Mosher on Heath (2014)


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In this meticulous study Elizabeth Heath examines the socioeconomic and political trajectories of the making of two key agricultural industries that all but define the culinary practices of the West: wine production in the department of Aude in mainland France and sugar manufacturing on the island of Guadeloupe. She thus illuminates the complex and integral relationship among colonization, empire, race, and the development of French Republican citizenship and identity, particularly during the period from 1848–1910. In addition to the ingenuity of the subject matter, the maps, charts, imagery, and abundant notes are important scholarly resources that enhance the quality of the text.

As Heath notes, this study is unique in its pairing and comparative analysis of seemingly unrelated agricultural products cultivated in the soil of two very specific areas of the French empire. Despite the kilometers separating the Aude region and Guadeloupe, the citizens who worked in the vineyards of rural France and the fields of sugar cane in colonial Guadeloupe reveal much about French imperialism during the Second Empire and the Third Republic. This book thus analyzes the agricultural products, the laborers who cultivated them in the fields and vineyards, and those who came to the table to enjoy the resulting culinary creations.

In part one, Heath discusses the role of Audois wine and Guadeloupian sugar within the global economy as France transitioned to the Third Republic. The abolishment of slavery in Guadeloupe in 1848 led to the freedom of 67% of the island’s population. As a result, sugar plantations made the shift from a labor force comprised of slaves to one that relied on wage earning workers and indentured servants. These societal changes contributed to the changing definition of Republican citizenship. In France, the development of roads and railways combined with record harvests and an increase in demand for wine, particularly in urban centers, resulted in unprecedented growth in the viticulture industry from 1850–76.

The three chapters of part two trace the role of the state and explore the challenges faced by both producers and consumers as they bought and sold goods in the (inter)national marketplace. The economic depression that began in Europe in 1873 caused government officials to question how and when social aid should be offered to citizens as the free trade global markets declined. A phylloxera plague led to state sanctioned *chaptalisation* or the practice of adding sugar to fermenting grapes. At the same time, an 1887 law made it illegal to “plaster,” or add potassium sulfate, to wines in France. Alongside various acts of state intervention, the organization and mobilization of workers became a reality for French citizens in 1884 when they earned the legal right to unionize.

The volume’s third part brings to light the rise of unions in both Guadeloupe and the Aude and the development of social welfare practices. While the nation provided social aid to some of its citizens, Heath notes that this assistance came at the expense of immigrants, women, and colonial subjects. With the development of unions, rural citizens achieved the mobilization platform necessary for obtaining the same rights as urban and industrial workers. In the Aude, strikes gave union members the opportunity to negotiate with and appeal directly to departmental officials. As mainland citizens gained a voice they discussed their rights, equality, working conditions, and wages. Conversely, workers in Guadeloupe found it more advantageous to negotiate with colonial officials in between strikes, during routine activities such as annual reviews. Ultimately, in the first decade of the twentieth century, the Republic recognized that rural agricultural workers warranted the same rights and protection as those who labored in urban industries. This was not the case for Guadeloupians as the state became occupied with new colonial opportunities in Africa and Asia. Equal rights for workers in Guadeloupe would come much later in the twentieth century.

*Wine, Sugar, and the Making of Modern France* would serve as a useful resource for a graduate level French history, cultural studies, or civilization course. I highly recommend this book to scholars and students whose area of research considers the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, the history of Guadeloupe, France during the Third Republic, global trade and economics, the rise of unions, workers’ rights, and the agricultural and culinary history of Europe and the Caribbean.
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