



Staging agriculture during on-farm markets: How does French farmers' rationality influence their representation of rurality?

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1. Introduction

In modern societies, agriculture holds a unique and complex place in collective imaginary. Either in its nurturing role, responsible for preserving century-old traditions and tending bucolic landscapes, or being blamed for damaging the environment and being in thrall to agribusiness corporations, agriculture is alternately venerated or rejected (Hervieu and Purseigle, 2008; Nicourt, 2013; Caquot-Baggett and Annes, 2016). In this context, farmers often express a feeling of disempowerment when it comes to dealing with these imaginary constructs which they see as assigned to them externally. In fact, in the late 1970s, in France, Bourdieu was already theorizing about the difficulty the farm population had in shaping its identity and its image for the rest of society (Bourdieu, 1977). He famously stated that the farm population can be viewed as an “objectified social class,” which is “a social class dispossessed of its power to define its own identity” (p.3). In this article, we want to explore the extent to which farmers can impact public perception of rural life and agriculture through agritourism. Over recent years, farms have been increasingly diversifying into tourism. In 2010, 12% of French farms (around 60,000) had diversified their activity into processing food, offering accommodation, food services, or leisure activities (Lerbourg, 2013). As an “encounter” between farmers and tourists, agritourism could empower farmers to shape and control their image, and get beyond mere cultural conventions. Indeed, agritourism might be the opportunity for farmers to engage with the social debate about agriculture and rurality. In this article, our intent is to explore the numerous ways in which farmers represent agriculture and rural life, according to their different motivations and rationales.

Recently, Silva and Prista (2016) showed that “rural tourism echoes two societal trends ... the rise of a lifestyle-led and leisure-oriented society, and the widespread mobilization of tourism as a strategy for rural development (...)” (p.183). Likewise, we see agritourism as a response to two trends: the need for farmers to diversify their activities through new strategies and the French population's yearning for the countryside, nature and tradition (Urbain, 2002). Agritourism might thus reconcile the different users of the French countryside. Agritourism activities consist essentially in the commodification of socio-cultural

goods relating to farming for tourists' consumption (Jackson, 1999). Its development coincides with the transition towards multifunctional agriculture, where production objectives combine with those of protecting the environment, promoting cultural heritage and fostering the social fabric (Flanigan et al., 2014). It also introduces tourists to agriculture (Dubois and Schmitz, 2015) through social interaction between tourists and farmers. By social interaction, we mean the process whereby two individuals enter a relation, then act and react on the basis of perceived behaviours and information. These interactions also produce meaning, create new behaviours (Goffman, 1956) and can be verbal or non-verbal. Interactions occurring in the field of agritourism may thus be seen “as a series of staged events and spaces, as an array of performative techniques and dispositions” (Edensor, 2001:60). Their ultimate objective is to produce a convincing performance and to convey the intended meaning. Here, we also follow Edensor's approach to performance, which he sees as being “both deliberately devised and habitual or “an interweaving of conscious and unaware modalities, part of the flow of ongoing existence” (2006:485). By giving an opportunity to the non-farm population to come and consume the countryside, to rest and relax in a natural environment, agritourism reflects the shift in usage from food production to recreation and consumption (Brandth and Haugen, 2011). It also enables farmers to be part of this transition, creating a context for dialogue, knowledge-sharing and for participating in the construction of a discourse on rurality.

The literature on agritourism shows that the supply of activities is quite diverse (Dubois and Schmitz, 2015; Phillip et al., 2010). These range from enjoying a meal and possibly staying overnight, to participating in farm activities and picking your own vegetables, or touring the farm and having a party in an old renovated barn (Arroyo et al., 2013). Agritourism activities can also be seen as recreation-oriented, educational-oriented, or both. In this paper, we focus on farmers' “performances” during on-farm markets of rural and agricultural matters. Over the past few years, these markets have been increasing in number (Banos and Candau, 2014). They may be organized by individual farmers or groups, and be under the supervision of an official organization (agricultural extension services) or not. They usually take place during spring and summer time, but some go on all year around.

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During these on-farm markets, tourists/guests are invited to purchase food and visit the farm. On most occasions, they are encouraged to bring a picnic basket and chairs so they can have a picnic on the farm, eating goods purchased directly from farmers. Usually, entertainment is provided: music, horse-rides, farm tours, etc. Tourists are encouraged to walk around the farm, talk to farmers, relax and enjoy the countryside. We believe on-farm markets are particularly suitable to explore our research questions, since they provide a space for re-imagining agriculture. Like farmers' markets, they constitute “a site of exchange, but also (...) a venue for negotiated meaning in the local food landscape” (Smithers et al., 2008). They bring different people, farmers and non-farmers, rural and urban dwellers, to a particular place, at a given time. Farmers thus have the opportunity to stage and choreograph both agriculture and their own image.

In this paper, our focus is on discourses, practices and behaviours produced during these on-farm markets. We want to assess whether farmers stage the farm in a way that embodies the rural idyll or, on the contrary, give a more authentic picture of farm life. Although several studies in rural geography or sociology have started to explore this question (Brandth and Haugen, 2014; Wright and Annes, 2014), one empirical question that remains largely unexplored is how farmers' motivations and rationalities shape the image presented to tourists. If, as pointed out earlier, farmers and food production coexist within the rural space with other populations and other uses of the countryside (recreation, leisure, etc.), different forms of social organization also coexist within the farming population itself (Hervieu and Purseigle, 2015). Homogeneity no longer applies when describing this population. Today, a range of different life trajectories lead into the profession, notably individuals with no farm background, and women now represent 30% of all farm operators. Dissimilarities in the way farmers do their job (from conventional to organic agriculture, including hybrid models) and meaning they give to their activities (with motivations ranging from the sole production of food to preserving local knowledge and know-how, or protecting the environment, or developing the social fabric in rural areas) have led several French sociologists to theorize about this wide, and sometimes contradictory, array of professional identities (Hervieu and Purseigle, 2015; Lemery, 2003; Nicourt, 2013). Researchers exploring farmers' motivations for engaging in farm tourism have found various different reasons (Barbieri, 2009; McGehee et al., 2007; Ollenburg and Buckley, 2007). Besides economic ones (diversifying sources of farm revenue), there are other rationales, such as a desire to educate consumers about agriculture, to create social bonds and prevent isolation, or to preserve cultural heritage and traditions. Therefore, our hypothesis is that the various ways of engaging with agritourism may shape differently how agriculture is put on show. Put simply, farmers could have dissimilar modes of staging agriculture, and indeed their farm and/or their appearance, depending on the rationale at work. These will be visible in the way cultural conventions regarding agriculture and rural life are dealt with. The staging of agriculture, a central component of farm tourism, is thus unlikely to be homogeneous, with widely different, possibly contradictory approaches and rationalities generating different images. This study is thus a contribution to the general literature on agriculture and representations, focusing on the farmers' role in shaping the latter, and providing a better theoretical understanding of agritourism's role in improving relations or in reinforcing forms of distinction and differentiation, between farmers and non-farmers.

2. Literature review

French farmers are today a demographic and professional minority within their own working space. From holding a position of authority, French farmers have become an “othered” rural group. Over the last century, the farming population has steadily declined. Today less than 3% of the working population works in agriculture (Agreste, 2011) and 80% of the French population is considered urban (INSEE, 2011).

Farmers constitute a demographic minority in France generally but also within their own working space. For just over two decades now, rural France has been gaining population, but not to the advantage of farmers (Gilbert, 2010). The newcomers, who are mostly involved in service jobs or retirees (Morin, 2002/12), add to the complexity and heterogeneity of a now multi-dimensional/purpose rural space (Perrier-Cornet, 2002) where different individuals (Gilbert, 2010) do not necessarily share the same ideas of what rural space should be. For instance, if farmers underline the productive function of the countryside, other social groups focus more on its recreational or residential uses (Banos and Candau, 2014). These different perceptions and usages can generate conflicts and misunderstandings between the farming and the non-farming populations, and hamper the sustainable development of the countryside. It is here that agritourism might offer ways to build bridges between these two populations and to overcome misunderstandings.

In this section, we discuss cultural representations of the rural and their role as a driving force in the agritourism experience (Bell, 2006; Bessière, 2000; Silva and Prista, 2016). We see agritourism as providing a way for farmers both to challenge dominant (and stereotypical) representations of the rural and to offer a more “authentic” picture of rural life. In addition, we also explore farmers' motivations and rationalities for engaging in tourism. We believe that depending on their rationality in doing so, they are likely to stage agriculture differently.

2.1. Cultural representations and agritourism

Regarding tourism in general or agritourism in particular, Bessière (2000) has argued that socially and culturally constructed images and representations of an “elsewhere” hold a key role in explaining tourists' desire to visit rural areas. In fact, the quest for new horizons, offering a break with the routine of daily life, is clearly a source of motivation for tourists. Analysing tourists' imaginative constructs of rural tourism, Bessière (2000) identified three different representations of the countryside existing in French collective imagination: “the therapeutic and purifying countryside” presenting rural space as a lost Paradise providing comfort and curing the soul and the body; “the socializing countryside”, which underlines the existence of particular forms of social relations based on conviviality and solidarity; and “the nostalgic countryside,” keeper of the traditions and values of an idealized past. If, in collective consciousness, this idealisation might explain what motivates tourists' journey to a reassuring (but nonetheless fantasized) place, it also raises questions. In fact, several authors have argued that this idealisation of the rural (or ‘rural idyll’) offers a set of images and representations which hide the complexity of contemporary rural areas by erasing diversity, simplifying existing power relations and omitting potential tensions, between rural dwellers (Cloke, 1997; Hinrichs, 1996; Little, 1999).

In addition, in collective imagination, the farm population holds a special place within this idealized and fantasized rural space. Farmers and the rural are conflated. The farming population represents “a minority still cultivating the land and often idolized as the evident guardian of nature¹” (Lowenthal, 1996). In the French context, as a social group, farmers represent a fundamental cultural reference, witnesses to the past, who, in a fast moving modern society, have become the keepers of our roots and national identity (Bages and Rieu, 1986; Frémont, 1997; Reed Danahay, 2002). However, other authors suggest that historically, two conflicting images persist in cultural discourse—idealizing and marginalizing ones (Rogers, 1987, 2000). In their analysis of the popular reality TV program “Love is in the Field,” Caquot-Baggett and Annes (2016) showed that both discourses still

¹ Authors' translation (“une minorité qui cultive encore la terre [et qui] est souvent adulée comme gardienne naturelle de la nature”).

² Authors' translation (“L'Amour est dans le pré”).

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