



Towards an agroecology of knowledges: Recognition, cognitive justice and farmers' autonomy in France



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ABSTRACT

Most collective agroecological initiatives in Europe today are built around a plurality of knowledge systems. Going beyond the well-documented instrumental goals of this knowledge-plurality, this paper highlights another, perhaps less obvious objective: the pursuit of recognition and cognitive justice.

The subordination of alternative farming practices, such as agroecology, to industrial high-input farming leads to the misrecognition of peasant communities. Challenging industrial agriculture hence requires both equality between different forms of doing farming and an active engagement with different ways of knowing farming. Cognitive justice, a concept originating in decolonial thought, encompasses not only the right of different practices to co-exist, but entails an active engagement across their knowledge-systems.

Using an example of participatory maize breeding in France, the paper illustrates how peasant movements in Europe organize an 'agroecology of knowledges', a counter-hegemonic engagement with modern agronomic science, through the recovery and co-production of situational, environment-specific knowledge, and the reskilling of farmers. It aims not only at improving agricultural science, but also at rebuilding collective identities and reclaiming autonomy.

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He who has two hectares, three goats and two sheep is not a farmer

— Xavier Beulin, president of the French National Federation of Agricultural Holders' Unions (FNSEA), in *Le Monde*, 7 April 2014.

1. Introduction

Agroecology is said to be a knowledge-intensive—as opposed to input-intensive—agricultural practice (Altieri and Nicholls, 2012; De Schutter, 2010). Agroecological methods are built around a plurality of knowledge systems. At farm-level, this translates into the re-skilling of farmers, who not only combine modern science and local knowledge, but (re)generate new, situated knowledge. At group level, knowledge plurality emerges through specific governance arrangements which allow for collective learning processes and co-creation of knowledge. Examples such as Participatory Breeding (PB), Participatory Varietal Selection (PVS), or Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS) rely on negotiated, environment-specific knowledge, and peer-based quality checks. They develop

a new agriculture fuelled by reflexive input of both formal and non-formal agricultural, ecological and social knowledge.

While the practical goal of this knowledge-intensity is rather straightforward — i.e. replacing exogenous inputs with better understanding of agriculture as a sustainable ecosystem, including socio-economic variables (Gliessman, 2007) — this paper highlights another, perhaps less obvious underlying objective: the pursuit of recognition and cognitive justice.

The re-emergence of peasant farming in Europe (van der Ploeg, 2008) can be understood as a double struggle for recognition. The first one is a struggle against the institutionalized subordination of alternative practices, such as agroecology, to industrial agriculture. Remedying this requires a form of status recognition in which different farming practices can co-exist.

Status equality, however, may be insufficient to challenge industrial agriculture, a sector characterized by the dominance of modern science. The second struggle for recognition, hence, is one for cognitive justice. Cognitive justice is a notion originating in decolonial thought. It encompasses not only the right of different practices to co-exist, but entails an active engagement across their knowledge-systems (Visvanathan, 2005; Santos, 2007). This paper argues that the pursuit of cognitive justice, through its inherently counter-hegemonic nature, serves an objective of 're-

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peasantization' (van der Ploeg, 2008): a constant struggle for autonomy based on a combination of the 'endogenous potential of agriculture' (Guzmán and Martínez-Alier, 2006: 472) and the resistance against the neoliberalization of the agri-food system (Stock et al., 2014).

The paper begins by introducing the reader to the concepts of (justice as) recognition and cognitive justice, drawing on critical theory and decolonial thought. It then considers the relevance of these concepts for the European context, showing how European peasants are culturally and cognitively misrecognized. Through an example of a collective agrobiodiversity governance initiative in France, the paper proposes a new concept, termed the agroecology of knowledges,¹ to further theorize and understand the role of knowledge in the recognition of peasant farmers and communities. The importance of this approach for a more sustainable agriculture is discussed in light of existing theoretical and empirical approaches in the concluding section.

2. Recognition and cognitive justice

While not necessarily wrapped in an explicit justice discourse, the reliance on knowledge plurality in peasant farming can be understood as a struggle for recognition. For Nancy Fraser, misrecognition occurs through a hierarchization of cultural values, in law or in practice (Fraser and Honneth, 2003). This hierarchization makes some people and/or communities 'inferior, excluded, wholly other, or simply invisible' (Fraser, 2000: 113), keeping them from participating in social interaction on equal footing with others. It thus takes the form of an institutionalized social subordination, which can only be challenged through 'affirmative recognition of difference' (Fraser, 2000: 116).

Institutionalized misrecognition goes hand in hand with two other forms of injustice: economic maldistribution and political misrepresentation (Fraser, 1995, 2005). Injustices hence arise out of a combination of economic exploitation, cultural subordination, and political inequality (Fraser and Honneth, 2003; Olson, 2008). These three factors combined prevent the existence of 'participation-parity', i.e. 'social arrangements that permit all to participate as peers in social life' (Fraser, 2005, 2009: 60).

Recognition, hence, would provide a space for cultural diversity to gain societal acceptance. However, while contemporary political claim-making increasingly focuses on the misrecognition of identity, gender, race, religion and/or culture (Fraser and Honneth, 2003), it rarely includes knowledge-based misrecognition. Modern science often remains the only form of knowledge to be seen as valid and exact (Santos, 2014). Moreover, status equality may not be enough in a socio-economic sector (i.e. agriculture) characterized by the dominance of modern agronomic science. Beyond the existence of alternative discourses and practices, there is a need for 'an alternative thinking of alternatives' (Santos, 2014: 42).

Fraser herself acknowledges that struggles for recognition are exacerbated in today's 'knowledge society' (Fraser, 2001), but does not clearly address the issue of dominant conceptions of knowledge. If cultural subordination is largely influenced by the knowledge one possesses and/or uses, what is required is 'equality between different ways of knowing the world' (Martin et al., 2013: 123; my emphasis). Like cultural misrecognition, cognitive injustice is an 'institutionalized relation of social subordination' (Fraser, 2000: 113). Unlike cultural misrecognition, however, it is not characterized only by the devaluation of group-specific identity or socio-cultural status, but by the marginalization of one's relation to

the world in the name of rigor, rationality, effectiveness or efficiency. Decolonial theorists see cognitive injustice as the consequence of what Santos et al. (2007) call the 'coloniality of knowledge': the hegemonic conception of modern science. It implies that access to scientific knowledge is unequally distributed in society and thus serves the interests of dominant actors (Santos, 2014).

Cognitive justice encompasses not only the right of different practices to co-exist (which is a necessary condition nevertheless), but entails an active engagement across their knowledge-systems (Visvanathan, 2005, 2009). In practice, cognitive justice is given shape through an 'ecology of knowledges': an active dialogue between different forms of knowledges and practices, both scientific and nonscientific (Santos, 2014). It involves rethinking the way in which knowledge emerges in modern science, where one side produces and the other passively consumes. It challenges the 'monocultures of the mind' (Shiva, 1993) and calls out the external limits of modern science, i.e. dimensions rendered invisible by reductionist epistemologies (Santos, 2007, 2014).

Following Santos (2014), an ecology of knowledges emerges out of a combination of two factors, both of which are present in the context of European agriculture: the presence of significant political resistance to capitalism, and the confrontation between radically different world views, 'so much that they cannot be brought together under the umbrella of a single totalizing alternative' (Santos, 2014: 192).

3. Cognitive justice and European agriculture

Peasant farmers in Europe face a double form of misrecognition. First, today's agriculture is characterized by the subordination of the alternative practices they use to industrial high-input farming. The 'alternative' and 'industrial' models are simplified ideal types, and many agricultural practices are likely to lie somewhere in between or combine elements from both models. Yet one can observe that characteristics of the industrial model – high external-input, biotechnology, labor specialization and output maximization – continue to gain prominence at the expense of emerging alternative practices, such as agroecology.

Emerging in the 1930s, the meaning of agroecology has evolved over time, and has been defined as a scientific discipline, a social movement and an agricultural practice (Wezel et al., 2009). Agroecology "provides the basic ecological principles for how to study, design and manage agroecosystems that are both productive and natural resource conserving, and that are also culturally sensitive, socially just and economically viable" (Altieri, 2002: 7). In the 1990s, the concept expanded to include social movements fighting for the transformation of the whole food system (Wezel et al., 2009) and has been popularized by global farming movements such as *La Via Campesina*.

Proponents of agroecology note that, despite a growing evidence-base on its effectiveness, it is still considered a *marginal* form of agriculture, and thus replaced by conventional solutions (Altieri and Nicholls, 2012). This may be explained by the perceived yield potential of industrial farming (Tilman et al., 2002), by lock-in mechanisms (Vanloqueren and Baret, 2009; Stassart and Jamar 2008) or by path dependency (Stassart and Jamar 2008). Looking at agriculture through a justice-as-recognition lens offers another complementary explanation. The sustained importance of high-input agriculture may also be explained by the fact that the industry, the world vision it represents, and the knowledge it uses have gradually been imposed as the dominant Western agricultural narrative (Thompson and Scoones, 2009). Contemporary European agriculture is the result of historical constructions of cultural discourse, ideas and ideology formed by dominant actors (Potter

¹ This term freely paraphrases Boaventura de Sousa Santos' concept of "ecology of knowledges", discussed further below.

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