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Introduction, "Industrial French Food and Its Critics"

The shift to an industrialized agricultural system, designed to support an ever-expanding number of consumers with an ever-diminishing number of producers, is without question one of the most important developments of the modern world. Nowhere else was this shift effected so quickly and so thoroughly as it was in postwar France. In 1945, the vast majority of French farming looked exactly as it had in the nineteenth century. Draught animals did the heavy work, manure was the only fertiliser, and holdings were poorly organised, scattered throughout the village. Less than thirty years later, however, farms were larger and rationally organized; chemical inputs such as fertilizers and pesticides were routine; tractors and combine threshers dotted the landscape; and farm products were shipped to national, European, and international markets. By the 1970s, France had become the world's second largest exporter of agricultural goods.

This statistic is often met with shock and surprise -- if not outright disbelief. The reputation that the French have built, as being purveyors of all things gastronomically refined and artisanally produced, makes it difficult to imagine that efficiency, productivity, and price might ever outweigh quality when it comes to food. The Michelin Guide, open-air markets,

cheese wrapped in wax paper -- these are the things that are called to mind when thinking about food and agriculture in France. Surely the French are too busy enjoying fine cheeses and perfectly prepared baguettes to see to the business of economic competition -- or so the myth of the *bon vivant* would have us believe. The story of how agriculture developed in the postwar period demands that these assumptions be questioned. It proves that the French are every bit as capable of global economic success as their neighbors. France is home to Danone, Unibel, and Lu, all of which focus their energies on the production of processed goods that line the shelves of such big-box stores as Auchan and Carrefour.

To be sure, France was not the only country to industrialize its food system in the twentieth century. Mechanization, chemical inputs, and economies of scale were adopted across the globe, from the United States and Canada to India and the Philippines. The French case, however, stands out for two reasons. First, France experienced these changes much more intensely. A process that had begun in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century was delayed a good fifty years and France still managed to close the gap and catch up, becoming one of the world's leading players in agricultural trade within the span of a single generation. Between 1955 and 1975, when this transformation was at its most intense, the active agricultural population was cut in half, and forty to fifty thousand farms disappeared every single year (Cleary 1989, 11). As farmers left the land, freeing up holdings for those who remained, the average size of French farms almost tripled (France, *Remembrement* 1958, 6-7; "La France a perdu" 2011). Productivity levels soared. By the end of the century, just 5 percent of the active French population was still working in agriculture -- compared to 33 percent at the end of the war ("Recensement" 2000). While one French farmer had fed seven people in 1960, by the end of the century he was feeding forty (Moulin 1991, 181).

This breakneck speed was the result of French plans to take advantage of the new European Economic Community (EEC) and to become the breadbasket of Europe. Wanting to out-compete the more efficient Dutch and Danes, the French doubled-down on agricultural industrialization. And it worked. By the late 1960s, when the Common Market was in full swing, France had become the dominant agricultural producer within the community. Between 1960 and 1982 earnings from agricultural exports skyrocketed from five million to eighty million francs -- an increase of 1600 percent ("La place de l'agro-alimentaire" 1982). Exports were in fact so successful that the French government began comparing its farm sector to the oil fields of the Middle East, referring to it as the "green gas" of the French economy.

The successful scaling-up of the farm sector led to the development of a heavily capitalized agro-industrial food complex. As basic food stuffs like wheat, milk, and sugar became less and less expensive, French food processors and retailers were able to transform the market. The frozen food retailer Picard expanded its operations in the 1970s and opened its one hundredth store by the end of the following decade. The 1970s similarly witnessed the birth of the now ubiquitous Président label under La Société Besnier (later Lactalis), as well as the triumph of food retail giants Carrefour and Auchan. A decade later, fast food chains like Quick and la Brioché Dorée had firmly established themselves on French soil. While Julia Child was teaching Americans how to master the art of French cooking, the French were embracing cheap convenience food.

The second factor that sets the French apart from other nations that modernized their agricultural sectors in the twentieth century is the heightened tension between the industrial and the artisanal. While the American farm sector has become synonymous with what historian Deborah Fitzgerald has called "the industrial logic," (Fitzgerald 2003) the French, in spite of

their voluminous global trade in intensively-produced foodstuffs, are rarely, if ever, associated with industrial food production. Instead, French food tends to be synonymous with high quality small-scale cultivation, with *terroir*, and with the bucolic rolling hills of Provence. But these forms of production, while significant, account for a small portion of the total food industry. The end result is a food system that is dominated by the likes of Carrefour and Flunch, but whose reputation is based on its open-air markets and sidewalk cafes. How did this double existence take shape?

Challenges to the industrial food system date back at least to the early twentieth century, when a handful of doctors, nutritionists, and farmers began to warn the French public about the deleterious health consequences of a modern diet. Bread in particular served as a lightning rod in the debates surrounding industrialization. As Steven Kaplan has demonstrated, as early as the 1910s French doctors and nutritionists began warning consumers about the possible risks of eating "mechanical bread," arguing that it was responsible for a host of ills ranging from indigestion to cancer (Kaplan 2008, 156-161). Only by forgoing mechanical food could French men and women build healthy bodies.

Many of these early proselytizers drew a link between the health of French bodies and the health of the nation as a whole. For instance, Raoul Lemaire, an early producer of organic goods, maintained throughout his long career that nothing short of the survival of the French race was at stake in the battle to control the food system. In his unpublished memoirs he wrote about devoting his life to this struggle: "J'ai consacré toute ma vie ... à régénérer la race française, c'est-à-dire à lui donner physiologiquement son compte de phosphore pour qu'elle ne se laisse jamais berner par cette bande d'oiseaux de proie qui se sont abattus sur notre pays pour lui dévorer tout son corps, et même ce qui est plus grave, et ce que je ne leur permettrai pas d'accomplir, son

âme" (Lemaire 1953, 2). Weak and degenerate bodies were incapable of defending the nation against both internal (corporate interests) and external predators (the Germans, the Americans). Lemaire was just one of many who mixed their commitment to natural food with their interest in eugenics. He was, however, one of the most successful producers of organic food in the decades following the Second World War and therefore held an enormous influence over the early years of anti-industrial movements (Bivar 2018).

By the 1970s, this early language of degeneration and the French race had largely been abandoned, in favour of a more left-leaning discourse. Néo-ruraux and burned-out '68ers began to replace the old guard, and shifted the focus of the anti-industrial food movement to the environment and the evils of free-market capitalism. This was the decade that witnessed the rise of les Verts and the establishment of the ministère de l'Environnement, as well as a growing nostalgia for rural lifeways (Farmer 2011). As environmentalism went mainstream, and as many began to question the postwar push toward urbanisation, more and more French consumers began to worry about the agro-industrial food complex, which by then had come into its own.

The French state also played an important role in the resurgence of interest in local food and gastronomy. In 1984, the Ministry of Culture commissioned a twenty-five-volume collection, documenting the culinary heritage of France, from *poulets de Bresse* to *escargots à la Bourguignonne*. Simultaneously, the Ministry of Agriculture increased its efforts in the direction of value-added niche markets, and encouraged the expansion of the AOC system (Appellation d'origine contrôlée). Created in the 1930s as a means of guaranteeing provenance in the wine industry, the number of foods protected by AOC status rose dramatically through the 1980s and 90s. Previously, the vast majority of these *terroir* products had been consumed locally, in their regions of origin. It was not until the final decades of the twentieth century that they entered

national, and even international, distribution networks in large numbers. For instance, while only 15 percent of all French wine carried an AOC designation in the 1970s, during the following decade that share rose to 44 percent (Loubère 1990, 125).

These efforts to promote French culinary heritage were the result of both economic and cultural developments. By the 1970s, surpluses were a major problem for the EEC. In spite of an already substantial decrease in the farming population, there were still too many farmers producing too much food. Niche markets would allow farmers to decrease their yields without losing income because their smaller supply of goods would fetch higher per-unit prices. Moreover, building up niche production was viewed as a means of bringing greater economic opportunities to struggling rural areas. Farmers markets and specialty local food items would draw both domestic and international tourists.

In terms of culture, the twin forces of European integration and decolonisation were perceived by many as a threat to political sovereignty and cultural identity. Playing up the importance of French cuisine, which has been an essential pillar of French identity since Louis XIV turned France into the European capital of luxury, was a means of reasserting the boundaries of Frenchness (Freidberg 2004). This attempt to maintain an older tradition of what it means to be French is perhaps best exemplified by the successful 2010 request that French gastronomy be added to the UNESCO list of "intangible cultural heritage" (Csérge 2016). While increasingly porous borders have precipitated new forms of political and cultural anxiety, the promoters of traditional French food have attempted to assuage those fears by making claims about what it means to be properly French.

Of course, these claims about the nature of French food culture, from the revival of *terroir* to the UNESCO designation, were largely inconsistent with the realities of agricultural

production. Blind to the combine threshers and the concrete livestock operations, the vast majority of French men and women, consumers and policy-makers alike, have instead preferred to nostalgically imagine a bucolic landscape in which farms were worked by human hands rather than machines, and livestock was pastured rather than confined. There is a serious contradiction at work when France can be both one of the most powerful producers of globally traded agricultural commodities *and* the embodiment of gastronomy as cultural identity.

This is not, however, to diminish those farmers and consumers who remained committed to the anti-industrial ideal. Néo-ruraux who moved to the French countryside to become farmers remained loyal to their ideals, while discerning consumers understood the difference between buying organic food at big box stores like Auchan and subscribing to a cooperative buying club. By the 1990s, many of these consumers had teamed up with local producers to build the first AMAP (Association pour le maintien d'une agriculture paysanne) -- the French equivalent of the North American CSA (Community Supported Agriculture). More recently, concerned consumers have focused their attention on industrial meat, the arrival of the obesity epidemic in France (see also the state-sponsored Manger-Bouger campaign), and school lunch programs.

Our aim with this special issue of *Modern and Contemporary France* is to locate these anti-industrial ideals in their proper context by emphasising the contradictions of postwar French food. While the French are often admired for their food culture and eating habits, which are in turn associated with artisanal production and convivial consumption, the French agro-industrialfood complex is a powerhouse that runs on chemical inputs, intensive production methods, and international dumping practices. By exploring the postwar evolution of French food, in all of its inconsistency, the following essays call into question our assumptions about

French food culture by revealing the multiple food cultures that have developed simultaneously through the postwar period.

Benjamin Poole's article "French Fast Food and the Myth of Americanization" opens our special issue by examining and deconstructing the stereotypes of American fast food and French cuisine. Poole dismantles this opposition not only by signaling the French and European business interests in fast food chains, but more revealingly by placing fast food in a longer history of the French industrialized restaurant, and by demonstrating the deliberate uses of this aging dichotomy in the promotion of a semi-mythical French gastronomy.

Poole departs from both acculturation and globalization models of Americanization, arguing that instead of France being on an imagined "receiving end of American culture, the "global circulation of food and industrial knowledge" (XX) led circuitously to the construction of a national culinary identity. Americanization, then, emerges as a mythical foil that serves to highlight French gastronomy and artisanal production of foodstuffs. Yet if the cultural uses of Americanization nod toward Richard Kuisel's argument in *The French Way* (2012), Poole recounts in novel fashion just how French fast food really was.

French cuisine itself is a product of standardization and the application of industrial methods to the kitchen -- a phenomenon emblemized by the patriarch of French cuisine, Auguste Escoffier. From Escoffier's Taylorised restaurant kitchen, where labor was organized to prioritize scale and speed, to Jacques Borel's self-service restaurant, opening in Paris in 1958 then proliferating as "restoroutes" throughout France in the 1960s, we ultimately arrive at the fast-food restaurant, the very first in France being a Wimpy opened by Jacques Borel himself in 1961. By the time restaurant critics Henri Gault and Christian Millau sounded the alarm over fast food in 1982 (and Minister of Culture Jack Lang's labeled it "anti-food" in the same year), they

willfully ignored two oddly related phenomena: first, what José Bové would eventually term *malbouffe*, with its American connotations, was discursively necessary to highlight the distinctiveness of "French cuisine" and, second, "the many iterations of fast food *à la française*" (XX) then in existence. Yet the very division between cuisine or artisanal production, on the one hand, and fast food, on the other hand, remains open to question: Poole concludes with the powerful example of Roquefort cheese, championed famously by Bové in his mediatized "dismantling" of a McDonald's in 1999. Made by industrial methods and aged in mechanized caves for over a century, Roquefort is today mostly produced by Lactalis. In this instance as in many others, "French traditionalism" emerges as largely a marketing ploy.

The blurred lines between modern and traditional ways of producing food persist in **John P. Murphy's** examination of a discrete subset of modern diets in "Frozen Progress: Tradition and Modernity in the Early Development of the Frozen-Food Industry in France." In the pages of the trade journal *La Surgélation*, he examines the industry's optimistic sense of non-contradiction between tradition and modernity when it came to the consumption of frozen food. Heavy reliance on the trade journal may not tell the reader about the inner workings of the industries that produced or retailed frozen food, but the source keeps the article focused on the publicly articulated imperatives and concerns of industry leaders. Furthermore, the pages of *La Surgélation* offer more than a glimpse – namely through the published results of opinion polls – of which frozen foods were being purchased by French consumers and how public perceptions of these food novelties were developing. These pages reveal a relative hesitation, though not outright hostility, on the part of French consumers to fully adopt frozen meals, at least through the 1970s. This may then explain a comprehensive yet contradictory set of rhetorical choices for nudging French households toward frozen foods.

First, trade representatives tried to harness an overall pedagogy of modernity to frozen food: the French needed to be taught to "read, think, know, and believe in progress," (XX) opined one editorialist for *La Surgélation* in 1966. That France lagged behind Western counterparts in frozen food consumption was seen by industry professionals as part of a larger "issue" with modernity – or as a glaring exception as France modernized spectacularly in nuclear power generation, high-speed rail, and online services. Second, through a certain sleight of hand, frozen food was touted as the savior of gastronomy, under attack from unnamed sources. Marketing classic French dishes in frozen form might also touch egalitarian nerves, for complex meals with strong class markers could now be available to the many; gendered marketing emphasized not so much the convenience of frozen food for French housewives and working French women as it did the elevation of women as the keepers of French cuisine. Yet Murphy shows that frozen food (meat aside) had, by 1971, acquired a reputation as a product for the rich. Finally, frozen was touted as the "most natural way to preserve food," (XX) with echoes of the "fresher than fresh" argument deployed by American pioneers of frozen food. An array of tactics – frozen food festivals, the frozen food exhibit at the annual Salon International de l'Alimentation, and the presence of sales associates in frozen food aisles in the still relatively new self-service supermarkets – might employ one or more of these rhetorical strands in the industry's anxious effort to get the French to buy frozen.

Fast food and frozen food can only be fully understood within the context of industrial agriculture. **Alison J. Murray Levine** looks to the industrial raising and slaughtering of livestock in France through the lens of documentary film, which has brought attention to this agricultural sector alongside print and digital media. With few exceptions, however, documentary film long contributed to perpetuating a generalized public ignorance surrounding

French industrial agriculture. Given that history, the appearance over a five-year period (2009-2014) of the four feature-length documentaries under review, merits attention, for these films both mirror and frame consumers' concerns over the meat that they may or may not eat. Levine's four films are part of a larger genre of documentary film devoted to exposés of particular economic sectors, some within an anti-globalization framework, and others within a counter-globalization framework, identified by Martin O'Shaughnessy as involving resistance, usually local, to dominant industrial models (XX).

Consumer data reveal the main reasons for the decline in meat eating in France over the past twenty years: collective concerns centering on environmental integrity and social consequences, but also "food quality and geographic origin," loom larger than health and price. Levine thus frames her films around the idea of "ecological citizenship," the key to which lies in the "connections between individual acts and collective systems" (XX). Documentary film is of course well positioned to make connections between narratives, values, and the consequences of individual as well as collective action. Such is the case with these films as they depict the suffering of animals, slaughterhouse and meat packing workers, and ecosystems. Through them the viewer can glimpse layers of resistance: local repertoires practiced by farmers bucking industrial trends, resistance on the part of the film makers in documenting and publicizing those repertoires, and perhaps even resistance in cinematic technique. In the case of Manuela Frésil's *Entrée du personnel* (2011), a documentary shot inside eight different meat packing plants and representing "an innovative form of aesthetic resistance to the conventions of classic expository documentary," Levine notes its "choral writing" (multiple blended voiceovers) and "seamless spatial montage," (XX) techniques that serve to collectivize and reveal experience in a very hidden corner of French life.

The role of civil society in critiquing and developing alternatives to industrial agriculture is paramount, in France as elsewhere. **Valeria Siniscalchi** examines the role of Slow Food in its brief French incarnation in order to highlight the unpredictable path it took as its French membership eagerly embraced it at first, only to reject it later at the national level. The international organization, founded by Carlo Petrini in Italy in 1986 and known widely for its activism in favor of sustainable agriculture and regional and traditional cuisine, consists of an international leadership headquartered in Bra, Italy, national organizations in numerous countries, and a far larger number of local entities known as *convivia*. Siniscalchi notes the overall evolution of Slow Food, from an organization often critiqued for its ability merely to increase the cultural capital of the affluent consumer through teaching "discernment," to one that moved toward environmentalism, adopting c. 2005 the slogan "good, clean, and fair," with its focus on small producers and local economies. The consumer of "slow food" became defined as a "co-producer" – someone in dialogue with local farmers – as opposed to a gourmet. France was one of the first countries to produce sympathizers to the movement, and *convivia* readily took root in French soil.

Yet Slow Food France came and went: the national organization opened in 2003 and closed shop in 2011. Siniscalchi cites a number of reasons for this less than illustrious career: namely, opposition to the organization's growing hierarchy and difficulties of "translation," in an anthropological sense, conspired to sow discord at various levels. Viewed from one angle, the French organization took the libertarian streak expressed by Carlo Petrini to its logical end – and the local *convivia* then took it in opposition to Slow Food France. Yet the story reveals dimensions that go well beyond a stereotypical French resistance to foreign leadership, or local resistance to national leadership; likewise, it would be incorrect to view the juggernaut of French

industrial agriculture as simply too powerful for the likes of Slow Food. The heart of this story lies in the crowded field of alternatives and activist opportunities around food that Slow Food encountered in France. From product labeling (notwithstanding its possible co-optation by agro-industry), urban gardens, organic agriculture, and biodynamic agriculture, to the more overtly political movements represented by the Confédération Paysanne and Colibris, French agricultural practices and civil society had already staked out a strong set of alternatives to the industrial norm when Slow Food appeared on the scene. Above all, the AMAP phenomenon succeeded where Slow Food France did not, tapping into the desire to value local production outside of mainstream market structures. The AMAP have made more visible differences to local economies, despite broadly shared goals with Slow Food and a remarkably similar characterization of the militant consumer – the *consomm'acteur*, arguably parallel to Slow Food's "co-producer." Some local convivia, however, have remained active, and Siniscalchi concludes that in the French setting, Slow Food appears useful as an international mouthpiece calling for overhauls of the food system.

Our special issue concludes with an in-depth look at one small farm successfully bucking agribusiness and industrial agriculture. **Nicole Risser** offers a microhistory of the Brès farm, located in the Drôme, a traditionally Provençal polycultural operation that transitioned in several significant ways beginning in the early 1990s. A six-generation farm facing familiar postwar pressures reviewed both in the article and in this introduction, the Brès operation moved cautiously and gradually to female management, all-olive cultivation, and organic conversion. This is obviously a success story, and as such does not shed light on why similar operations have failed, yet the risks undertaken by the Brès-Kanéko family were significant, and the lessons instructive. Régine Brès' decision to assume management of her parents' farm seems logical from

the standpoint of this one-child family, yet the patriarchal structure of French farming did not necessarily bode well for her ability to secure financing or other forms of agricultural assistance. Nevertheless, the gendering of French farming has changed remarkably in the early twenty-first century, with some 25 percent of all French farms run or co-run by women. Likewise, converting to a monocultural, organic olive farm entailed low productivity during the years of conversion and enhanced risk of damage by pests, yet this small farm benefited from a cluster effect by which a decisive number of farms in the region embarked on organic conversion more or less simultaneously.

These aspects of the Brès story appear to speak to significant structural change. A closer look reveals that a densely supportive context buoyed this small farm's resistance to dominant models. First, Régine benefited from her parents' own move toward gender equality on the farm, as well as their entrepreneurial bent – they experimented with marketing strategies, purchased new equipment, and traveled for the sake of their professional development. Second, Régine advanced in part due to her own cultural capital in the form of professional education and the technical training she sought, in addition to her husband's support and non-farm income. Third, the European Union began to regulate organic agriculture and assist conversions in 1992; the French state formally recognized organic agriculture in 1980 and launched a multi-year development plan for organics in 1998. By the time she decided to convert to organic methods in 2006, Régine Brès was able to take advantage of increasing state assistance for the sector. All of these elements have helped lead to the viability and at least minimal prosperity of this small, female-run farm. New models of farming can flourish in one of the world's heartlands of industrial agriculture.

Food and farming have emerged in the last decade as important topics in both the academic and popular spheres. Michael Pollan and Raj Patel set the stage with trade publications, while Julie Guthman and Marion Nestle made major scholarly contributions. But cultural stereotypes have tended to over-determine the treatment of food and farming in the literature on France. Amy Trubek's *The Taste of Place* (2009) and Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz's *A Taste for Provence* (2016) cater to assumptions about the artisanal nature of French food. To this list we would add the recent special issue of *Contemporary French Civilization* (2017), which once again focuses on French food culture, gastronomy, and representation at the expense of investigating how the majority of French men and women actually produce and consume agricultural products – industrially. English-language investigations into the dominant industrial food model remain scarce. This special issue will serve as a much needed corrective by presenting niche artisanal production as a reaction to the hegemonic industrial model in order to give readers a better sense of how the French food system actually works.

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