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The farmers of the associative movement “Terre de liens” in France: reshaping farming representations and identities.

Pibou Elsa¹

Abstract – This article explores the ruptures and continuities in the farmer’s ways of being in a contemporary and activist organization called “Terre de liens”. This uncommon French structure, which buys and leases land to farmers, tries to raise public awareness of agricultural issues and to integrate members who are traditionally far away from land tenure issues. Even if the main purposes of this organization is to fight against land speculation, provide support to the setting-up of farmers and develop sustainable activities, the action of actually and concretely setting-up farmers raises many questions, among which the place and representations of the farmers in this process. This article will study the case of the farmer profile within “Terre de liens”, in order to highlight what being farmer in this structure changes or does not change. This study will try to show how the socio-professional identities of the farmers could be transformed.

TDL FARMERS: A SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACH

The strategies developed by project initiators in agriculture in order to access land tenure face several obstacles, especially when they lack sufficient financial, informational and relational resources. Since the end of World War II, the French government established various policies meant to help farmers bypass these difficulties and preserve the agricultural use of the land (Sencébé et al., 2013). But given the persistent problems and the context of multifaceted crisis that our societies face, some citizens—both farmers and civil society actors—have been involved, since 2003, in the creation of an associative initiative called “Terre de liens” (TDL)—literally “Land of links”.

TDL was initially created as an association aiming at helping farmers set-up their agriculture projects and providing advice and information on the best way to collaborate with other actors in several juridical forms. The association thus reminded the citizens and the regional authorities about land tenure issues and federated the various branches of the association through the French regions, allocating them resources. After this initial phase, TDL developed its own financial tools in order to provide operational help to farmers. These tools, called *La foncière* and *La fondation*, enable TDL to collect funds through public offerings. Thanks to these donations from citizens and private businesses, TDL can able buy land and lease it to new farmers.

In return, the tenants must relinquish part of their independence. Indeed, they have to renounce entirely or partially their desire of becoming land owners. Furthermore, TDL implemented more or less systematized devices to control the proper use of land: a tenancy agreement with specific environmental clauses, an agronomic inventory of the farms, as well as several meetings taking place in the farms between TDL members, volunteers, donors, shareholders and farmers.

From a sociological perspective, I want to understand the reasons that led these farmers to become members of this organization (was it because of opportunities, reflective choices, pragmatism?). I also wish to grasp the impacts and the consequences of their commitment in the organization and their influence on the process of construction and reconstruction of their socio-professional identities. I will investigate the relations, the connections or the breaks between the objectives set by TDL at a broad scale, and the individual representations of the farmers who lease TDL land. Is there a significant gap between the collective ambition and the actual representations that the farmers finally have? For that matter, is it relevant to analyse the situation in terms of vertical or horizontal relationships between the farmers and the organization? Do TDL farmers knowingly waive their freedom of farming as they intend to, as well as their desire to own and to pass down land? What about their autonomy? Does the collective nature of ownership effectively preclude the farmers from developing an intense emotional connection with land (Hervieu, 2005: 95)?

A POLYMORPHIC DATA COLLECTION PLAN

To provide some elements to respond to these questions, my study was built on several modalities of data collection. On the one hand, I organized a quantitative survey to analyse the profiles and the personal evolution of TDL farmers at a national level and I conducted long interactive interviews, with TDL farmers in one region (“Midi-Pyrénées”), to better approach and understand their representations and values. On the other hand, through participant-observation, I attended several meetings at different levels in order to grasp the implications and the real place(s) of the farmers within this structure.

RUPTURES AND BOUNDARIES IN TDL FARMERS POSITIONING

My analytic work shows that the organization highlights paradoxes inherent to the understanding of

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the farmer's place and work. On the one hand, one can observe similar patterns in the personal path of TDL farmers (education, work experience...) and in their practices. Most of them chose the profession, turned themselves into farmers and studied to that end. Furthermore, they developed practices in accordance with TDL's wishes: organic agriculture, often mixed farming, and products commercialised locally. My initial hypothesis—that TDL farmers do not opt for this organization by chance—was thus corroborated. They all chose first a profession before choosing a place where they would eventually practise this occupation. Generally, their farm research was not focused on one single region. This pattern breaks with the family and territorial continuum, which is a typical feature of French peasantry (Mendras, 1976, 1992; Hervieu, 2001; Rémy, 2008). Many farmers collaborated with TDL in order to ensure that they would pass down their farms to farmers who would respect the social and environmental principles supported by the organization. Nevertheless, these remarks should not lead to minimise their sense of belonging to one specific place: their roots and their territorial registration remains an important marker of their identity (Jean, 1997). All these elements suggest the development of the profile of the intermediary farmer (Dufour et al., 2003; Papy et al. 2012)—farmers who get into a territory and whose speeches reveal some "peasant" characteristics, as described by rural sociologists (Mendras, 1992; Rémy, 2008).

On the other hand, I did not expect to observe such diversity in their attempts, in their positioning and in the reasons encouraging them to call on this organization. The diversity that we traditionally find in the French farmers' profile—their values, representations and desires—is no exception and can be found within TDL. For some farmers, it is their militant path and commitment that led them to turn to the organization and not just their desire to settle. As a matter of fact, most of them wanted to access land in order to farm. They generally hoped to access land through a communitarian way and they do not make the property a priority. Actually, they lost the ability of owning their land but they have the right to be involved in the meetings of the organization and they have the possibility to sit on the decision-making structures. Nevertheless, this possibility as well as involvement and opening towards the entire society—such as TDL wants to experiment—did not necessarily correspond to the farmer's expectations. This could be observed in their relations with TDL: some of them seized the opportunity to commit themselves within the structure, to get their voices heard, but a lot of farmers did not want to make these commitments a daily priority. We can observe various degrees of farmer involvement: this depends on their ability to convert their systems of norms, to grasp the societal representations of their profession, and to adopt the linguistic and organizational code of TDL. These elements especially resurface in

conflict situations and in power struggles that such conflicts cause.

Thus, what can be observed in the structure leads to another question — that of the farmer's place. Actually, are we not witnessing the development of new ways of controlling farms, farming and agricultural practices? With this kind of structure, is not it this profession, which is generally described as considering autonomy as an important asset, becoming a new "object class" to quote Pierre Bourdieu (1977)? Finally and contrary to what I expected to witness, the study of TDL and TDL farmers showed that power struggles between farmers and other rural actors do not disappear within this kind of structure, no matter how open it may be, but seem to crystallize on various topics that raise the question of the farmer's place in society, through a new point of view. At this stage of development, the organization that I observed does not seem to recreate new farming modalities but it recreates new types of solidarity and dialogue that are likely to transform the positioning of farmers in the public debate. Moreover, it recreates a situation of test of their desire of autonomy as well as their capacity of being involved in this debate. This kind of structure, the claims it defends and what it reveals are part of an international dynamic that takes the issue of access to land and the practice of farming profession and echo back other social movements or structures such as the MST in Brazil, the Via Campesina movement, the marches of access to land in India.

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