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The Work of Agricultural Advisers: Between Technical Instruction and Political Mobilisation (1950-1990)[☆]

Sylvain Brunier

Centre de sociologie des organisations (CSO), UMR 7116 CNRS et Sciences Po, 19, rue Amélie, 75007 Paris, France

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Abstract

Drawing on a socio-historical analysis of the work of agricultural advisers, this article explores the conduct of modernisation policy following the Second World War. The advisers played a crucial role in this, by recommending new methods of production and encouraging farmers to mobilise as a group. They relied on technical know-how as well as their practical knowledge of the agricultural milieu. Above all, they showed huge ingenuity in demonstrating their devotion to their farmer clients, without evading the framework set by their employers. These capacities for adaptation so essential to their profession were initially highly valued. Then, from the 1970s onwards, they attracted criticism for their failure to conform to the new imperatives of bureaucratisation, specialisation and commercialisation in agricultural advice.

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The big modernisation drive in post-World War II French agriculture strikes us today for the scale and rapidity of the social and economic transformations that affected an entire section of the population, without – at least until the 1970s – giving rise to structured forms of political opposition.¹ Economists have clearly shown how the rapid spread of the new production techniques led to a spectacular increase in outputs and a no less spectacular reduction in the number

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E-mail address: sylvain.brunier@sciencespo.fr

¹ The myth of trade union unity upheld by the FNSEA (national farmers union) and the chambers of agriculture only began to be challenged in the late 1960s (Coulomb and Nallet, 1972; Martin, 2005), although discordant voices were already making themselves heard in the 1950s (Pessis et al., 2013).

of farmers, but have so far failed to account for the determination of the actors to engage on this path.² Unless farmers are considered to have supported the modernising programme spontaneously and en masse out of moral virtue alone or through the clear sightedness of their union leaders, which is the idea that underlies the “silent revolution” thesis,³ the radical intensification in agricultural production methods and the disruption of the peasant way of life raise the question of the efficacy of the public policies directed towards this outcome. A socio-historical analysis of the work of agricultural advisers offers a way to examine the implementation of the policies of so-called agricultural extension and then of agricultural development, and to identify the specific ways in which they won the support of farmers.

At a more general level, we propose to cast light on the deployment of a non-commercial service relationship, a condition for the implementation of an ambitious modernisation policy, negotiated and then jointly managed by the state and by the professional farming organisations, which sought to transform the productive apparatus and the social structures of the agricultural world. To do this, we need to take into account the systems in which the service took shape and spread (Dubuisson-Quellier, 1999), and to spotlight the co-produced nature of the advisory relationship, by emphasising the fact that the service could not have existed if the two terms of the relationship – the advisers on one side and the farmers on the other – had been unable to collaborate (Brandt et Gadrey, 1994). To analyse the work of the agricultural advisers we need to describe their interactions with farmers and place those interactions within the context of post-war agricultural policy, in other words to take into account the fact that the work of the advisers was a political instrument whose meaning was a continuous bone of contention between the different parties. Respect for the “principle of symmetry” in reality requires the recognition of a double symmetry (Bloor, 1976). The advisers influenced the behaviour of the farmers by applying frameworks imposed by political leaders. However, this interplay of influence also worked in reverse: the advisers played a key role in developing agricultural policy, and the meaning they assigned to their activity reflected the obligations that the farmers placed on them.

Officially recognised in 1959, the profession of agricultural adviser has been the subject of extensive research, essentially within INRA, since the 1970s (Rémy, 2006a). Some later studies based on forms of action-research formalised the need for the advisory relationship to be co-constructed, positing this co-construction as a methodological and ethical imperative in order to prevent any kind of power play by technicians over farmers (Darré, 1978; Lémery, 1991).⁴ The analyses that focus on the period when this profession was created were structured around the frequently cited opposition between a “top-down extension” conceived by the Agriculture Ministry’s departments in the first half of the 20th century, and a “bottom-up extension”, proceeding from local farmer groups and advocated by the professional farming organisations at the time of

² Although coming from opposite directions, writings of both Marxist (Gervais et al., 1977; Servolin, 1972) and neo-classical (Chombart de Lauwe, 1963; Bergmann, 1972) inspiration agree on this point. The average size of farms rose from 14.4 ha in 1955 to almost 25 ha in the early 1980s. The number of farms larger than ten hectares, on the other hand, remained relatively stable for almost a century: 847,000 in 1882, 849,000 in 1977. The implementation of the modernisation plan led to the almost total eradication of the smallest farms and to a drastic reduction in the number of farmworkers, which fell by a factor of 10 between 1954 and 1981 (Coulomb, 1985).

³ The expression was made popular in the book by Michel Debatisse (1964), president of the CNJA (national young farmers centre) then of the FNSEA, and the main interlocutor of the Debré government at the time of the big agricultural framework acts of 1960 and 1962 (Lynch, 2005).

⁴ The setting up of GERDAL (group for experiment and research on local agricultural development) by Jean-Pierre Darré was part of this process. Bruno Lémery, Claude Compagnone *et alii* have continued this approach to the present day (Compagnone et al., 2009).

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