

The World on a Plateau

by Raphaël Morera

The Larzac plateau is famous and paradoxical: as the scene of an emblematic struggle against the state, but also because its economy is a model of integration within global capitalism. Philippe Artières retraces its history.

Reviewed: Philippe Artières, *Le peuple du Larzac. Une histoire de crânes, sorcières, croisés, paysans, prisonniers, soldats, ouvrières, militants, touristes et brebis...*, Paris, La Découverte, 2021, 307 p., €21.

Le peuple du Larzac (“*The People of the Larzac*”) provides a sort of stratigraphic cross-section of the most famous plateau in the Massif Central. Keen to situate the recent history of the *Causse*¹ within its long history, Philippe Artières outlines the development of the Larzac from prehistory through to our present day, meaning from the hunter-gatherers of heroic times through to passing 21st century tourists. Make no mistake, though: the real subject of this historian’s investigation is indeed the conflict, culminating in the 1970s, between the plans drawn up by the military and the central French state on the one hand, and the world of farmers and activists on the other. Artières’ work thus involves locating this emblematic conflict within the history of the plateau, and thus conferring upon it the unction of autochthony.

Covering 2,500 years of history in 307 pages is something of a gamble. Artières displays both elegance and conviction in overcoming this challenge, thanks in particular to his carefully-structured approach and the striking quality of his writing. His investigation is supported by his expertise in examining marginal groups and

¹Translator’s Note: “*Causse*” is the name given to the limestone plateaux of the Massif Central, located in an area bordered to the north-west by the Limousin and the Périgord uplands, and to the east by the Aubrac and the Cévennes.

disciplinary institutions, is open to new historiographical perspectives and enriched with a more traditional form of economic history, and thus constitutes a history that manages to be both comprehensive and modest at the same time. Three chronologies, which end up converging in the 21st century, structure the narrative: that of the agropastoral economy, then that of the army, and finally that of the struggle. For Artières, the Larzac struggles arise out of the conflict between two contradictory systems: the pastoral economy, which is open to the market, on the one hand, and governmental and military territorial planning on the other. So far the former has proved victorious, albeit temporarily, by turning the plateau into a territory where various struggles converge, and into an issue for democratic politics.

From Sheep to Roquefort

The history of the Larzac plateau provides a perfect illustration of the triumph of a pastoral economy that is dominated by religious institutions. Its harsh climate and rocky ground considerably limit rural work on the *Causse*. In the 12th century, the Templars settled permanently on this austere territory, and were the first to turn it into a stronghold of ovine agriculture. The trend started by this religious movement was never opposed subsequently, to such an extent that it is skilfully capitalised on by today's tourism industry. In the preindustrial economy, sheep farming had a commercial and nutritional purpose, but it also permitted the development of essential artisanal activities. Medieval parchments, piled high in archives and libraries, are the first obvious trace of this. But leatherwork was, more broadly, a crucial development factor in the economy of the *Ancien Régime*. Sheep farming shaped not just the environment of the *Causse*, but also the economy of its neighbouring valleys – and it provided the conditions for its urbanisation.

In terms of its foundations, the history of the Larzac is ultimately barely different to that of many other French regions. But the beginning of the age of Roquefort constituted an absolutely unique fork in the road. Regional specialisation was a consequence of the 19th century and of the development of the railway system. The diversification of local *terroirs*² and the strengthening of local economic identities shaped French geography from this point on. As part of this development, the blue-

² Translator's Note: The term "*terroir*" originally referred to the environmental factors affecting crops (in particular vines) in any particular region – it has now also expanded to refer to a more nebulous notion of character, which might be that of the region itself, or of its agricultural produce.

veined, soft sheep's milk cheese produced in Roquefort-sur-Soulzon (hence its name) has striking specificities. Matured over a long period of time and relatively easy to preserve, this cheese has allowed producers to add value to astronomical quantities of milk at a very large scale. Roquefort has become a brand that is widely exported and rests on an efficient capitalist economy that has definitively connected the history of the plateau to that of the world. And said plateau has inserted itself so well and quickly into the global economy that it has become a milk importer.

Unfortunately, Artières does not have much to say about the causes of this commercial success, and about its strictly human and social dimension. This question is all the more interesting given that, in the 1970s, the Parisian Amicalist movement played a major role in how the mobilisation of people on the plateau would develop. And in fact, even if most inhabitants of the *Causse* prefer to emigrate to Marseille, the *Causse* is already connected to Paris by intense and ancient bonds. The whole of the Massif Central plays the role of providing a demographic reservoir at the service of the capital³. In the 19th century, *the Aveyron bournats* had a monopoly over the Parisian drinking economy. The Larzac is, in reality, a space that is open to the national and international market through *the Auvergne diaspora* that is so present on the banks of the Seine. The people of the Larzac have lives that extend far beyond the limits of the plateau, something which contributes to shape its local identity and to promote its renown.

The Larzac in Colonial History

The opening up of the plateau to the global economy has a counterpoint: remote, and even isolated, the Larzac is also a land of bringing to heel and iron discipline. Leatherworking women were the first victims of this, through their working conditions. In subsequent periods, people were often locked up on the high plateau. A work camp was set up there during the 19th century. Then the army got involved, first by housing Spanish refugees here, and then by using it to imprison separatist Algerian militants, before – temporarily – using it to house Harkis.

This book thus shows how the plateau's military history turns out to have been above all one of surveillance and discipline. Its isolation is a valued resource. Before

³ Roger Bêteille, *Les Aveyronnais. Essai géographique sur l'espace humain*, Poitiers, Imprimerie de l'Union, 1974, 593 p.

becoming a training area, the plateau was an internment camp. But in the context of the Cold War, and of an army staffed through conscription and defeated in the colonies, the Larzac naturally stirred the appetite of a general staff that was short on land to use for military training. From the interwar period, the state increased its presence in the South of France, mainly in response to the German menace and out of a desire to preserve the military-industrial apparatus. After the end of the Second World War, this enterprise was simultaneously strengthened and the nature of it transformed.

By immersing the army's projects into the modernising context of the 1960s, Artières well explains why the military had no cause to doubt the success of their enterprise, which was part of a global drive for "internal colonisation", as the farmer activists mentioned. The author could doubtless have pointed out more clearly that the state doing the planning is then no longer just the military state. The Parisian hold over southern French regions was displayed in industrial planning, in the development of tourism infrastructures, but also in the protection of nature. Gabrielle Hecht has thus shown how the installation of southern French nuclear sites was designed and defended as a centre of modernisation that would lift isolated rural areas out of their relative underdevelopment⁴. The creation of the Cévennes national park or the implementation of the Racine programme around Montpellier were inspired by a similar logic⁵. The desire to expand the camp, so keenly felt by the military, is the continuation of a centuries-old history of the central – and Parisian – state gradually working its way down into southern France.

Struggle, Invent

In this context, the history of the mobilisation of the Larzac plateau gains more intensity and meaning. It is simply the only successful opposition to one of the 5th Republic's major planning projects. Admittedly, the political will was not as strong in La Cavalerie as in Palavas-les-Flots, in Port-Leucate or in Marcoule, but the protean

⁴ Gabrielle Hecht, *Le rayonnement de la France. Énergie nucléaire et identité nationale après la seconde guerre mondiale*, Paris, La Découverte, 2004, pp. 187-194.

⁵ Guillaume Blanc, *Une histoire environnementale de la nation. Regards croisés sur les parcs nationaux du Canada, d'Éthiopie et de France*, Paris, Publications de la Sorbonne, 2015, 320 p.; Giacomo Parinello et Renaud Bécot, "Regional Planning and the Environmental Impact of Coastal Tourism: The Mission Racine for the Redevelopment of Languedoc-Roussillon's littoral", *Humanities*, 2019, 8(1), 13.

mobilisation of the *Causse* and its allies led to the failure of the state-sponsored project. Through its patience and determination, it brought a formidable administrative machine to a standstill.

Artières follows the progress of this mobilisation step by step, almost day by day, and thus brings a unique and powerful process of socialisation back to life. The power and longevity of the movement were drawn from its being so locally rooted, and the quasi-unanimity of the plateau opposing the plans of the military. For the farmers, the issue above all was to defend their land, their goods, as the tools of their work. But without ever giving up on their initial commitment, the people of the Larzac have transformed this plateau into a sounding board for the causes and struggles of the day. A form of exchange thus appeared between agents who initially had nothing in common: local roots and land on the one hand, and ideals and words on the other. Is it not ultimately this particular cocktail that we find again and again in various oppositions to major infrastructural projects which are out of step with their time before they have even seen the light of day? In Notre-Dame-des-Landes as on the Larzac, it is in fact the state that, by hesitating and agonising over the realisation of its projects, has given its opponents the time they needed to succeed.

In the case of the Larzac, it is this alchemy that has made its history so powerful, and anchored it in people's memories. It made possible, very early on and in a highly structured manner, the formalisation of some of the crucial issues facing our contemporary world. The preservation of a dynamic rural population, connected to the earth both through property and through work, is an essential lever not just of food security and pleasure, but also of the preservation of environments and biodiversity. At a time where the powers of marketing and of the "post-industrial" economy – such as the digital giants and the defenders of veganism – are arguing that cutting ourselves off from nature and from the Earth is the necessary condition for saving the planet, Artières' book provides us with a timely reminder that, on the contrary, strengthening this bond is indeed a necessity of our day. In this sense, *Le peuple du Larzac*, through its immersive style, will delight readers who are interested in the history of the struggle, and, through the perspectives it opens up, will arouse the curiosity of all those who wish to better understand the specificities of the plateau.

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