

## Meta-analysis of *Artisanal Bakery in France*

Bertaux and Bertaux-Wiame's *Artisanal Bakery in France: How it Lives and Survives* bills itself as a Marxian account of the reasons for the survival of the traditions of the eponymic *petite bourgeoisie*. The authors' explicit perspective is quite plain – as is its subtextual framing in the context of a pathological trend towards modernization.

The authors portray *le boulange* as an artisanal class struggling with a cultural shift towards a more modern, capitalistic system in nearly prototypical Marxist *petite bourgeoisie* terms. Ownership of the means of production – of the *boulangerie* itself – is, at least in the early phase described, the principle determining factor of social identity and class, passed on from parent to child-apprentice and essentially familial. This marginal ownership of capital is of course shown as essentially exploitative; a young *boulangier* couple is exploited by their predecessors, alienating them from their hard work for years until they manage to pay off the loan that supports the last generation's retirement (167). In turn, they exploit an entire pyramid of workers who trade their labor power for a pittance wage and a false consciousness of their place in the exploitative system of ownership – an ownership to which they are, by dint of competition, unlikely to succeed (156).

Because *boulangers* cannot compete with the industrialists on price, they compete on the artisan's *forté*: use value, "its symbolic meaning" (173) as a central element of French *cuisine*. Unlike the capitalists, they are portrayed as not particularly seeking to *accumulate* capital so much as to merely preserve their independence.

By contrast, the denigrated capitalist factory owners – whom the authors did not see fit to also interview – are portrayed (160) as cynically using the tools of the State (tax incentives, legal pressures) and of unjust monopolies (flour distribution, advertisements) to subdue the noble not-as-capitalists. Despite the vilification and indeed the entire paper's thesis of resistance to the revolution in mode of production, however, it is implicitly inevitable. Bakers, losing their ability and will to hand off their increasingly poor financial and working conditions to their own children, are forced to recruit peasants instead, with increasingly exploitative and impersonal power differences. While the *petite bourgeois* struggle to survive, the industrialists accumulate yet more capital, "waiting for the next opportunity" (161). The eventuality of the rational use of this capital is clear: Marx's predicted progression from peasant to *petite bourgeois*, and further to a proletarianized dichotomy of manager-owners vs. wage laborers.

Indeed, the authors' central belief in situational forces propelling everyone forward along the inevitable path of changes in mode of production is what makes them so surprised as to write the paper in the first place: these *boulangers* have managed to hold out, for a time, against the Marxist inevitability.

The authors go about their research in more or less the standard Marxist fashion: after a perfunctory attempt at obtaining statistical series, quickly dismissed as too socially problematic, they focus on oral histories. Their target is quite explicit – “to get at the ‘material side’” (176-7) of the *boulangers*’ conditions; to study the “concrete functioning of class relations” (ibid.) – to confirm their preëxisting, implicit framing of a struggle between classes defined by modes of relations.

Of course, the authors “never asked questions about political ideas” (ibid.), as to them the State is essentially epiphenomenal; indeed, “by keeping the artisanal form alive... they make politics” (ibid.). The work of making bread itself, and thus of perpetuating the mode of production it entails, is the essence of the Marxist “base”. Indeed, the authors imply, this is the purpose of *their* work in doing this research – so that it “would be connected somehow to everybody’s daily life” (ibid.), and in doing so, to commit an intrinsically *political act*. Not of superstructure politics, of course, but to incline their readers towards supporting a mode of production the authors prefer.

This clearly preferred view of the “traditional”, “ancestral”, “artisanal”, more quintessentially “French” (155) mode of production is throughout opposed by the “capitalistic” mode. But this is of course not simply talking about who owns the shop; it is equally a dystopic portrayal of modernization. Merely substitute “modern” for “capitalistic”, and the anti-modernist treatise about the inevitable but often deleterious procession from a more idyllic tradition to an anæsthetized, modern, tasteless one.

The authors can’t resist stating this distaste for the modern even in their first paragraph, with scare quotes describing the industrial (read: fake) ‘bread’, “wrapped in a shroud of cellophane” (155) like a dead thing. The “canned bread”’s (159) only redeeming qualities are its price and durability, described in much the same terms of disgust for its preservability as we might today describe Twinkies™.

Cellophane is, of course, not incidental; it is part of visualizing a single cohesive anti-ideal, against which the romanticized nobility of the *boulangier* stands in stark contrast. The small shops “have a personality of their own” (163) – they are personable, friendly, fresh, “French” (155); the impersonality of their modern, industrial competition is implicit in the very lack of description thereof. This dissociating trend from empathizable patrimony to anonymous factory product, from family-run business to soulless machine, is clearly repulsive to the authors.

Much is made of the “traditional” conflation of spouse with business partner, of its necessity and romanticism, though the authors openly acknowledge (168) that, without being forced by the traditionally inviolable bonds of marriage, no modern, emancipated wife would consent to go along with such a life of indentured servitude.

That the artisanal bakery “has always been mostly been an *urban* trade” is a “paradox” to its “‘traditional’ image” – a paradox, that is, when contrasted to the idealized type of tradition being *rural*.

The effect of modern forces in shaping the industry of bread making are universally described in a negative light. Productivity increases with mechanization, but at the cost of eliminating the traditional “teaching vocation of the bakers” (171) – and “besides... you have now to work faster” (162). Work/life balance is sacrificed to the capitalistic pressures towards modernity; even a family business means “not more ‘family life’ but less” (168).

The social trend, described in terms of mode of production, is also quintessentially the modernist account. Far from “the only way to become a baker [being] to be born the son of a baker” (164), as traditional family lineages would dictate, succession is “to the only type of men ... willing to take over the shops – young bakery workers” (166) – and they recruited more and more from the even more desperate rural youths (170). This of course leads to increased urbanization as rural people move to the cities to work, and increasingly difficult to meet the expectations of men who have “met [modern, ] industrial workers and realized that they are better paid and have a better life”. Thus the traditional family business itself becomes commodified.

Even the rhetoric employed by the authors is modernistic. They set against each other two binary ideal types: on the one hand, the traditional, artisanal, romantic, French image of a craft dying out; on the other, the modern, industrialized, anonymous, globalized image of a commodity devoid of character. There is of course no claim that this is from pursuit of greed – just the impersonal modernizing force of individuals seeking to be self-directed (in increasing vain). The individual histories of all the people the authors interviewed is glossed over, forming “a certain representativeness... not at the level of phenomena” (179) – forming, that is, an ideal type from application of which “to guess many features of [any bakery’s] internal life” (ibid.).

The explicitly Marxist interview and survey methods discussed above overlap well with those of the modernists, with various more general statistical socioeconomic indicators sprinkled throughout to give context to the emphasis on primary histories.

The only thing missing from a traditional (ha) modernist account is the extrapolation of some sort of prescriptive dicta for how to change policies to improve the lot of those caught in this inevitable modernization. Given that the authors are antipathetic to this trend, though, this is not surprising. They would hardly want to accelerate a dystopia, after all.

It is somewhat surprising, given its use as an underlying assumption and general Marxist agreement with its premises, that the authors did not give at least a nod to rational choice theory.

The changing incentives and constraints of all the classes described, from the rural worker deciding to move to the city to pursue his newly available incentive of upward mobility, to the bakery owner’s increasing constraints of price, worker availability, and competition, are all amenable to cost-benefit analysis.

The authors seem perfectly willing to stop and discuss the existence of cash value of goodwill (166), but don't go into any real detail. Even the authors' description of "love" marriages (168-9) is, traditionalist romanticism aside, as a coldly rational economic decision on the part of most husbands, and a suboptimal decision made under duress and lack of good information on the part of their wives *cum* business partners. One could imagine an equation coming along with this decision, describing the optimum tradeoff for a prospective husband of time together with his future wife to establish trust *vs.* the risk of her realizing his plans, as to how likely it would be for her to agree to go along with the plan.

It is a bit strange, also, that the authors give such a trite description of customers' buying behavior. Certainly conceiving of it as a moral choice between the True French Style of traditional artisanal bread and the blandness of cellophane makes the story simpler, but it is hard to believe that the average French consumer has quite such a simplistic set of goals. Perhaps, for instance, they are actually optimizing for familiarity and ease *vs.* risk of choosing a new source for their daily bread; perhaps the artisanal bread is actually cheaper overall (such as when accounting for nutrition) compared to its industrial competition. The authors gloss over what these other impacts on the individual consumer's decisions might be.

Even the potential stories that would go completely together with the central Marxist philosophy go ignored. Despite spending a page describing how the industrialist class launched a "massive attack" on the artisanal class through application of State power, exploitation of capital, etc. – and how the artisans bravely fought back by *mobilizing their fellow workers to unite for a common purpose* – the authors spend a scant few words on how the industrialists "lowered [their] prices to get back [their] former customers". Surely this is a nigh perfect example of what a Marxist would consider an opportunity for uniting the *petite bourgeoisie* against their exploiters – an opportunity for revolution in mode of production, wresting power away from the malicious owners of capital? This lack of action is hard to explain well in purely Marxist terms, but the drawbacks rational choice predicts in collective action problems describes it quite well.

There are plenty of other parts of the tragedies the authors describe in the lives of artisans that can be similarly described. Take, for example, the need for a leviathan state to mandate a day off – and even with that, the *doublage* (162) caused by individual bakers not being willing to permit the baker across the street to get customers on one's own day off. Clearly the authors would like the artisanal way of life to survive; why not try to predict what policy changes – laws, tax breaks, or other incentives / constraints – might improve their livelihood (and lives)?

It's a bit of a pity that the authors punted so readily on obtaining more quantitative data – data that all three perspectives would have benefited from having. Surely the erstwhile mailed surveys could be asked in person at some point during the longer qualitative interview; personal and business income records tallied and compared to tax returns; business registrations and new bakery buildings collated from the town hall; estate records of deceased bakers examined to determine their financial success; etc. etc. This extra work to finish their study seems small, compared to the effort already expended in obtaining

and recording so many interviews throughout France. Stopping at a mostly undirected interview, and then bemoaning their inability to create figures or even “give accurate measures of social phenomena” (178) – rather than having to speculatively “propose an hypothesis” (ibid.) that they cannot empirically confirm – seems to rather short-change the authors’ ability to stronger points.

As the authors purport it, the central story is one of social change of the only sort that Marxism really recognizes, i.e. a change in the “production relations... [that] determine all the other forms” (176) of class relationships. Certainly they do tell this story... but in doing so, they implicitly invoke both a frame of an inevitable trend towards a dystopic future, and a slew of individual, rational motivations made by both their protagonists and antagonists. A richer story might have been told with more attention to (and indeed a Marxist *kritik* of) these underlying aspects and assumptions of their argument, and with a less superficial drive for empirical, quantitative data to balance their intensely qualitative version of “a day in the life of a doomed *boulangier*”.

*C'est la philosophie étroite!*