

Organic pioneers

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Throughout the nineteenth century, ecological currents in the agricultural world promoted organic farming and the defense of small producers. The story of these “ecological farmers” sheds light on the forward-looking contract forged between agriculture and society.

Reviewed: Jean-Philippe Martin, *Des paysans écologistes. Politique agricole, environnement et société depuis les années 1960* (On ecological farmers: Agricultural policy, environment, and society since 1960), Paris, Champ Vallon, 2023, 224 p., 23 €.

Too often, terms used in the political realm rely on all-encompassing generalities: "ecologists," "farmers," "urban populations," "decision-makers," "consumers," and so on. These simplifications often serve established interests and their agents. The principle of representation does, of course, respond to the demands of management and especially joint management: state authorities expect intermediary bodies to represent group interests.

This is the case, for instance, with France's dominant agricultural union, the FNSEA, which has always defended the unity of the agricultural world--though under its own authority. But it is always dangerous to oversimplify reality, squeeze out all nuance, and conceal minority movements and the margins where social innovation is born and new models are tried out. These novelties may be disruptive when one is sailing at cruising speed, but they can be lifesaving when the boat starts to tilt. A good

captain will not have jettisoned these safety canoes on the pretext that doing so would make the boat lighter.

At a time when the global food system has sprung a leak (or is "drying up," if one prefers) and industrial civilization is drowning under the weight of its own destructive powers, it is worth revisiting the history and present condition of the poorly represented and often mistreated constituency known as "ecological farmers."

The ecological critique of industrialization

Such is the goal of Jean-Philippe Martin, a historian and a specialist of the *Confédération paysanne* (or Peasant Confederation, a secondary farmers union), who has, in this book, broadened his interests to all agricultural movements, including dominant unions. Rather than vilifying new demands relating to social justice, health, and the protection of the environment and ways of life, these movements seek to address them by forging new alliances with non-agricultural movements, foreshadowing a new social contract between society and agriculture.

Historically, two movements offered early warnings about industrialization's negative effects on agriculture. The first was organic agriculture and its precursor, biodynamic agriculture, a movement that embraced the anthroposophy of Rudolph Steiner (1861-1925) which, beginning in the 1920s, developed in Germany, Switzerland, England (with the formation of the Social Association in 1945), and France, notably with the creation of *Nature et Progrès* (Nature and Progress) in 1964, which brought together doctors, farmers, and consumers.

This movement emphasized health and ecological issues, yet without ignoring social issues. It consisted of a conservative and even reactionary constituency, on the one hand, and a socialist-leaning constituency, on the other. Out of the later emerged, in France, the *Fédération nationale d'agriculture biologique* (the National Federation of Organic Agriculture, founded in 1978 thanks to the unification of several movements and the recognition granted in 1981 by the French state--notably the Agriculture Minister, Pierre Méhaignerie--which resulted in creation of a French and European label: "*bio*," or "organic").

During the period when industrial agriculture was hegemonic, organic agriculture provide a socioeconomic framework for preserving and developing

alternative agronomic and veterinary practices that have since been "rediscovered," as well as various social and commercial practices, notably a direct connection to "consumer-actors." Indeed, organic farming owes much of its success to the willingness of consumers to pay a little more for their goods, prefiguring a demand made by all unions: the need for genuinely remunerative prices.

It is worth noting that industrial agriculture, which noisily demands higher prices and denounces consumers' inconsistency, does not hesitate to simultaneously denigrate organic agriculture because of its high prices! It is true that, in the former instance, the point is to cover "production costs" (pesticides, fertilizer, equipment, and bank debts), while in the latter, what matters is preserving the environment and health. The difference is immediately apparent. To paraphrase Pascal: truth on this side of agrobusiness, error on the other.

Worker-farmers

The second movement emerged within trade unionism, notably in western France, a region with a strong tradition of mutual technical aid in livestock farming and an area characterized by small, labor-intensive properties, in contrast to the more grain-based northeast.

After the fodder revolution, when grass culture replaced permanent prairies, livestock farming experienced the corn fodder revolution and its offshoots: hybrid seeds, fertilizers, plant protection products, harvesters, silage harvesters, food supplements, and soy beans--in short, an array of imported "factors of production" that deprived producers of their autonomy and made them dependent on the agro-industrial complex while reducing their status to that of subcontractors and casual laborers. Contrary to appearances, they increasingly resembled the proletariat.

It was in reaction to these trends that, in the technical domain, organizations like CEDAPA were formed. CEDAPA was influenced by André Pochon, the apostle of the white clover. At the same time, a Marxist-inspired critique emerged that emphasized workers' rather than farmers' rights. This movement was led by Bernard Lambert, who was politically close to the self-management movement before being elected to parliament as a socialist in 1981.

These movements demanded that agriculture be "more economical and autonomous," to quote the title of the 1978 report by Jacques Poly, who at the time was director of the Institut national de recherche agronomique (National Institute of Agronomic Research, or INRA). These various movements came together in 1987 to form the Peasant Confederation, which gave the term "peasant" a political meaning and brought it into public discourse as an alternative to the farmer model promoted by the FNSEA. A more discreet participant in this trend was the MODEF, tied to the Communist Party.

Farmers encounter ecology

While the 1980s largely evaded ecological questions, the latter inevitably resurfaced in the 1990s due to mad cow disease, the rise of genetically modified organisms, the blue-green algae problem, and climate chaos.

Economical and autonomous methods were far less harmful to the environment. Yet the rapprochement between the movement's social agenda and its ecological concerns--which were often perceived as "urban"--would take some time. By the late 1970s, following the 1974 presidential campaign of René Dumont, an agronomist who renounced industrialism, Lambert recognized the importance of addressing ecological issues, yet the social critique advanced by the movement was embraced by many small producers who, because they lacked land, intensified industrial production, notably through pig and poultry farming. Ecological questions thus sowed discord within the Peasant Confederation. It gradually joined the ecological movement by promoting agroecology, a blend of ecological and social concerns.

Ecological concerns also spread to the dominant union, whose members transitioned to organic farming. This was true of Dominique Chardon, who assumed a national role. The FNSEA lost some of its representative weight with the emergence of a new union, Coordination rurale (Rural Coordination), in 1991. Even as it tried to embrace organic agriculture, particularly in the professional organizations it controlled, the FNSEA prioritized a different approach: "reasoned" agriculture. But was this just an attempt to draw attention away from other initiatives?

City mice vs. country mice

These efforts were quickly threatened by two new concerns: the return of large predators, particularly wolves and bears (either due to land abandonment or because they were deliberately reintroduced), and reduced consumption of animal products (the flexitarian/vegetarian/vegan triptych).

These two trends proved problematic as a significant number of "peasants" had survived thanks to extensive livestock farming in pasturelands that were not conducive to industrialization. Veganism and large predators were thus threats to extensive livestock farming, which depended on alpine meadows and the farmers who practice it.

The controversy revealed the tensions inherent in the quest for an ecological society, which makes it necessary to address multiple and often contradictory priorities: biodiversity, naturalness, energy, soil protection, water resources, and landscapes. Such contradictions can only be resolved through compromise. These tensions revived a narrative opposing "city mice"--presumed to be "uprooted ecologists"--and "country mice"--presumed to be "rooted locals." Though this conflict can often be cruel, it does not inherently exclude the possibility of compromise.

One trend that mirrors society at large is the growing role of women in the profession. This development is essential to the enormous challenge of generational renewal--a genuine headache, at a time when farms are so capitalized that individual inheritance has become impossible.

Three solutions remain: dismantling these farms, as the Peasant Confederation recommends; the mutualization of their capital and perhaps their labor, as advocated by Terre de Liens (Land of Connections); and embracing the limited liability company model and firm-based agriculture, as the FNSEA has done in practice since 1960. The final choice will depend on which public policies are implemented.

No manifest destiny

Jean-Philippe Martin offers a detailed account of the history and contemporary challenges faced by ecological farmers in clear, accessible, and jargon-free language.

His book is a perfect example of successful popularization. Though short on jargon, it is less so on acronyms: some familiarity with the topic will make it easier to fully appreciate this original essay.

Martin's goal is to show the existence of early ecological movements in the agricultural world and to argue that "ecological farmers made themselves, even if they enjoyed the support of ecological organizations and urban consumers who bought organic and local produce and embraced community-supported agriculture."

Yet this claim is contradictory: by "themselves," yet "enjoy[ing] ... support." Presumably Martin wants to challenge the sectarian strategy of farmers in the agro-industrial complex, who see industrial agriculture as the "natural" approach and regard ecological concerns as the alien fancies of city-dwellers and "neo-rural" populations. While Martin's concerns are understandable, we do not completely agree with his defensive strategy, which seeks to "agriculturalize" ecology.

After all, the industrialization of agriculture was not an endogenous process. How often has the agriculture world not justified itself by declaring: "we were told to produce"? But who made this request, which admits that industrialization was a response to external stimuli? No more than ecological agriculture, industrial agriculture is not the countryside's manifest destiny. In any case, farming is an activity that participates in society and necessarily results from socioeconomic alliances between its practitioners and other social forces.

The virtue of ecologist farmers is less their indigenusness--that they "made themselves"--than the fact that they paved the way towards a new contract between agriculture and society. In this sense, they did not "enjoy" support: they negotiated with urban movements, with whom they shared values and goals, the terms of a mutually beneficial exchange that they hoped would one day become the norm. This interpretive reservation aside, the book's many qualities deserve to be discovered by a wide readership.

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