



Conflicts over farmland uses and the dynamics of “agri-urban” localities in the Greater Paris Region: An empirical analysis based on daily regional press and field interviews

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to help gain a better understanding of the conflicts over farmland uses and of their interdependence with the dynamics of territorial governance mechanisms that are emerging in metropolitan rural areas. The example retained is that of the conflicts over farmland uses observed in the Greater Paris Region, and of their links with the “Agri-urban programs” implemented on the region borders. In order to conduct this study we perform a critical examination of the conflicts that occur in the region and are reported in the daily regional press (DRP), before focusing more specifically on the case of agri-urban program zones, using methods such as direct interviews or document analysis. The first section, based on the result of the DRP census, highlights the diversity and nature of the conflicts that occur in the Greater Paris Region, and shows in the meantime that most of the conflicts are linked to a place-based collective effort to prevent or manage the negative impacts of urbanization on the agrarian landscapes and products. The second section further discusses the specificity of conflicts according to whether they are located within or outside an agri-urban program zone. The third section puts forward some hypothesis about the links between conflict processes and the creation of innovative mechanisms, based on an examination of the events and motivations that have led to the creation of agri-urban programs.

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Introduction

Agriculture and its boundaries have for a long time been a core issue in the field of rural geography – defined as the study of the organisation of natural landscapes by human societies. But, as a result of the economic and social evolution of post-industrial societies, it has progressively shifted from the analysis of agrarian landscapes, to the study of low density areas characterised by an increasing diversity of uses and by a constant expansion of built land (Saraceno, 1994). In the field of periurban studies, this shift has been radical, as scientists neglected the agrarian and agricultural components of local societies in order to focus mainly on urban and energy issues linked to the “sprawling city” (Brueckner, 2000). A growing number of scholars shows however that peri-urban areas have also to be considered as the urban-rural interface (Bryant and Johnston, 1992; Tacoli, 1998) and could even be better defined as “rural territories in the field of urban influence” (Bryant, 1995). The implicit consequence of this conceptual shift is that the study of

changes in these areas has to combine both urban and rural “perspectives” in order to be relevant (Errington, 1994; Allen, 2003; Masuda and Garvin, 2008).

One of the key points frequently highlighted is that peri-urban areas, though they might keep a rural morphology (natural or agricultural landscapes, low density of built development), are transformed in order to fulfil various urban and metropolitan projects, which tends to disturb agrarian landscapes and social structures (Murdoch and Abram, 1998). As a result of this, frictions and conflicts between the different activities (agricultural activities vs. residential or industrial activities for example), the different economic or social groups (residents, farmers, developers, etc) or simply the different interests emerge (Henderson, 2005; Zérah, 2007). These conflicts are interesting for they reveal the changing position of agriculture. They can also be considered as the changing factors of social dynamics in rural areas (Woods, 2003; Reed, 2008). In this study, we focus our attention on the observation of rural land use conflicts in order to explore the dynamics of rural localities located in peri-urban areas.

In order to undertake an empirical analysis of this question, we focused on the Greater Paris Region case. It is the national capital region of France, but also, and by far, the largest metropolitan area in France and can only be compared with two or three other

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metropolitan regions in Europe. Around the highly urbanised core composed of Paris and its suburbs, a peri-urban belt has received many residential and industrial activities that produce more or less urbanised rural landscapes (Iaurif-Driaf, 2004). Within this peri-urban belt, the scarcity of well-located vacant spaces (well-connected to transport facilities and services centres) and the diversity of actors and interests that share the same rural environment raises many tensions and conflicts over farmland uses.

But the peri-urban belt is also an area where several local development and planning initiatives dedicated to farmland protection and farming enterprises survival are currently carried out, mainly by local authorities. Initially based upon the involvement and cooperation of local actors, these local programs have more recently been recognised by the Île-de-France (official name of the region) Regional Council, which gave them the generic label of “Agri-urban programs”, as part of an overall regional strategy devoted to metropolitan growth control and the protection of regional natural resources. The programs are defined and elaborated at the municipal or inter-municipal scale and are located close to the urbanized core of Paris and its suburbs.

Having been informally experimented all over France since the 1970s, Agri-Urban Programs are presented as major tools for the “conservation” of open spaces around large cities. Destined, more particularly, for the preservation of rural spaces, they were officially recognised in July 2001 by the Inter-Ministerial Committee for Territorial Development (CIADT) through the financial support granted for seven of these programs in the Paris Region. These mechanisms have inspired the development of “*peculiar measures relative to the protection of rural and peri-urban areas*” that are part of the 2005 law concerning the development of rural territories.¹ The programs are based on the notion of “a territorial project” and are based on flexible initiatives of partnership in which several parties can be involved: territorial communities, local associations, Chambers of Agriculture and local farmers. A “territorial project” is jointly defined by all interested parties and leads to the development and adoption of a program of action financed for several years and which all the partners involved commit to supporting and respecting. It is based on the cooperation between these different actors and is a place of experimentation of the tools of management of rural areas.

These programs are currently shaping, at different levels, the dynamics of the localities where they are settled. We therefore consider that they lead to the emergence of a specific type of peri-urban locality which can be referred to as “Agri-urban localities”.

They have become the object of great attention by policy makers and can be compared to the various other local initiatives that bring academics to model the functional complementarities and/or oppositions between rural land and urban systems (Bryant and Johnston, 1992; Halseth et al., 2010). Borrowing several concepts from economics, they put the stress on the negative externalities produced by urban activities upon agricultural production (Errington, 1994), but also on the quality of rural amenities sought after by citizens (Cavailhès et al., 2004). Outside this traditional urban/rural framework, the concept of multifunctionality is used to analyse how new social arrangements are negotiated between various stakeholders in order to share or manage open spaces (Wilson, 2007). But, by focusing on the cooperation dynamics between these stakeholders (such as the co-construction of landscape projects for example), they tend to minimize the omnipresence and the role of tensions and conflicts in the decision processes.

In this article, we wish to apply a methodology that combines both conflict and cooperation analysis and reveals their spatial and

temporal interdependence as part of the driving forces that shape the dynamics of local development. This methodology is tested for the case of farmland use conflicts and their links to the cooperative Agri-Urban Programs (AUP) in the Greater Paris Region. By doing this, our aim is to connect quantitative methods and local analyses applied to agricultural land use conflicts. Our work follows previous research studies about conflicts conducted by a research group (Torre et al., 2006); more particularly it comes in the wake of studies based on the analysis of the Daily Regional Press (DRP) (McCarthy et al., 1996; Rucht and Neidhardt, 1999; Darly, 2009) and combines two levels of analysis, namely the analysis of the DRP on the one hand, and the exploitation of surveys conducted by experts and of other documents, on the other hand.

In order to explore the interdependence between conflicts and cooperation dynamics in the differentiation of rural spaces we test two hypotheses regarding the structural link between the conflicts and the AUP geographies:

The first one is related to the impact of the creation of Agri-urban programs on the nature of the conflicts that occur within and outside their geographic perimeters. We believe that the nature and the expressions of a conflict will be of a specific kind when located within a program perimeter and will therefore be of a different kind to those conflicts located outside, close to or away from this AUP.

The second one is about the impact of land-use conflicts on the creation of Agri-urban programs. Our hypothesis is that the spatial extension of the program’s perimeters and the type of actions that they promote are the results of territorial conflictual processes. We believe that Agri-urban programs can be the products of social coordination initiated as a result of the emergence of conflicts, which are the expression of antagonisms about land uses, and that the programs contribute, in parallel with the development of cooperative actions, to the regulation of antagonisms.

The paper is divided into three sections: their order reflects the analytical path that we followed in order to discuss these hypotheses. The first section lays out in detail the theoretical framework and methodology for the conflict analysis that we developed thanks to a multidisciplinary literature review. In the second section, we present the general characteristics of the conflicts over farmland uses as they are reported in the daily regional press. This regional analysis allows us to discuss our first hypothesis by showing how their nature varies depending upon whether they are located inside or outside the borders of an AUP. The third part is then dedicated to a discussion about the causality links between conflicts over farmland uses and the dynamics of AUP, which is based on the comparative analysis of several local case studies.

The basis of an interdisciplinary approach to conflict analysis

Conflict analysis conceptual framework

When dealing with land use management in peri-urban areas, local planners must respond to two public necessities that are both of public interest but which can also contradict each other. On the one hand, they are requested to control urban sprawl in order to prevent further environmental deterioration and the associated difficulties related to transport and to the provision of public services. To manage such a complex process as urban sprawl, one requirement is to put under legal constraint the rights to urbanize cultivated farmland by declaring illegal any urban housing or building activities on such areas (Brueckner, 2000). The second goal of public policies in this context is to provide the minimum amount of buildable lands necessary to respond to the legitimate demands for housing and services in rural areas. These two major constraints contribute to placing the questions of local agricultural

¹ Art. 73, Law no. 2005-157 dedicated to the development of rural territories.

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