



Detaching from agriculture? Field-crop specialization as a challenge to family farming in northern Côte d'Or, France



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A B S T R A C T

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This article examines the causes and experience of field-crop specialization and its consequences for family farms. First of all, the article reviews the academic literature on family farming and shows how, far from hindering capitalist development, family farming has been a useful tool for public policy encouraging such development. It then proposes to look at family farming as a model which aggregates a set of social norms and practices which may to some extent be disconnected. The article is based on a qualitative case study carried out in northern Côte d'Or, France. It shows that in this area field-crop specialization results from a withdrawal of dairy, thus triggering a process of detachment with regard to certain characteristics of family farming. This initial disconnection is followed by other recombinations of links, creating the opportunity for several possible ways forward. Finally, the article analyzes the effects of specialization on farming in partnerships and farm management, emphasizing the decoupling of business from household, and management from field work.

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1. Introduction

The 2010 French agricultural census confirmed several long-term trends in domestic agriculture: like elsewhere (Ilbery and Bowler, 1998; Mather, 1992; Pritchard and McManus, 2000), the number of farms is steadily declining, and remaining farms are becoming larger and more specialized. France now has fewer than 500,000 professional farms, with an average size of 74 ha (Agreste, 2011-a).¹ One possible interpretation of these trends is that they correspond to global changes and to the emergence of a neoliberal food regime (Friedmann and McMichael, 1989; Friedmann, 1992; McMichael, 2005) based on free international trade and biotechnology (Burch and Lawrence, 2009; Pechlaner and Otero, 2008). The internationalization and liberalization of agricultural markets are said to be forcing farmers to adapt to a more competitive global environment by lowering production costs – a process which entails a shift to larger and more specialized farms (McMichael, 2009).

According to this rationale, the process of specialization and expansion mainly consists in adjusting to global economic constraints (Friedmann, 1993: 34; McMichael, 2009; Pechlaner and Otero, 2008). Based on a case-study of specialized field-crop farming in the east of France, this article aims to nuance this approach by showing that farm specialization is not only a response to external economic pressure, but also relates to a series of internal factors, such as workload, family structure and farm management. If one takes these elements into account, it is possible to reveal a variety of experiences and trajectories, a new diversification in farming models and new types of organization (in terms of work, management and partnerships on farms) behind the global shift towards larger and specialized farms. The process of specialization thus raises issues not only in relation to the economic performance of farms, but also with regard to an entire model of agricultural development, based on family farming (Marsden, 1984; Moulin, 1991).² Instead of seeing the reproduction or disappearance of farming models as being simply linked to a global food regime (McMichael, 2005, 2009), we need to look at farm specialization as

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¹ Agreste is the statistical service of the French Ministry of Agriculture. See Agreste's Website: <http://www.agreste.agriculture.gouv.fr/>. In France, professional farming is defined by two criteria (Rattin, 2007): on the one hand an economic size greater than 8 European Size Units (statistical unit of measurement corresponding to approximately 1.5 ha of wheat) and on the other hand a quantity of work greater than 0.75 Annual Work Units (statistical unit of measurement corresponding to one person's full-time work over a period of one year, i.e. approximately 1880 h).

² The issue then is not to know how farmers locally adapt to global constraints, but to assess how farm transformations in a particular context raise some general issues about farm work, management, and relations between business and home that may be relevant in other contexts, even if they result in totally different outcomes. In other words, I take farm specialization not as a variable, but as an indicator of broader farm reconfigurations.

a process which affects various aspects of agriculture and which incrementally transforms family farms. Rather than the disappearance or reproduction of family farming, the relevant issue raised by specialization is the potential separation of elements usually joined together in family farming (Cheshire et al., 2013; Johnsen, 2004; Pritchard et al., 2007).

In this article I study the case of field-crop producers, to gain an insight into the tensions felt by the family-owned farm model today.³ I first review the debates on family farming in the academic literature, describe the major features of post-war rural modernization in France, and propose an incremental and process-based approach to changes in farming models, rather than an approach based on global reproduction. I then examine the conditions under which farmers are led to specialize in field crops, and show that this specialization corresponds to a withdrawal of dairy. I analyze the reconfigurations that this withdrawal entails, in particular in the organization of work and the balance between work and non-work (leisure, family life, etc.). I then show how the innovations brought about by grain specialization broaden the scope of possibilities for farmers, enabling them to construct new forms of partnership and to develop entrepreneurial methods of farm management. Finally, I show that these transformations raise issues about the modernized figure of the farmer, relying on the juxtaposition between work space, residence and family (Cf. Johnsen, 2004).

2. The persistence of family farming in a capitalist environment

The issue of family farming in modern agriculture has been the subject of extensive debate among scholars (Machum, 2005; Magnan, 2012; Mooney, 1982; Pritchard et al., 2007; Reinhardt and Bartlett, 1989). In particular, these debates relate to the contributions made by Marxist approaches, which considerably renewed north-American rural sociology at the end of the 1970s (Buttel et al., 1990; Buttel, 2001). The continued persistence of family farming throughout the 20th century – characterized by family ownership, family work and the coupling of business and household (Gasson and Errington, 1993) – constituted a challenge for Marxist analysis, which predicted the development of a capitalist agricultural system based on large-scale wage labor farms (Marx, 1887, 1969). To explain the absence of such developments, some Marxist sociologists have highlighted the distinctiveness of agriculture (Friedmann, 1978; Mann and Dickinson, 1978). Farming is here assumed to be unsuitable for capitalist corporate control, because of the seasonal, perishable and variable nature of agricultural production. This intrinsic variability is thus supposed to constitute an impediment to capitalist penetration into farming. Following Weber, or heterodox Marxists (such as Chayanov or Kautsky), other rural sociologists have disputed this point of view. Mooney thus suggests going beyond what he qualifies as “teleological analysis”, which presupposes the disintegration of the petty-bourgeoisie, giving way to a head-on confrontation between the proletariat and the capitalist class (Mooney, 1983). For Mooney, there is indeed a capitalist penetration into farming (as indicated by farmers’ indebtedness in order to mechanize their farms and buy land), but it makes “detours” (Mooney, 1982). Capitalist penetration in agriculture does not lead to a simple polarization between the proletariat and the capitalist class, but to a contradictory class location and to the development of various family farming models which are increasingly integrated into

the capitalist system. It is possible to maintain family farming within a capitalist environment because evolutions in farming models follow not only an economic rationale, but also subjective and ideological determinants (Mooney, 1983, 1987). Following on from these initial debates, rural sociology was filled with controversies surrounding the future of family farming, essentially opposing two schools of thought, the *subsumption school* and the *survival school* (Bjorkhaug, 2012, Johnsen, 2004). For proponents of the subsumption school, family farming was destined to be integrated into capitalist circuits (De Janvry, 1980) and thus to fall under either formal or real capitalist control (De Haan, 1994). In particular, this approach gave rise to works on the *disappearing middle* in the 1980s (Buttel and LaRamee, 1991). For the survival school on the other hand, family farming was likely to maintain itself precisely because the partial non-commodification of assets (land, work) made it more competitive than capitalist farming which was subject to a strict imperative of profitability (Friedmann, 1978; Mann, 1990). Later on, these debates became less central, due to the increasing importance of research on globalization or on food regimes (Friedmann, 1987; Friedmann and McMichael, 1989), leading to a shift in social science focus from farming to international agri-food systems. Nevertheless, in such approaches the issue of farming models and of the competition between family farming and corporate farming remain present, if only latently (Friedmann, 1987; McMichael, 2005), as can be seen from recent debates on global landgrabbing (Magnan, 2012).

Works on the persistence of family farming or contemporary research on the competition between family farming and corporate farming in the context of a corporate food regime (or third food regime) generally adopt a structuralist approach (Bjorkhaug, 2012). These macro-level analyses leave little room for the points of view of the actors, for an analysis of their motivations and for the micro-level processes which cause people to shift from one model to another (Johnsen, 2003). Similarly, they do not grasp the diversity in trajectories and experiences which lie behind the apparent convergence of aggregate statistics (Long, 2001). The food regime approach does not conclude that a single agrarian production model is uniformly imposed upon all actors, but the preservation of a wide diversity of farming models is generally viewed as a form of resistance to a supposedly dominant norm. The global institutional arrangement acts as an external environment to which actors have no choice but to adapt. By adopting an actor-oriented approach, we cease to see actors as disembodied social categories and can look at the strategies that they bring into play to appropriate an institutional framework (Long, 2001). Social change then appears not as the unequivocal consequence of a new global political norm, but as the singular product of the appropriation of these norms by actors (Tennent and Lockie, 2011). In addition, focus on actors allows us to shed light on the diversity of motives for action. As stated, debates on the persistence of family farming were very much marked by a Marxist approach (or even neo-Marxist or post-Marxist, as with the *food regime approach*) for which the capitalist yardstick is the appropriation of surplus value by capital. It is within such an analytical framework that family farming appears to be a paradox, a sign of contradiction or detour. From a Weberian perspective (Weber, 2002), capitalism is characterized not by the commodification of labor but by the accounting imperative of profitability, of balancing income and expenditure, input and output (Weber, 2003). This is why, for Weber, we can talk about capitalism, even in Antiquity (Weber, 1976). The other difference between Weber’s approach and Marx’s approach is that for Weber, the economy is simply one form of rationalization among many, and not the central force which transforms society (Weber, 1978). Furthermore, the economy can itself be molded by other forms of rationalization – religious, political, ethical, legal or technical (Weber, 1993). From this point of view, we can analyze family farming not as an obstacle to capitalist development (as in Mann and

³ In common parlance, this category of farmer is referred to as “field-crop farmers” (*céréaliers*). Although in practice they may produce grain, oilseed, or protein crops which are grown in the same way; in the rest of this article I retain this common term.

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