

Itinéraires marchands du goût moderne: Produits alimentaires et modernisation rurale en France et en Allemagne (1870–1940) [Merchant Routes to Modern Taste: Food Products and Rural Modernization in France and Germany (1870–1940)]. By *Thierry Nadau*. Text assembled posthumously and edited by Marie-Emmanuelle Chessel and Sandrine Kott. Paris: Editions de la Maison des sciences de l’homme, 2005. xxi + 300 pp. Photographs, illustrations, figures, bibliography, notes. Paper, €22.00. ISBN: 2-735-11064-8.

Reviewed by Kolleen M. Guy

How does one review a book that the author did not intend to write? A pioneering historian of modern European history, Thierry Nadau died in 1994, at the beginning of his career, leaving behind a foundation of creative, if largely unfinished, work that promised a new cultural history of commerce. His colleagues at some of France’s most prestigious research institutes, recognizing the originality of his ideas and methodology, have assembled these pieces for our benefit. The result is a book that Nadau never envisioned. Here we find no central thesis, no carefully crafted argument, no definitive answers. All we have are brilliant possibilities presented in tantalizing vignettes gleaned from Nadau’s work-in-progress for the arduous French *doctorat d’Etat*. The result is a quirky example of the discipline of history at its best. Nadau left behind his cognitive map with arrows indicating new avenues of research and pointing to a new methodology for understanding history. His was a vision of the possibilities offered by creating a comparative social and economic history of commerce that is attentive to culture. With this book, we mourn the loss of his promising conclusions, even as we celebrate his rich legacy of possibilities.

The work opens with Nadau’s reconsideration of the role of French agricultural in retarding economic growth between 1870 and 1914. This is a period that is generally understood by historians as presenting an almost continual agrarian crisis, the apogee of a peasant agriculture that served as an obstacle to the kind of economic change taking place in the other areas of Europe. Above all, so the theory goes, it was the French *mentalités paysannes*, resistant to change and bolstered by early Third Republic politicians, that retarded progress. Notions of French backwardness were always predicated on the

premise that other European nations were making greater progress toward a modern, market-based agriculture. Nadau (using the kind of comparative history once pioneered by Marc Bloch) reexamines these assumption. Through a comparative study of France and Germany, Nadau, like Bloch, uncovers surprising similarities between French and German agricultural production: both underwent dramatic transformations between 1870 and 1914; both experienced the upheavals that resulted from the growth of large-scale agribusiness; and both countries were marked by the resilience of small-scale cultivation in the face of market change. Given the similarities between the French and German experience, how do we account for the difference in aggregate outcomes? Nadau argues that the critical element overlooked by historians is the role of demand for food products in determining the pace of agricultural change and the rate of economic growth. He calls for a new economic history that goes beyond an essentially quantitative analysis of production to incorporate the actors (both producers and consumers) into the story and examine their motivations. Perhaps, he suggests, the reasons for the patterns of French economic growth had less to do with obstruction by backward peasants and more to do with patterns of development in the commercial food industry. Perhaps the reasons for French economic backwardness lay outside the countryside. Perhaps this is a story about the cultural links between consumption and production.

The history of the transformation of consumers' desires and demands and the place of food consumption in economic modernization has been pioneered by Anglo-American scholars. Nadau's work dovetails nicely with the research conducted by scholars like Frank Trentmann, who focus on consumption, civil society, and political culture. Yet, in linking the dynamics of production and consumption, Nadau's contribution is original. Influenced by the comparative methodologies of the early French *annalistes* and the *Alltagsgeschichte* (microhistory or "history of the everyday") that prevailed in the German historical circles he frequented, Nadau produces a series of vignettes that suggest the kinds of conversations that probably took place in the markets of the time. One vignette, for example, compares the manufacture and marketing of biscuits by the French firm Lu and the German firm Bahlsen at the turn of the century. Each firm was shaped by the cultural preferences of its country's consumers. Germans liked to purchase biscuits from itinerant merchants at train stations, at expositions, and in

other public localities. To accommodate them, by the 1900s Bahlsen had begun packaging its products in order to highlight their standardization, indestructibility, and affordability. French consumers, on the other hand, by that time were purchasing biscuits in small shops or *confiseries*. Biscuits were considered a luxury item in France, and they were associated with quality, even as they were becoming increasingly affordable. Thus, the Lu firm did not innovate packaging to improve durability, nor did it attempt to sever the link between firm and consumer in marketing its product. Not until the 1950s would Lu adopt the mass-marketing strategies pioneered by Bahlsen. While business historians have read this story as an indication of the Lu firm's failure to modernize and a sign of the "backwardness" of French business that was further constrained by inefficient agriculture, Nadau suggests that Lu's strategy was consistent with French cultural practices that emphasized quality and insisted on a direct relationship, however tenuous, between producer and consumer. Indeed, it is not hard to imagine the result of a decision by Lu to adopt Bahlsen's mass-marketing strategy: it would have been a disaster for the firm. French cultural practices would simply not have supported the German consumption model. Rather than failure, the story of Lu demonstrates the successful outcome of a market dialogue.

Nadau presents a range of examples, drawing from the diverse areas of food-purity regulations, agricultural tariff policy, and rural electrification campaigns. His conclusions are clear: there was more than one path to economic modernization. The mass production of food for undifferentiated urban consumers was not the only route to commercial success. Nor was the large-scale industrial farm the only direction for modern agriculture to take. There was plenty of room for "niche" markets, artisanal production, and the family farm. Small-scale producers of cheese, yogurt, bread, jams, sausages, and wines were economically viable and well equipped to read consumer demand and adjust their output accordingly. These niche producers were intimately tied to small-scale agriculture (the kind of agriculture that economic historians like to label "backward"). They also were connected to a consumer base that could accept and at times resist the homogenization of taste that was becoming so common in democratized food markets.

The brilliance of Nadau's work exists in his ability to recognize that men and women in the past, both producers and consumers, had the capacity to invent multiple uses for material objects and to ascribe varying significance to them, depending on the context. Notions of quality could trump quantity. The desire to remain connected to the land or to maintain the tie between producer and consumer could outweigh the desire for access to the mass market and its anonymous exchanges. Nadau's cultural history of commerce allows us to see agricultural markets more holistically and with more compassion for the human beings who function within them. Agriculture could have taken a number of routes to become "modern." As Nadau demonstrates, the path leading to mass-produced, homogenized food production was not always the most rational choice.

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