaux*. The interiors of these farmers' homes are equally revealing of their only partial embourgeoisement. Here, Laferté observed decors that revealed "popular taste on a grand scale" (p. 300), from the building materials (wood, stone, marble) to the wall art and decorations (pastoral scenes, framed cornucops, hunting trophies, stuffed chickens) to the prominence of large, flat-screen TVs to the absence of musical instruments. Laferté's discussion of the use of space within these homes is also illuminating. Whereas massive kitchens serve as central hubs, equally impressive living and dining rooms are seldom used, reproducing a popular, as opposed to bourgeois, domestic practice.

L'embourgeoisement: une enquête chez les céréaliers is a memorable study that usefully reminds readers of the heterogeneity of the French countryside, while also insisting on the local (rural) specificities of large-scale social change. With it, Laferté contributes to ongoing debates about the "malaise" of French agriculture, arguing that alongside dwindling subsidies and the volatility of agricultural commodities, deep sociological transformations have fundamentally changed the face of rural France, creating both winners and losers. In this regard, Laferté demonstrates the crucial importance of ethnographic research, since statistical analysis alone would have largely overlooked the process of embourgeoisement he chronicles. This book also offers valuable insights into the dynamics of social change, particularly upward social mobility, helpfully disentangling processes that are too often collapsed into the single label "gentrification."

Of course, no book can anticipate every reader's questions. Since at least 2008 with the development of the first Ecophyto Plan, the French State has expressed a commitment to shifting away from an agricultural model reliant on heavy pesticide use to one founded on ecological principles. How did the farmers Laferté studied, whose output, as the author notes, depends on pesticide use, position themselves with regard to this new state-led orientation? What strategies of resistance or adaptation have they envisioned or developed? On a more theoretical level, anthropologists and other social scientists have long insisted on the specificities of local dynamics in illuminating large-

scale social or cultural change, such as the embourgeoisement Laferté describes. After all, it is in the thoughts and actions of individuals living in particular times and places that extralocal forces are embodied, interpreted, managed, and negotiated. How does Laferté's idea of localized social space articulate with this longstanding aim in social science research? In what ways might it help us to reconceptualize or to deepen our understanding of the relationship localities have with surrounding regions, states, or supranational entities?

These open questions in no way diminish the overall quality of Laferté's book. Well documented and engagingly written, this study will appeal to researchers in rural history, sociology, and anthropology, as well as to those working in agricultural economics, including policymakers and regulators. More broadly, scholars interested in social transformation will find much to engage with here. *L'embourgeoisement: une enquête chez les céréaliers* makes an important contribution to these fields and opens up new conversations on the articulation of social identity in the French countryside and beyond.

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