



New farmers, from Standards to Real Life

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Abstract

The evolution of agriculture in Western Europe after World War II can be illustrated by what happened in Brittany. A standardized model of agriculture was imposed to the farmers, in every dimension of their life, both as a worker and as a citizen. They had no choice but to implement technically, build economically, live socially and support politically a “one best way” of farming. Some innovative farmers, refusing to become aliens to their own job and life, collectively invent creative agricultural systems, adapted to local conditions. Nowadays, their proposal, condemned by the organized leaders of agriculture, is progressively contaminating sectors of conventional farmers. This pro-active although non-planned strategy could inspire economists trying to break free from standards : individual and collective creativity can be mixed and relied on, instead of trying to impose a new set of standards.



From the 50s on, agriculture in Western Europe followed a technique spiral, rooted in utilitarian reason and ever-increasing quantities of commodities. Brittany is a very clear example of this route. Considered as poor and backward in the post war era, it created an agricultural revolution inspired by humanistic values, as set by the young Christian farmers¹, whose slogan was “see, appreciate, do”. In the 60s the new agricultural paradigm had reached a point where food self-sufficiency was ensured, and the farmers still numerous. Nevertheless, there was already some evidence that the new slogan was “hear, don’t try to understand and obey”. What could be considered an emancipatory movement as compared to the “eternal order of the fields” froze to a set of standards imposed to the farmers. The way technique got an increasing power at every step of this evolution can be enlightened by the works of Jacques Ellul : as he stated, technique domination became self-reproductive and self-based. But economy, or a particular set of economic standards, became at the same time the external factor that legitimated the technique wave “ you need more and more technique because it’s more efficient ; those small farms must disappear because they can’t compete ; your income depends on your submission to the one and only farmers union”. The keywords, efficiency, competition, income, clearly come from economy. This paper is intended to promote cross-reflections between PEKEA members on the effects of technical and economic standardization on people’s life, in this case farmers, and how it can be overtaken by groups of innovators, linking individual autonomy and collective action. It suggests some similarities between the innovative task PEKEA is implementing in economy and the way chosen by farmers to face standardization of agriculture.

The standardization in agriculture invaded in the 60s every dimension of farming and farmers

Technical standardization

As it had been experimented in industry, engineers and technical staffs defined a “one best way” that soon became a “one and only way” for every product. Breeding became “the” solution for a whole region, and then industrial breeding without any link with agronomy, territory, know-how or soil. Till now, there is no greater compliment for some farmers than to be called “good technicians”. Although some concerns were identified in the 70s (about environment), the self-mastering power of technique led to solve every problem by a new technique, creating a new problem, needing a new technique... Through the extension system (“chambres d’agriculture”, cooperatives, unions) every gap to the dominating standard can be detected and sanctioned. The bank system, held by the same persons and groups, can avoid every dissident voice, just by refusing loans for unconventional projects.

Economic standardization

Implementing technical standards needs codified rules on economic and financial issues. As banks get a prominent role as the keepers of the technical order, they are enabled to impose economic standards in tune with their own objectives. In the French case, the power of the financial system invades the public sphere, as direct subsidies to young farmers² are submitted to the approval of the project by the bank. The technical package designed to fit in the standard walks together with the financial package that makes its expression possible. The “management

¹ JAC : Jeunesse Agricole Catholique

² Dotation au Jeune Agriculteur (DJA)



centres”³ or the dairy control centres⁴ widely spread economic indicators or figures, useful for them in their own rationality, as the new tables of the law. Every interaction between farmers then depends on criteria of up most importance for a bank to get its money back, but sometimes of very weak meaning and usefulness for the farmer. As a result some indicators of meaningful value are left aside, such as the added value (social point of view) or the ratio final income of the farmer / investment (farmer point of view). Finally, the farmer is considered as a mere producer, without any power or reflection on economy. The standard commercial chains only involves agro-food industries or coops. Farmers’ dealing with direct sales is unwanted, as producer’s responsibility is limited to making an increasing quantity of raw product.

Social standardization

A model farm, involving the whole family, is designed by the implicit technical standard. In the 60s it was drawn for two workers : the farmer, with the help of his spouse and of a child when he is ready to succeed. The settlement of young farmers is run by strict rules, such as the minimum area for settlement. This nucleus is mostly related to its agricultural human environment, through local aid groups (to share machinery or to help the family in case of disease). The neighbourhood’s control helps maintaining the conformity of the whole farm to the standard.

Political and cultural standardization

The ever-lasting recalls about the essential utility of a supposed “unity of the farmers”⁵ creates a cultural and political standard defined by the dominating union of farmers. The agenda for everybody is thus designed by a central power, and the “local scale” only has to follow the rule. Every excrescence seems rubbed out in a professional group that is obviously quite heterogeneous. The “peasant world” was famous in France to keep an internal culture, supposed to be united, and strong political links with right wing politicians. It has often been attributed to an ever-lasting way of thinking on the countryside, forgetting that this culture has often changed and is thus a collective construction. Of course, the control is presented as non-political, jus a way to improve technical capacities or solidarity between farmers. But the terms are clearly political, since they define policies “no subsidies for organic farmers”, “no settlement under 20 hectares”, and so on. Political conformity is thus imposed to become or to stay a farmer.

As a result, the situation was a broad gap between what people (including farmers) think a farmer is (independent producer of food – entrepreneur dealing with soil and nature) and what most of them had become (workers trying to follow standards)

- his income depends on his capacity to implement rules that he has not chosen, nor even participated to build ;
- he manages his farm using indicators and criteria that don’t fit his needs, some of them unmeaningful or unuseful ;
- he organizes his family and social life from exogenous technical and economic standards ;
- his acts as a worker and as a citizen are oriented by a complex centralized system.

³ les « centres de gestion »

⁴ les centres de « contrôle laitier »

⁵ “unité du monde paysan”



To face this set of constraints, different from what they consider to be the responsibility of a farmer, some peasants⁶ insist on autonomy and creativity. Organic farmers first, followed by other rural actors, openly aim at breaking the standards framework.

Technical point of view

The methods of organic agriculture or grass-based breeding systems are closely linked to micro-local conditions (weather, soil,...). An evidence is that these farmers always defend systems “linked to the ground”⁷, when political authorities or farmers organizations try to legitimate “out of ground” systems. In localized agriculture, a technological package is no use, since it depends on an internal coherence that can be broken by missing the smallest detail. The “green revolution” model has been adapted in different countries, but has always kept a huge geographical step of application, when new farmers need to invent solutions for some hectares. Most of the time they “do it themselves” a half-breed solution inspired by colleagues that have already successfully tested some techniques. Even constraints are helpful, since for example organic farmers reinvest the banning of chemical products as a weapon to invent new techniques. A recent research, led by the Sustainable Agriculture Network⁸ shows that grass-based dairy systems generate lower pressure on environment and resources than conventional ones : they take between 7 and 9 litres of equivalent oil to produce 100 litres of milk, while conventional use between 12 and 14 litres. But adding lots of partial techniques doesn’t build a consistent system and economy is most of the time the guideline for coherence.

Economic point of view

Technical efficiency can be measured by economic means. It must be stressed that the price balance system is an image of a dominant ideology : for instance, in the example on energy above, the economic difference will grow together with the price of oil. Anyway, in current conditions, the costs for the inputs are about 30 % lower in grass-based systems. Another evidence of their efficiency is that they generate an income per capita equivalent to conventional ones, but in a scheme where public subsidies are low, while the gross income in conventional is almost equal to the subsidies. Anyway, alternative farmers use non-conventional or even non-financial criteria to make economic decisions. They imagine an economic frame that fits to their own objectives. For instance, time for leisure and social activities can be as important as an increase of the income. They need new economic criteria or indicators in order to control the management of their farm, but also to have some common language to organize collective progress with their colleagues. Associations for collective empowering on economic management have been created. They have led to the definition of new economic tools, useful both for individual purposes (optimising work for all kind of objectives) and social progress (exchanges between farmers, evaluation of the role of farming systems in local economy). They had to dare to jump in a risky game, since denying legitimacy to the standards system meant lack of support (from banks or public institutions). Nevertheless, it is known today that un-aided farms⁹ are more successful than the standard ones,

⁶ in French « paysan », etymology related to “pays” = countryside

⁷ in Breton conditions, where breeding is dominant, it means that the food is produced on the farm where the animals are bred

⁸ Réseau Agriculture Durable, see <http://www.agriculture-durable.org/>

⁹ in French « exploitations non aidées » : farmers that didn’t receive public subsidies or low-costs loans



on a quite important criteria of sustainability, existence (= economic subsistence) after 5 years. In trade, alternative farmers are keener to selling their own production, alone (markets, fairs) or collectively (cooperative shops, coops), than conventional ones. They consider their job as a complex one that is in now way limited to production. In other words, they are convinced that power now lies in a favourable position in the trade chain more that in producing. So they act as multifunctional rural actors, and create a new definition of what a farmer is.

Social point of view

Many of the new farmers have gained an experience out of their farm : some come from non-farmers families, many of them worked in different farms or in other jobs. The standards they can refer to are different from the ones that are widely used by conventional farmers. And their diversity makes it impossible to assign some collective resemblance as a standard. Generally, their social habitat is wider than groups of farmers : their previous experience or education have opened their social circle to persons that are still considered unfrequentable in standard agriculture (such as ecologists, consumers organizations,...). In the family life, the spouse is most of the time involved in a job or activities out of farming (it now has become the dominant model also in conventional farming). The Farmers' Voice 2004 Summary Report¹⁰ shows that organic farmers are more likely to work together and with customers (51% any organic vs 40% non-organic). Hosting for youngsters, disabled people, tourists is many times associated with production. But one main goal for alternative farmers is employment : a recent study by the Sustainable Agriculture Network shows that grass-based systems generates 10% of employment more than conventional ones. As a result 39% of organic farmers are content to stay in agriculture, and only 26% of conventional (figure from Farmers' Voice 2004 Summary Report).

Cultural/political point of view

It has been said upwards that the life of many of the innovative farmers has been more complex than just succeeding to the father. They have obviously acquired specific cultural references in this course, different from the standard culture of the united union. The power of the dominant union (FNSEA) has been affected by the birth of an opposite union (Confédération Paysanne), far more attractive for most innovators, at least those who still refer to unions. The Confédération Paysanne strongly contests the ever-lasting protest against liberalism in speech, associated with an ever-lasting support to liberal forces in facts. Members of this union often try to be consistent : their technical, economical and social system aims at illustrating the feasibility of small and medium farms, whose priority is to create "human" jobs. But they deny every "one best way" that could be proposed to achieve this goal.

Despite the evidences that alternative systems can be more efficient technically, economically and socially, this way of escaping the standard is firmly condemned by conventional farmers, and some innovative farmers happen to be put in quarantine by their neighbourhood or the "agricultural system". Their attitude is explained as an idealistic dream that could only be born in the mind of people from town, thus unreal farmers, fleeing their responsibilities. Their practise is considered wrong in every dimension

¹⁰ see <http://statistics.defra.gov.uk/esg/reports/orgfarm.pdf>



- on the technical point of view, it's only "do it yourself" without every "scientific" basis. If they make it, it's the exception that confirms the rule ;
- on the economic point of view, a look on their old tractor is enough to demonstrate that they are almost bankrupt ;
- on the social point of view, you can't rely on people who come so many times to welcome their children when school is over ;
- on the political point of view, it's a shame to see farmers sharing ideas with anglers instead of supporting their colleagues in jail after burning a public building.

The following table tries to summarize the opposition between the standards oriented systems and innovative farming

	<i>Conventional farming</i>	<i>Innovative farming</i>
Technique	Implements standards Relies on outside directives	Creates a home-made system Relies on exchanging know-how with colleagues
Economy	Uses standard criteria built by "the system" (banks, extension, state) Relies on gross product	Uses a set of indicators fit to specific goals, and changing as time passes Relies on value added and share time/income
Social	Follows the features imposed by economic constraints Relies on local groups and distrusts their members as competitors	Adapts the farming system to social objectives and create jobs Relies on chosen colleagues and groups of citizens
Cultural	Follows the rules defined by the "profession" ¹¹ Relies on the "profession" to react to external threats	Inserts reflection about farming in global context Relies on personal and collective creativity

We have here drawn a portrait of 2 ways to be a farmer. They obviously do not show as pure in reality But we can refer to Weber's ideal-type approach to suggest that submission to standards versus autonomy is a quite important factor to understand how innovating farmers and farming appear. Coming back to the Breton situation, this relation to standardization is still quite powerful to explain the current evolution. On the one hand, there is a group of farmers, highly organized and integrated to agro-food industry and banks, whose strategy is to reinforce the existing standards. This strategy is based on an "natural" evolution of the existing paradigm : the bigger / the more competitive, the more integrated to the agro-food chains / the more profitable, the more standard technique / the more efficient. The supposed efficiency of this route relies on an implicit economic standard of globalisation and liberalisation. On the other hand, many

¹¹ idiomatic word for the organized system of union, extension, cooperatives and banks



farmers try to build original local farming systems, based on local conditions. Their route cannot be defined as a standard, even if their goals are often in tune. But this lack of standards make their experience difficult to understand by the man in the street. In a way, they face a situation quite similar to economists trying to rebuild a collective economic knowledge from complex realities instead of using “ready not to think” standards. In the case of farming, it is worth saying that nowadays the most numerous group of farmers is an in-between range of people who can’t burn all their idols (the previous standards) yet but progressively adopt some innovative practise. As time passes, they often come to a formal adoption of their own way. Shouldn’t it inspire PEKEA to grow crops of unconventional thinking to contaminate the neighbour’s fields ?