

Rural Communism in France, 1920–1939. By Laird Boswell (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1999) 266 pp. \$47.50

This book should have been written long ago. Rural militants and supporters played a major role in the electoral success of the French Communist Party (PCF) between the world wars. In fact, as Boswell notes in his introduction, the PCF remained as the largest communist party in the West after Adolf Hitler banned its German counterpart in 1933. If rural backers were instrumental in sustaining such an important communist movement during the turbulent (and relatively well-studied) interwar years, one would think that a significant literature on the phenomenon would have emerged long ago. Yet, Boswell's study falls on mostly parched ground. Previous explanations rely on difficult-to-examine leftist political traditions that date to the turmoil of 1848. These studies purport to explain voting habits by a sort of Newtonian law whereby successive generations of rural voters consistently rewarded parties that emerged further to the left—*toujours plus à gauche*. This theory has rural voters falling into the laps of the PCF as if by gravity. But Boswell will have none of it. His approach takes rural communism on its own terms, in its own context, and by its own voices. Boswell hypothesizes that from “the point of the view of the peasantry, rural communism was a coherent response to unfulfilled desires for political and social reform, the fears born of the Great War, the crisis of a quickly declining rural sector in search of salvation and identity” (7). He makes his case using a diverse mix of evidence and methodological approaches.

The book has a little something for everyone. It is a regional study, in the sense that it focuses on the three departments of the Limousin (Corrèze, Creuse, and Haute Vienne) and the neighboring department of Dordogne. Based on data gathered from these interwar strongholds of rural communism, Boswell carefully, but convincingly, generalizes to a broader political landscape.

Archival and published sources from national, departmental, and local archives abound, but two particularly helpful methodologies dominate the body of the text. The first is electoral geography. Boswell marshals an impressive battery of inferential statistics to explain leftist strength in the countryside. Correlational analyses distinguish the communist vote from other political parties—spatially, historically, structurally—and show that the PCF enjoyed an unusually stable implantation at the village and communal levels. Boswell bolsters these findings with an ecological regression analysis in which he persuasively culls individual-level voting behavior from broader electoral outcomes.

Having demonstrated a strikingly stable communist support and sketched its social composition, Boswell turns to more common multiple regression analysis in order to examine the interaction of political behavior, demography, population density, religion, and farm structure. The results permit Boswell to question several long-held theories. For example, he concludes that PCF support did not originate from what had been assumed to be its natural adherents—the most proletarianized and

poorest of rural inhabitants (landless agricultural workers and sharecroppers). Rather, he finds the Party's faithful supporters in "a balanced mix of small-holding peasants, tenant farmers, agricultural workers, temporary migrants, artisans, and shopkeepers" (89).

Boswell's quantitative analysis is matched by evidence garnered from oral interviews with thirty-four surviving PCF militants. Though Boswell quickly concedes a lack of statistical representation among his subjects, these interviews provide an indispensable texture to the study. Using them, Boswell skillfully interprets his subjects' worldviews and how they contributed to their support for the Party.

Boswell's study is an elegant history that greatly complicates our view of communism in France and elsewhere. More might have been said about the Popular Front and the peasantry's perceptions of its efforts to stabilize grain prices and enact social welfare in the countryside. But these are minor quibbles. Most important is the contribution that *Rural Communism in France* makes to a growing literature that interrogates our presumptions about what is "urban" and what is "rural." On this count, Boswell's work is a treasure.

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Cosimo De' Medici and the Florentine Renaissance. By Dale Kent (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2000) 537 pp. \$39.96

That we know so much about fifteenth-century Florence is not merely the result of its appeal as the setting for one of the "golden ages" that shaped the modern world. It is also due to the extraordinary riches of the city's archives. Historians are naturally drawn to evidence, and the Florentines were lavish both in what they recorded and in what they preserved. There is probably no other place in the world, except perhaps Venice, about which we can know so much, despite the passage of 500 years.

Despite the wealth of information, however, Cosimo de Medici, the man who more than any other embodied this golden age, remains enigmatic and elusive. His public achievements are well known: the enormous wealth he accumulated as the head of a huge international bank; his political and diplomatic efforts as he rose to dominate Florence and then to represent its interests on a broader stage; his building projects; and his patronage of the great artists of his time, notably Filippo Brunelleschi, Donatello, and Fra Angelico. But he was not a man who let outsiders into his private world, and, as a result, historians have long been divided about the larger aims that he pursued. Was he seeking to make himself the "prince" of Florence? Did he use his wealth mainly to further his political ambitions? In particular, was his patronage of the arts primarily another means to that end—that is, were his buildings and his commissions intended as demonstrations of his wealth and power?