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The ‘peasant’ dimension of the
Confederation Paysanne’s alternative to
industrial farming**

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In its 2007 Nyéléni Declaration, *La Via Campesina* (LVC) presented food sovereignty as “[empowering] peasant and family farmer-driven agriculture, artisanal fishing, pastoralist-led grazing, and food production, distribution and consumption based on environmental, social and economic sustainability.”¹ In two recent documents – *Sustainable peasant and family farm agriculture can feed the world* (2010) and *From Maputo to Jakarta: 5 years of agroecology in La Via Campesina* (2013) – LVC offers some interesting insights into what ‘peasant and family-driven agriculture’ actually stands for.

To begin with, LVC associates ‘peasant and family-driven agriculture’ with a set of approaches and practices. In particular, LVC stresses its environmental and self-emancipating/autonomous dimensions. In its 2013 document it explicitly links ‘peasant agriculture’ to agroecological practices and the ‘peasantry’s’ direct relation with the land and nature. When referring to agroecology, it is interesting to note that LVC places particular emphasis on its ‘bottom-up’ character: “we don’t believe that agroecology can be implement (sic) on a recipe basis, but rather that the principals must be applied differently in each distinct reality, based on the knowledge, creativity and protagonism of rural peoples” (La Via Campesina, 2013:71). Autonomy is presented as both a way of life and primary objective. Production, writes LVC, “is carried out as autonomously as possible, independent from external inputs (fertilizers, pesticides, capital, hybrid seeds,...)” (La Via Campesina, 2013:71). Autonomy and agroecological practices are closely connected since autonomy requires “[conserving] and [taking care of] the natural assets that are used in production (land, seeds, soil, biodiversity, water, diverse human knowledge, etc.)” (La Via Campesina, 2013:71).

When designating the types of farms best suited for these practices and approaches to farming, LVC refers to small, family and community-run farmsteads. Only small farms “permit the development of functional biodiversity with diversified production and integration of crops, trees and livestock.” (La Via Campesina, 2010:2).

These different factors – small, family and community-run farms, autonomous and environmentally sound practices – are combined through the idea of a distinct ‘peasant’ identity centred on a unique capacity to think and act independently.² At the crossroads between ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ ‘peasants’ “combine the recovery and revalorization of traditional peasant farming methods and the innovation of new ecological practices”. Their practices take on an absolute and timeless dimension and are presented as the outcome of a distinctive and enduring ‘peasant’ faculty to adopt “coping strategies in the attempt to establish themselves as basic entities in the rural world” (Heller, 2013:12). In drawing on local knowledge and ingenuity, they can cope with complex and hostile environments, and simultaneously give rise to new alternative prospects for farming. As LVC explains, more than “an ‘economic model of production’, [peasant farming] is a way of life” (La Via Campesina, 2013: 11). The primary characteristic of ‘peasant farming’ comes from the fact that “peasants and small farmers are at [its] heart” (La Via Campesina, 2013:72-73).³

¹ <http://www.nyeleni.org/spip.php?article290>

² The notion of ‘peasant agency’ fits in well with the ‘food sovereignty’ concept and the assertion of peoples’ rights to define their own food systems. It also fit sin with the idea that ‘peasants’, as *La Via Campesina* writes in its *Declaration of Rights of Peasants*, constitute “a specific social group” (La Via Campesina, 2009).

³ LVC presents ‘small and family-driven agriculture’ in the following manner: “It is diverse, based on family farming and peasant agriculture. Production is developed and renewed based on the cultural roots of peasants and family farmers, women and men, youth and elders. It is a model that can feed entire nations and guarantee the rural population the right to a dignified life, socially, culturally and economically, based on work on the land, as they have already practiced for many generations. Basic rights are respected, and people should be at the center of all policies, rather than the market: we are speaking of a *just* rural society. This includes the protection of farmers, indigenous people and afrodescendent communities, their cultural and human values. They are the basic human resources of food production. Without men and women to till the land, there can be no agriculture. Without agriculture, what will people eat?” (La Via Campesina, 2013: 72-73).

Blurring the divide between discourse and reality as strategic *enjeu*

In being linked to a ‘logic’ and ‘way of life’, ‘peasant’ farming takes on an ethical and immaterial dimension. The extent to which farmers’ behaviours and practices arise out of a distinct ‘peasant’ agency has given rise to much academic debate. Certain observers have drawn upon individual and collective acts of ‘peasant’ resistance as proof of the existence of a distinctively ‘peasant’ ‘moral economy’ or ‘ethic’ (of subsistence, of reciprocity) (Scott, 1976). Transnational ‘peasant’ mobilisations such as LVC are viewed as collective expressions of a uniquely ‘peasant way of being and seeing’ (Desmarais, 2007).

Yet, to what extent can the act of defending a distinct ‘peasant’ ethic be regarded as proof of the *actual* existence of such an ethic? By focusing on acts of resistance are we not taking ‘peasantness’ at face value rather than enquiring into whether such a ‘peasant logic’ *actually* exists? In the process, are we not also, as privileged observers, contributing to blur the line between discourse and reality? And, regardless of whether or not a ‘peasant logic’ actually exists, to what extent do ‘peasant’ movements knowingly mobilise ‘peasantness’ as a discursive device for the purpose of a broader collective strategy?

In order to address these questions, we will focus on the strategic implications of notions of ‘peasantness’, ‘peasant agency’, or ‘peasant identity’. At the level of LVC this would require us to assess the extent to which notions of ‘peasant agency’ can, for instance, be used to legitimise LVC in the international arena (agriculture-related negotiations, civil society mobilisations...) as well as creating a common basis for action within a heterogeneous global ‘peasant’ constituency.

As we have seen through our brief presentation of LVC’s ‘peasant agriculture’, alternative farming models offer some interesting insights into the strategic implications of ‘peasant’ references. They do however tell us how they emerged. Our hypothesis is that the strategic value of these ‘peasant’ references partly stem from the fact that they are in many cases shaped by non-peasant understandings of ‘what being a peasant’ means.

The issue of whether and how ‘peasantness’ constitutes a strategic *enjeu* also applies to the groups and networks affiliated to LVC. In the course of this essay, we shall discuss the afore-mentioned points by referring to the LVC-affiliated Confédération Paysanne (CP) in France and its project of ‘*agriculture paysanne*’ (‘peasant’ farming, AP). As we shall see, references to the ‘peasantry’ evolve over time, usually in relation to changing contextual factors and external influences. In the case of the CP, far from reflecting a common ambition borne out of a shared and timeless ‘peasant’ *savoir faire* or way of being. The uses and meanings associated with the ‘peasantry’ are shaped by the CP’s interactions with non-‘peasant’ actors.

The Confédération Paysanne (CP)

As a founding member of the European Farmers Coordination (CPE in 1986)⁴ and *La Via Campesina* (1993), the CP has been heralded in academic and activist circles as a key player in the growing movement of ‘peasant’ resistance against neoliberal globalization and junk food (Birchfield, 2005; Edelman, 2003; Mertes, 2004). It was created in 1987 out of the fusion between a variety of ‘peasant’ movements that emerged in the late-1960s and early 1970s in opposition to the dominant farmers’ union, the FNSEA⁵ (and its youth branch the CNJA⁶), and the *cogestionnaire* system which was accused of accompanying – and largely co-organising – a state-led modernisation policy that effectively led to the mass disappearance of less competitive – and usually ‘small’ – sections of the farming population. The bulk of the CP’s founding members had previously

⁴ Now European Coordination – Via Campesina

⁵ Fédération Nationale des Syndicats d’Exploitants Agricoles

⁶ Centre National des Jeunes Agriculteurs

been active in what was known as the *Paysans Travailleurs* (peasant-workers, PT), a loose network of farmers who neither completely in or out of the *cogestionnaire* framework.

As a trade union representing ‘peasant’ farmers, the CP takes part in professional elections held every six years. These elections determine the union’s representativeness of the farming population, and subsequent political influence and levels of public funding. Despite its trade union status, the CP has been praised as an innovative form of professional organization whose originality lies in its ability to combine the defence of categorical interests – those of ‘peasants’ – with the development and promotion of an alternative model – ‘peasant farming’ (AP) – in response to both the particular problems facing French farmers, and the broader environmental, health-related and social challenges facing the planet and those who populate it. This dual ambition was included in its founding motto: *syndicat pour une agriculture paysanne et la défense de ses travailleurs* (which translates as “trade union for establishment of peasant farming and the defence of its workers”).

Yet, what are the implications in terms of the CP’s ‘peasant’ identity of the union’s history and dual objective? As shall be argued, far from reflecting a common ambition borne out of a shared ‘peasant’ mentality, the CP’s – and before it the PT’s – ‘peasant’ project was largely the product of interactions with non-‘peasant’ actors, and adaptations to shifting agricultural and political contexts. Despite their frequent references to an essential ‘peasant’ *savoir-faire* or ‘way of being’, we will see that the CP’s discourse – and the PT’s before it – on the ‘peasantry’ and alternative model – peasant farming – were in fact shaped by a series of internal and external constraints.

The Agriculture paysanne (AP) concept

“We wanted to outline a farming strategy – autonomous of the political parties – that expressed the [peasants]⁷ own demands rather than instrumentalizing them for other ends. We’re committed to developing forms of sustainable agriculture, which respects the need for environmental protection, for healthy food, for labour rights. Any farmer can join the Confédération Paysanne. It’s not limited to those using organic methods or working a certain acreage. You just have to adhere to the basic project” (Bové, 2001a:92).

Peasant farming seeks to “ensure that the greatest possible number of peasants distributed across the territory can earn a decent living through the production of healthy and quality food, on a farm that is on a human scale [*a taille humaine*] and without jeopardising the natural resources of the future. It must contribute, with citizens, to livening up rural regions in a living environment that is appreciated by all” (Confederation Paysanne).

“Our rural territories must once again be able to provide quality [food] on a regular basis and in sufficient quantity to the local market. A sustainable rural development policy rests on farming that is less intensive that respects women and men, local know-how, the environment, the geographic and cultural diversity of the *pays*. Contributing to the liveliness of all territories is the *raison d’être* of peasant farming. This type of farming is grounded on three principals: it has a social dimension centred on employment, solidarity among peasants, among regions, among the world’s peasants; it must be economically efficient by creating added value, in accordance to the means of production employed and volumes produced; it must be mindful of consumers while at the same time preserving the natural resources that it uses. A real challenge to entrepreneurial farming, grounded on profit, that encourages the concentration of production and, hence, the disappearance of

⁷ I have voluntarily swapped the word ‘farmer’ by ‘peasant’ as in French, Bove uses the term ‘peasant’.

peasants!”⁸

The preceding extracts offer three – of a variety of – accounts of AP from the CP’s perspective or that of a CP representative (in this case, José Bové, its highly mediatised spokesperson in the late 1990s). The first is taken from a 2001 interview given by Bové to the *New Left Review*. The second is the CP’s official definition of AP (contained in its 1998 AP Charter). And the third extract is taken from the CP’s campaign manifesto for the 2007 professional elections.

As with LVC’s definition, in all three cases, AP is associated with similar sets of issues – environmental protection, healthy and safe food, the vitality of the countryside. The issue of farming practices is also presented in a non-prescriptive manner. As with LVC, the CP insists that ‘peasant farming’ is not a model but “an approach which encourages [farmers] to question [their] own practices and not the validation of [particular] production techniques.”⁹ As Bové explains, “any farmer can join the Confédération Paysanne. It’s not limited to those using organic methods or working a certain acreage. You just have to adhere to the basic project” (Bové, 2001a:92). Unlike LVC however, the notion of size is not explicitly referred to. In its 1998 definition, the CP elusively refers to farms ‘on a human scale’ (Confédération paysanne).

In all three cases, solidarity prevails over competition and profit which is associated with with ‘entrepreneurial’ and ‘industrial’ farming. AP offers the prospect of a decent livelihood for ‘peasants’ by putting an end to the “hellish competition” that opposes them to one another (Dufour in FADEAR, 1998:156). The first principle of the CP’s 1998 AP Charter states that farmers engaged in AP should “distribute volumes of production in order to enable the greatest number of people to access the profession [*métier*] and to earn a living from it” (CP, 1998). Unlike productivist farming, AP seeks to distribute work among ‘peasants’ rather than foster competition between them. As Jean-Luc Malpau, a member of the CP’s AP working group explains:

“We can say that peasant farming is an alternative to industrial farming whose purpose is to transform industrial commodities into other commodities for industry, with the well known consequences on nature and on product quality. We can also say that it represents an alternative to entrepreneurial farming whose purpose is to generate the highest possible profit, leading to the concentration of farms and the disappearance of peasants” (FADEAR, 1998:8).

The idea of a particular ‘peasant agency’ is not directly referred to in these definitions of AP. And yet using the ‘peasant’ term to label a section of the farmer population and to designate certain types of practices and principles of action is significant. By unequivocally promoting a ‘peasant’ alternative, the CP is attuned to the changing state of French agriculture and to the changing understandings of ‘what being a peasant’ means. These are in turn shaped by interactions between farmers and non-farmers. In other words, the decision to use the ‘peasant’ term is not neutral when considering its wider meanings and political significance (Lehning, 1995; Ponton, 1977). The French ‘peasantry’ has historically constituted what Pierre Bourdieu calls a ‘class-for-others’ whose very perception of itself has been shaped by non-peasant accounts of it (Bourdieu, 1977). Either despised or celebrated, the ‘peasantry’ has never constituted a neutral political category. This can largely be explained by the fact that throughout much of the 19th and 20th centuries (and to a certain extent today as well), farmers were a major political *enjeu*. Ever since the French Revolution, from Léon Gambetta who declared that “the Republic would be a peasants’ republic or would cease to exist” to Philippe Pétain

⁸ P.9, *Campagnes Solidaires*, No.212, November 2006

⁹ <http://www.agriculturepaysanne.org/files/FADEAR-plaquetteA4-web.pdf>

who proclaimed that “the peasant, *he* is chief!”¹⁰, the ‘peasantry’ has been regularly mobilised and celebrated by successive parties, governments and regimes in an attempt to assert their power and authority (Hubscher, 1997; Morena, 2011; Morena, 2013).

Referring back to AP, references to a distinctive ‘peasant’ agency are especially visible in the numerous interpretations of AP given by a certain group of – often sympathetic and engaged – French academics.¹¹ Just as with LVC, AP is presented as transcending the traditional divide between ‘modernity’ and ‘tradition’. As Alphan  ry and Dupont argue, the case of AP shows us that we need to go beyond “the opposition between tradition and modernity, since [peasants] borrow from both in the process of elaborating their various alternative forms [of farming]” (Alphan  ry and Dupont, 1985:28). For Del  age, they represent a new form of modernity, more modern than *agriculteurs* (word used to designate industrial farmers) who see themselves as the sole representatives of ‘modernity’ in agriculture (Del  age, 2012:117-118). The idea that ‘peasants’ are in fact representatives of the future rather than of the past breaks with the idea of ‘peasants’ as at best static – and at worse reactionary – individuals. In reaction to the constraints imposed upon them by modern/industrial agriculture ‘peasants’ have consciously evolved and developed innovative farming techniques; techniques that enable them to preserve their distinctive ‘peasant’ way of life. This ‘extraordinary inventiveness’ involving a selective combination of traditional and modern farming techniques constitutes a key ‘peasant’ feature (Bitoun Del  age and Dupont, 5; Lemarchand, 2002:87).¹²

From the moment that these ‘new peasantries’ transcend the historic opposition between tradition and modernity, it also takes on a broader set of scientific implications. As with Gambetta or Petain, references and interpretations of the ‘peasantry’ serve a broader purpose: in support of an unorthodox theoretical approach (critique of modernity) which itself feeds into a longstanding debate in French academic circles on the ‘disappearance of the peasantry’. In other words, by drawing on the lived experiences of postmodern ‘peasantries’, researchers not only demonstrate that the ‘peasantry’ continues to exist but that the prevailing academic tools used are outdated. They are accused of not only offering a distorted view of reality but of also shaping this reality in their own ‘techno-scientific’ image. This leads people like Alphan  ry and Senc  b   to criticize the ‘essentialist’ visions that “lock down the peasantry in a binary vision” of modernity and tradition (Alphan  ry and Senc  b  , 2009:26).

Consequently, to be a ‘peasant’ can be seen as responding to other peoples’ perceptions of what ‘being a peasant’ should mean. Yet, I would argue that far from passively replicating these popular understandings, farmers have also increasingly learnt to strategically use them for their own individual and collective ends. To refer back to Bourdieu’s notion, we could argue that *acting* as class-for-others has allowed farmers to create the proper conditions for collective action and to advance their interests (Barral, 1968). The CP’s growing visibility in the media in the late 1990s and early 2000s is not only a product of its spectacular actions against McDonald’s and GM crops but is also linked to its successful re-appropriation of contemporary

¹⁰ In his 1941 speech to the ‘peasantry’ he proclaims that while “the city-dweller can live from day to day; the farmer must envisage, calculate, struggle; disappointments have no grasp on this man characterized by the necessary work instinct and his passion for the land; no matter what happens, he confronts, he holds on. HE IS A CHIEF.”

¹¹ These include people like Yves Dupont. As he himself admits “[he] has, since 1996, acted along side the Conf  d  ration paysanne that [he] follows since its creation [...] in 1987, and whose founding members [he] was actively involved with since 1977, when [he] was an INRA researcher” (Dupont, ‘paysans malgr   tout’, 2).

¹² Yves Dupont talks of a voluntary strategy on behalf of ‘peasants’, what he refers to as a ‘dialectical integration’, that is “a set of practices which consist in using the least possible amount of equipment, to adopt a certain number of modern technical innovations [...] and traditional knowledge, in order to try to struggle against the growing encroachment of the market and recourse to intensification which accelerates the elimination of a growing number of farms” (Dupont, 1994:72).

understandings of the ‘peasantry’ as alternative to neoliberal globalisation. Thus, depending on the audience, CP leaders – and in particular José Bové – adapted their public discourse accordingly. They alternatively celebrated the ‘peasantry’ as a symbol of ‘eternal France’¹³ or as an avant-garde in the fight against neoliberal globalisation and/or the ‘ideology of progress.’ At a conference organised in 2002 entitled ‘Un-do development, re-do the world’, Bové, for instance, situated the ‘peasantry’ within this broader critique of the ‘ideology of progress’, which he presented as

“a sort of myth, according to which there is a given situation to begin with, that all that humanity does will improve. This great myth of the 19th century was the dominant ideology, built by both the liberals and the Marxists, representing the other side of the coin, that of the ideology of progress. The reason for which a new style of thought exists today, is due to the fact that we have realised that these systems were rigorously identical, that they were based both on *scientism*, on the logic of production and the market and on the glorification of state and its institutions. We are now faced with a global calling into question of this whole pattern” (Bové, 2003: 19).

As he goes on to write, the ‘peasantry’ has historically played a vital role in this questioning of the ‘ideology of progress’. They have “themselves denounced the logic in which the system wanted to trap them” (Bové, 2003:25). Rather than just viewing Bové’s discourse as proof of the existence of a ‘peasant’ logic, we must contextualise it and question its broader strategic underpinnings.

A strategic imperative

Drawing on non-peasant understandings of ‘what being a peasant means’ has become even more important in the face of French farmer demographics. In a country that boasted 7.4 million farmers in 1946, recent statistics have shown that a mere 966 000 individuals (out of a total active population of 26 million) are regularly employed (part-time and full-time) in farming (Molinier, 1977; UN, 2007:16; AGRESTE, 2012:35). If we take out the farm labourers and ‘family help’¹⁴ (*aides familiaux*), the figure drops down to 423 000 (a mere 1.6% of the total French labour force).

Bearing in mind that the CP presents itself as the representative of ‘small’ and ‘peasant’ farmers, the question then becomes of seeing how many of these 423 000 or so farmers can be considered as being of the ‘small’ or ‘peasant’ type? A variety of criteria can be used when considering what qualifies as a ‘small’ or ‘peasant’ farm: farm size, the nature and amount of used labour, income and subsidy level... Were we to adopt size of farm, the total ‘small’ farmer population would amount to less than half of the aforementioned figure. According to official statistics, in 2007, less the 116 000 farms fit into the ‘small’ category¹⁵ (when compared to 192 000 in 2000), and over half of these were run by retired farmers (AGRESTE Primeur, AGRESTE).¹⁶ Should we include farms of less than 20 Ha of UAL into our calculation, the total figure adds up to 211 000

¹³ When analysing the reasons for the CP’s sudden popularity following the 1999 dismantlement of a McDonald’s restaurant in Millau, Francois Dufour refers to a widely accepted and specifically French sense of rootedness in the land (“you don’t have to be a farmer or live in the country to feel rooted in the land. Such roots connect all parts of the country in a unifying whole, and this can’t be undermined by Europe or globalization. The McDonald’s issue came just at the right time to stir up such feelings. [...] People don’t want to be uprooted” (Bové and Dufour, 2001:27).

¹⁴ Brothers, sisters, parents, children who live on the farm and take part in the activities on the farm but without earning wages.

¹⁵ That is of less than 5 hectares of Utilized Agricultural Land (UAL). This corresponds to the official definition of a small farm according to the French Ministry of Agriculture. Approximately, 3 hectares more than the 2 hectares that are sometimes used to define ‘small farms’ in the South (Bernstein, 2010 :4).

¹⁶ According to French legislation, farmers have the right to continue farming as long as the overall surface represents less than a fifth of the SMI (Surface Minimale d’Installation).

(when compared to 325 000 in 2000).¹⁷

A frequent criticism against official statistics relates to the fact that they are based on arbitrary definitions of what can reasonably qualify as a ‘small’ farm, leaving out ‘unconventional’ farms (also referred to as ‘*hors-normes*’) that do not fulfil the official criteria (Muller, 1989). It goes without saying that subsistence orientation in the strict sense – the idea that only a small fraction of the production is commercialized whereas an essential part of the production is consumed on the farm – cannot apply when qualifying ‘small’ ‘peasant’ farmers in contemporary France. While a significant share of the rural population in pre-World War Two France relied on home-grown fruits and vegetables, and farmyard meat and poultry (Gervais, Jollivet and Tavernier, 1992 [1977]: 218), and while there still existed cases of ‘self-consumption’ (*autoconsommation*) in the 1950s (de Cambaire, 1952), these practices all but disappeared as a result of post-war modernization, and its correlated processes of mechanization and regional specialization. Apart from a few very rare cases, usually in ‘difficult’ farming areas, the subsistence criterion (in a strict sense) no longer applies when designating ‘small’ farms in contemporary France. This is an important point since it means that the overwhelming majority of – if not all – ‘small’ farmers in France necessarily interact with the market both to sell their produce and to acquire the essential commodities that they need for their reproduction as both capital and labour.

In order to avoid this difficulty, some observers have focused on qualitative and sociological – rather than strictly quantitative – criteria: the type of production (family-run, organic, diversified, off-farm), production techniques (low levels of mechanization, low recourse to agri-inputs), and commercialization techniques (farmgate selling, farmer-to-consumer networks).

The family-run character has also been used when designating ‘small’ farms. According to the latest agriculture census (2010), in addition to the farm head (*chef d’exploitation*), family members who are fully or partially engaged in farming activities amount to less than 12% of the total annual amount of farm labour (19% in 2000). When looking at the younger generation of farmers and their families, the 2010 census showed that 75% of farmers’ spouses declare that they do not take part in their partner’s farming activities.

The existence of a wide range of criteria suggests a multiplicity of competing understandings of who can reasonably qualify as a ‘small’ or ‘peasant’ farmer. As a result, the task of designating these quantitative and qualitative criteria is politically charged and has subsequently been at the centre of longstanding and on-going struggles and debates about ‘peasant’ farming. The task of defending ‘small’ peasants becomes as much about promoting a given definition of who qualifies as a ‘peasant’ farmer as of defending an actual ‘peasant’ group. In other words, the CP’s *raison d’être* – and the left-wing ‘peasant’ movements that preceded it – has not only been to represent an identifiable segment of the farming population but of simultaneously defining the contours of the ‘small’ or ‘peasant’ farmer group and imposing a given definition of ‘what being a peasant’ means.

From the moment that the ‘peasantry’ is not self-evident, deciding on who can reasonably qualify as a ‘peasant’ will be a constant source of discussions and conflicts both between the CP and other stakeholders in the agriculture debate, as well as within the CP itself. The ‘peasant’ concept evolves over time, in accordance with the shifting understandings of ‘what being a peasant’ means; understandings that are themselves

¹⁷ The limit of the size criterion clearly lies in the fact that it does not account for highly productive farms that do not require large surfaces of land (battery farms for example). In 2002, the CSO¹⁷ introduced two further criteria: a maximum average turnover over a three year period of 40 000 Euros per labour unit including First pillar subsidies (UTH, now UTA) and a 12 000 Euros maximum amount of annual subsidies per farm (CAP First Pillar). When we apply these criteria, the figure falls down to approximately 90 000 ‘small’ farms (ENGREF, 2005:13).

shaped by a variety of contextual factors. As a result, different groups of actors come up with a variety of concepts to either designate actors with ‘peasant-like’ attributes or their practices. What is more, the meanings associated with the concepts have also evolved over time in accordance with the material rewards that can hopefully be achieved through the adoption of one or another term.

In the case of the CP, this process has not only been influenced by popular understandings of the ‘peasantry’ and its broader societal functions and attributes (alternatively, as producer of ‘good’ food, as protector of nature, as cultural symbol), but more generally by the strategic imperatives that derive from its position with regards to what Cleary calls the ‘political economy of agriculture’ (Cleary, 1989:19; see also Barral, 1968).

The political economy of French agriculture

In the 1950s and early 1960s, the urgent need to rebuild the French economy, led to the establishment of a corporatist system of co-management (*cogestion*) whereby a single union, the FNSEA (and later its youth branch, the CNJA) was officially recognized as the sole representative of the entire farming profession. In the post-war context of economic reconstruction and modernisation, the term ‘peasantry’ was replaced by ‘*exploitant familial*’ (family farm) when it came to designating the professional status of French farmers. Yet, while the ‘peasant’ term all but disappeared from official state discourses, it continued to be used by the FNSEA. Through the concept of ‘peasant unity’, the FNSEA’s leadership sought to retain its control over the farming population by preserving a sense of belonging to a distinct community. In doing so, the FNSEA leadership – controlled by large landowners and rich cereal producers – sought to uphold its bargaining power towards the state. *Cogestion* can therefore be seen as a combination of modernist policies centred on the ‘*exploitant familial*’ and traditionalist – agrarianist – discourses centred on ‘peasant unity’.

The modernisation of French agriculture required a profound restructuring of production through mechanization, chemicalisation, regional specialisation and market reorganization; the aim being to concentrate production between a limited number of highly productive and specialised state-of-the-art farms. This involved a high degree of state oversight and involvement in a variety of agriculture-related domains: education (through the *lycées agricoles*) and training, research and innovation (creation of the INRA¹⁸ in 1946), financing and market regulation. As a “dominated economic sector”, French agriculture could no longer organise itself and develop without the financial, technical and regulatory assistance of the state and state-related bodies (Tavernier, 1965:872).

The state relied heavily on a variety of national and local actors in order to not only implement reforms but also educate and convince farmers of their necessity (Muller, 1984). Among them, French academic research came to play an important role in the state-led modernisation process. As one farmer recalls, “the INRA for peasants is a monument. We were very proud to have collaborators from the INRA among us. [...] The INRA was our good Lord to some extent and we were ready to buy into anything that they told us” (Pochon, 2007:14). Greater demand towards the social sciences on behalf of the state led to a process of institutionalisation of the ‘rural’ issue in academic circles. Over the course of the 1950s; specialised research groups emerged in the INRA, the CNRS¹⁹ and EPHE²⁰ in the fields of economy, sociology and to a lesser extent ethnology (Debroux, 2009:257). As Henri Mendras²¹ wrote in 1959, one of rural sociology’s tasks was to provide policy makers with data and empirical research on the social and economic impacts of their policies (Mendras, 1959). French rural sociology was heavily influenced by the North American model, centred on close state-researcher collaboration and centred on the study of American farmers’ resistance to change (and

¹⁸ Inra : Institut National de la Recherche Agronomique

¹⁹ Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique

²⁰ Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes

²¹ Mendras is often referred to as the founder of French rural sociology

in particular the ‘Chicago School’ of American Sociology) (Mendras, 1990:30-31). In the French case, the priority in the 1950s and 1960s was “less about defeating [farmers’] resistance than of saving them too many bad choices of orientation, which implied calming the impatience of the ‘vulgarisors’ [*vulgarisateurs*] [...] by explaining to them the *peasant logic* (influence added) and particularly the structure of village society” (Mendras, 1990:31).

In an attempt to sidestep the FNSEA’s initial reticence, the state proceeded to empower those for whom reform represented a means of emancipation from the constraints of traditional rural life – family, Church, closed village communities – and of gaining access to the benefits of economic progress: young farmers. In exchange for their support, young modernised farmers (*jeunes modernisés*) were granted greater influence within the CNJA and FNSEA as well as a series of powers at all levels of the *cogestionnaire* system’s decision-making process (Cleary, 1989: 30; Morena, 2011; Tavernier, 1965; Tavernier, 1969). The result was a CNJA/FNSEA that co-managed with the Ministry of Agriculture and representatives of agri-input and agri-output industries all aspects of farming: credit (Crédit Agricole), social protection (Mutualité Sociale Agricole), rural development (ANDA). The notion of ‘peasant unity’, however, remained untouched.

Crisis and rising contestation

The combined effects of a series of sectorial crises in the late 1960s and the first oil crisis of the mid-1970s would not only lead to a continued decline in the number of ‘traditional’ farmers²² but would also take its toll on the *jeunes modernisés* who had enthusiastically supported the modernisation process. The system of guaranteed prices (through the Common Agriculture Policy, CAP) when combined to the growing productivity in farming led to a crisis of overproduction and a drop in the real value of agricultural commodities. Their greater recourse to the agri-input sector also meant that farmers were far more exposed to the evolutions of global commodity prices. The 1973 oil crisis, for instance, triggered a 50% increase in fertilizer and mineral prices. Greater specialization also meant increased vulnerability to climatic conditions. The bad climatic conditions of 1975 and 1976 led to a 7% fall in overall production. The outcome was the disappearance of over one million farms between 1955 and 1979 (from 2.3 million to 1.3 million) and a 1.8% average annual drop in farmers’ net buying power (on the basis of net farming income) over the 1972-1982 period (Desriers, 2007:27).

In the late 1960s, and in reaction to the disappearance of *jeunes modernisés* and the growing regional and sectorial inequalities within the farming population, surfaced the first expressions of discontent within the ranks of the FNSEA and CNJA. A group of *jeunes modernisés* came together at the local, regional and national levels in response to the negative social effects of modernisation and *cogestion* and their national representatives’ poor crisis management. In a number of regions, they began to link their situations to those of factory workers in the neighbouring cities. The processes of upstream and downstream integration meant that they were increasingly alienated from their means of production. Local ‘peasants’ built up links with activists from the local labour unions and left wing political formations, in a number of cases through brothers and sisters of farmers who had left the family farm in order to find work in the factories of neighbouring towns and cities. Jo Bourgeais, a long-time member of the CP recalls, how:

“In large peasant families such as mine (in the West of France) there were usually two children who remained on the farm while the others left for the factories in the cities. This was a real political eye-opener. In my case, I had a brother who very quickly became an active member of the CGT [Confédération Générale du Travail] and the Communist Party.”²³

²² By ‘traditional’ farmers, I am referring to those whose disappearance had been planned by the state.

²³ Interview with Jo Bourgeais, Bagnole, 23rd November 2007

This process gave rise to a new movement within the ranks of the CNJA and FNSEA: the *Paysans Travailleurs* ('Peasant Workers', PT) (Bruneau, 2008:346). Under the leadership of Bernard Lambert, the PT openly situated its struggle within a Marxist-inspired approach centred on notions of 'exploitation' and 'class struggle'. In addition to being relevant to many *jeunes modernises*' own experiences, this approach also coincided with a revival of revolutionary discourses and movements in the late 1960s. This Marxist revival was not restricted to partisan circles but also affected scientific research on agrarian issues.

In addition to being drawn towards Marxism, Lambert also drew Marxists towards him (especially following the publication of his book, *Les Paysans dans la Lutte des Classes* (1970)). Among them were a group of young scholars. As Jean Marc Boussard and Michel Blanc recall, "few of [these academics] made a clear distinction between their scientific work and political activism" (Boussard and Blanc, 2000:210). In a number of cases, they were also active in Lambert's PSU²⁴ party or in the numerous *Gauchistes* – and notably Maoist – groupings that sprang up at the time (Bourrigaud, 2003:187; Martin & Drouet, 2009:295).²⁵ Lambert himself recalls how he would collaborate with "intellectuals from the INRA." (Lambert, Bourquelot and Mathieu, 1989). The PT's newspaper, *Vent d'Ouest* would serve to spread their analyses to a wider public. As a result, less 'politicized' PT sympathisers also "reappropriated a Marxist rhetoric that divides the world into opposing classes" (Bruneau, 2008:348).

Two factors facilitated Lambert's and the PT's interactions with Marxist academics. The first has to do with the specific orientation taken by the bulk of French Marxists dealing with contemporary agrarian issues.²⁶ Despite their differences – largely linked to disagreements in terms of temporality: had all farmers been absorbed by capitalism or were they destined to be? –, there was an overall consensus when it came to recognising the fact that the 'peasantry' constitutes an exploited social category whose members could not exploit one another. Their exploited status formed the basis of their 'peasant' identity. To paraphrase Jerome Grossman, it is because they are exploited that they are 'peasants' (Grossman, 1980:74).

By eliminating any possibility of class struggle between 'peasants', the notion of 'peasant unity' – which was central to the *cogestionnaire* framework – was not only preserved but could be reappropriated for the PT's own strategic ends: to attract the broadest possible support from within the farming population and to take control of the FNSEA/CNJEA from within. Only the meaning associated with the 'peasant' concept changed. When denouncing the "myth of the unity of the peasant world", Lambert was effectively denouncing the FNSEA's interpretation of it, not 'peasant unity' *per se* (Lambert, 1970). He was calling for the establishment of a *true* 'peasant unity' that brings together *real* 'peasants' against capitalism. *Real* 'peasants' were however not defined according to a specific set of practices but in terms of their 'exploited' status. In their Common Platform of 1974, the PT writes that: "there is space in the current moment in time for a class-based syndicalism that seeks to defend peasants who are exploited by capital and condemned in the short- or medium-run by capitalist development" (Paysans-Travailleurs, 1974).²⁷

²⁴ Parti Socialiste Unifié

²⁵ These included Jean-Pierre Bompard, Daniel Hassan, Alain Salmon, Claude Viau, Guy Debailleul, Jacques Maubuisson, Gilles Allaire, Gilles Lemaire, Michel Gervais, Henri Nallet, Claude Servolin, François Colson.

²⁶ I say the bulk because a small – and rapidly marginalised – group of economists offered a Leninist approach centred on class differentiation within the 'peasant' group. Two articles published in the Trotskyist journal *Critique de l'Economie Politique* offer a noteworthy critique of the dominant approach (Cavailhès, 1976 ; Ossard, 1976). Both Cavailhès and Ossard rapidly abandoned Marxism and went on to hold high-ranking positions in the INRA.

²⁷ In a book on the Paysans-Travailleurs, François Prevost offers an interesting sociological profile of the typical PT activist: "They are usually from the 'Grand-Ouest' and the Rhône-Alpes. They are young (usually under 30). They are educated. Many of them have held another profession. Their farms are slightly bigger than average. They have made important efforts to modernize and now find themselves in a situation of heavy debt. Many of them are dairy farmers" (Prevost, 1976).

The second factor relates to the fact that it was respectable – and almost better from a career perspective – to be identified as a Marxist in the French academic circles of the 1970s. Without explicitly being the norm, Marxism was nevertheless acceptable. This has to do with the fact that Marxism represented a way for many young researchers to break with the older generation that prevented them developing their research careers. As Grossman writes, it was “a killing of the father [...] that took the form of a global rejection of all that was associated with him. He was liberal then we will be Marxist; he was productivist then we will be ruralist” (Grossman, 1980:61). The effect of this massive influx of self-proclaimed Marxists was a normalisation of Marxism in French academia; albeit, as was previously argued, without breaking with the idea of a ‘peasant’ specificity. As Jean Cavailhès recalls, the vast majority of economists recruited into the INRA over the course of the 1970s were Marxists (Cavailhès, 1984:9).

We thus see how both the ‘peasant’ category and notions of ‘class struggle’ were combined to offer a common basis for action that was compatible with the French agricultural framework of the time. Although it criticized the *cogestionnaire* framework, the PT still acted in relation to it.²⁸ It was able to differentiate itself from the FNSEA/CNJA leadership while at the same time presenting itself as the true promoter of ‘peasant unity’, its ultimate ambition being to be recognised as a legitimate representative of the ‘peasant’ masses (through an adaptation of the framework itself). The issue of ‘alternative’ farming practices was largely absent from the PT’s agenda in the early 1970s. Rising social disparities were at the heart of the PT’s attacks against the *cogestionnaire* framework and its calls for a redistribution of wealth and higher incomes. Greater interest on behalf of the PT for alternative practices would coincide with its marginalisation from the FNSEA/CNJA and *cogestionnaire* framework, and rediscovery of ‘traditional peasant’ practices.

In addition to a revival of left-wing revolutionary discourses, the late 1960s – and in particular the May 68 events – had a profound impact on peoples’ perceptions of the countryside (*ruralité*) and those who lived and worked there. The 1970s were marked by a ‘return to nature’, a celebration of authenticity, and a rejection of industrialization and productivism (Hervieu and Léger, 1979; Hervieu and Léger, 1983; Hervieu and Viard, 1996; Kayser, 1990). In the field of publicity, the ‘eternal order of the field’ and ‘peasant common sense’ were used to sell detergents and industrial cheeses. Highly mediated issues such as the struggle of ‘traditional farmers’ (1971-1981) against the extension of a military base on the Larzac plateau (Aveyron) would also contribute to this rediscovery of ‘traditional peasants’ (Terral, 2011).

In the early 1970s, a number of young people chose to swap their urban lifestyles for isolated villages with the plan to set up ‘communities’ and live off the land. Some of them attempted to take up farming. Although many of these ‘*néoruraux*’ rapidly gave up and returned to more conventional urban lifestyles, those who remained played an active role in the promotion and defence of their ‘traditional’ farmer neighbours and the promotion of ‘alternative’ or ‘marginal’ farming methods (Cordelier, 2008:224-225). While accusing the FNSEA and *cogestion* of neglecting them, ‘*néoruraux*’ and ‘traditional’ farmers also had difficulties in relating to the PT’s ‘class struggle’ approach. The priority for ‘traditional’ farmers in isolated regions was less of defeating capitalism through class struggle than of remaining on the land through farm-based adjustments and innovations. For their newly established ‘*néoruraux*’ neighbours it was also about pursuing their ideals of a more autonomous, sustainable and authentic way of life. They would contribute to promote ‘traditional’ practices as an alternative to the dominant model.

Thus, by the mid-1970s, the PT’s institutional critique of *cogestion* as instrument of ‘peasant’ exploitation was supplemented by the day-to-day struggles of marginalised and marginal farmers – isolated and ‘traditional’ – and their apparent resilience to the on-going crisis (Rémy, 1986). Rather than giving rise to new approaches, the crisis seemed to legitimise those who unremittingly pursued their traditional and, in appearance, typically

²⁸ This, as we have seen, relates to the fact that French farmers are heavily dependent on the state.

‘peasant’ lifestyles (Pernet, 1982).

Growing academic interest towards alternative practices

In addition to the *‘néoruraux’*, academics would also play a decisive role in promoting and articulating these individual or localised acts of ‘peasant’ resistance by developing an overall interpretative framework that could then be taken up by farmers to advance their individual and group interests.

A variety of factors contributed to academics’ growing interest in marginal farming. The modernisation process, while having transformed France into a global player in the field of agriculture, was also increasingly associated with a series of challenges. A growing number of academics realised that “rather than questioning its pertinence, they had [...] accompanied the [productivist] process.” (Bonnain-Dulon, Cloarec and Dubost, 2011:21). Agronomists, economists, sociologists and anthropologists (particularly from the INRA and CNRS) started to question the social and environmental effects of French modernization policies, and their responsibilities as academics and civil servants (acting in the name of the *service public*) in supporting them.²⁹ Various contextual factors led a group of French academics to focus on alternative practices.

First of all, rather than benefiting everyone, the modernisation process had produced growing regional and social disparities. In certain regions, the decline in agricultural employment induced by regional specialisation was not compensated by an increase in industrial employment, leading to increased disparities of income and rural desertification. In an attempt to address the problem, the issue of ‘rural development’ was placed high on the political agenda. In 1972, a Ministry of Territorial Planning was set up and following the left’s victory in the 1981 presidential elections, new objectives were set with the explicit aim of limiting regional inequalities and rural exodus. The decision in 1982 to organise the *Etats Généraux du Développement Agricole* (EGDA) marked a turning point in the interactions between farmers and other agricultural actors: researchers, *conseillers agricoles* (technicians), state bureaucrats and policy-makers.³⁰ During the EGDA, a number of *conseillers agricoles* expressed their concern at the crumbling of ‘rural societies’ and the ‘crisis of agricultural development’ (Rémy, 2006: 97). This growing interest for rural development and planning contributed to a shift in perceptions of farmers’ functions in the rural context. Rather than just being producers of commodities, farmers were increasingly analysed – through concepts like ‘multifunctionality’ – in terms of their broader societal functions in the countryside.

Secondly, while contributing to a massive increase in production, new production methods (herbicides, pesticides, meat-and-bone meal, growth hormones) were increasingly singled out for their sanitary/health and environmental effects. The term ‘productivism’ was used to designate this system of economic organization in which production is an end in itself (rather than a means to an end), regardless of its social, environmental and health effects. The adoption of a critical stance towards the ‘ideology of progress’ – which

²⁹ This sudden moral dilemma on behalf of certain researchers has to do with the nature of state research in France devoted to the study of farmers and agriculture. As civil servants engaged in state-funded research, they were initially expected to contribute to the broader post-war policy of modernisation. Initially, most researchers who joined the INRA were convinced that the elimination of ‘peasant routines’ was a necessary evil (Jollivet, 2001:72). In the late 1950s and 1960s, a number of sociologists, anthropologists and geographers were appointed (in the INRA and CNRS in particular) to evaluate the social consequences of the modernization policies in order to proceed to a more ‘humane’ elimination of uncompetitive farmers (Mendras, 1990; AlphanDéry and Sencébé, 2009:26).

³⁰ In the years preceding the EGDA, a series of initiatives were organised involving the various actors in agriculture and rural development. In 1981, the issue of pluriactivity’ was discussed at a conference organised by the Association des Ruralistes Français (ARF). The growing expressions of interests were understood in relation to its contribution “to the mitigation of difficulties that are increasingly being felt today” by farmers (Lacombe, 1984:35). Linked to the notion of pluriactivity was the growing questioning of traditional definitions of farms as solely being grounded on their productive purpose.

was associated with productivism – led many scholars to distance themselves from Marxism giving rise to a new academic dividing line that opposed productivists and anti-productivists.

Thirdly, in addition to recognising ‘productivism’s’ limits in the field of agriculture, academics were also influenced by the broader political climate of the time. The marginalisation of *Gauchistes* groups, the birth of the reformist Socialist Party (PS) in 1972 and Union of the Left in 1974, and its subsequent victory in the 1981 Presidential elections would encourage a number of academics to abandon their Marxist references and revolutionary ideals.³¹ As Cavailhès explains, from the moment that the Socialist Party (PS) became a ‘responsible party of government’, “what was needed was managers, not critical ideologues” (Cavailhès, 1984:10).

These contextual factors created the conditions for new research agenda which involved a critical analysis of productivism’s environmental, social and sanitary consequences, and farmers’ broader societal functions.

Examples of this growing interest for marginal farmers within the French research community include the establishment of the SaD department within the INRA. In 1978, Jacques Poly, director general of the Inra, published a report (1978) calling for “an autonomous and efficient agriculture” “more concerned about our long-term future” (Poly, 1978). On the back of this report, a group of INRA researchers (economists, agronomists, sociologists...) set up the Systèmes Agraires et Développement (SaD) department. Its objective was to analyse the reasons behind “certain farmers’ reluctance towards innovation.”³² Research was conducted on farmers who experimented with alternative farming methods. In Brittany for example, SaD researchers developed a close working relationship with a group of local farmers who had come up with their own, autonomous, efficient and sustainable techniques in dairy farming (without the help of INRA technicians). Looking back at this period, Claude Béranger, former director of the SaD writes that:

“External debates came together with internal debates within the research community [...]. This overall direction also echoed that of environmentalists who were challenging a development model which wasted energy and natural resources but also the preoccupations of ‘Third-World’ organisations” (Béranger in Pochon, 2008: 5-6).

While it signalled a growing interest on behalf of researchers for alternative farming models, the emergence of new research agendas and departments such as the SaD did not, however, lead to a fundamental shift in the INRA’s overall approach. As an institute that was under the authority of both the Ministry of Research *and* the Ministry of Agriculture, the INRA’s research priorities continued to abide by its founding agenda (1946): a top-down approach consisting in the development and introduction of state-of-the-art farming techniques and more productive seed and animal varieties. In addition to being under the authority of the Ministry of Agriculture, the INRA was also influenced by the FNSEA/CNJA and the agri-input and agri-output industries (Béranger in Pochon, 2008: 62). And although the Left’s victory in 1981 initially opened up new opportunities for research in the field of alternative farming, the FNSEA’s political and numerical strength when combined with the power of productivist lobbies thwarted any real attempts to alter the INRA’s overall orientation.

In order to bypass these institutional constraints, certain researchers set about developing and engaging with alternative networks of dialogue and exchange. Bringing together activists (from various *associations*), journalists, academics and farmers, these networks adopted a more openly activist approach. A number of these groups had links with the PT. By drawing attention towards alternative farming practices, academics

³¹ Sometimes in return for cabinet or leadership position in the Ministry of Agriculture, INRA or state administration (Boussard and Blanc, 2000:210)

³² Within the CNRS, and through the work of the sociologist Marcel Jollivet, an ‘interdisciplinary research program on the environment’ was set up in 1979 whose objectives were very similar to those of the SaD.

who were active within these groups were able to pursue a research agenda that was in tune with their own research interests and, in the process, hopefully break with what Estelle Deléage calls the “domination of farmers by the state-professional sphere and the market” (Deléage, 2012:119).

Growing collaborations between academics and the PL in the field of alternative farming

Over the course of the 1970s and 1980s, various projects, networks and publications were devoted to the study and promotion of alternative farming practices. These were initiated by groups of researchers and farmers – including many *neoruraux* – who, for the most part, acted independently from the PT. This did not mean that PT activists were not involved in them. The PT’s loose structuration enabled local PT sympathisers in ‘traditional’ farming regions to push for the inclusion of alternative practices into the PT’s overall strategy. In order to do so, sympathetic academics were encouraged to both study these alternative practices and develop a unifying interpretative framework that could be taken up by the PT.

In view of the FNSEA’s monopoly over professional training bodies, a variety of alternative information sharing and training networks emerged over the course of the 1970s and early 1980s. These included the CNEEJA³³, set up in the early 1970s. In 1975, the CIR³⁴ was created on the Larzac plateau to develop exchanges between academics and the local population.³⁵ In 1980, a group of farmers – some of which were active in the PT – set up the AFIP³⁶. Its tasks included the organisation of training and information sharing sessions on alternative farming practices. In the Rhone-Alpes region, the CEIPAL³⁷ was created in 1983. Its goal was to raise awareness on rural development issues and to create links between farmers in France and the global South.³⁸

In addition to these training and exchange networks, groups emerged over the course of the 1980s with the specific aim of developing grassroots alternatives and initiatives. Examples include the CEDAPA³⁹ in the Cotes d’Armor (Brittany) and the ALDIS⁴⁰ in the Mayenne (Pays de Loire). The CEDAPA and ALDIS emerged in industrial livestock farming regions that were hard hit by the on-going agricultural crisis. Mountainous and less productive regions also gave rise to similar sorts of initiatives; the difference being that they involved ‘traditional’ and *neoruraux* farmers. In this case, the Rhone-Alpes region and the Grenoble area acted as an important hub of activity when it came to studying and promoting alternative farming practices. The Grenoble case offers a good illustration of how such initiatives, while developing on the margins of the *cogestionnaire* framework, were inevitably constrained by it, especially from the moment that attempts were made to link them up to the PT.

The CEP Rural

The creation in 1979 of the *Comité d’études et de propositions* (CEP)⁴¹ on rural issues offers a potent example of the collaborative research projects that developed to study alternative farming practices. The CEP-rural’s

³³ Centre National d’Etudes Economiques et Juridiques de l’Agriculture

³⁴ Centre for Rural Initiatives

³⁵ The CIR later merged into another similar network, the CIVAM (Centres d’Initiatives pour Valoriser l’Agriculture et le Milieu Rural).

³⁶ Association pour la Formation et l’Inforamation Paysannes

³⁷ Centre d’Etudes et d’Echanges Internationaux Paysans et d’Actions Locales

³⁸ A number of progressive journals also published special issues on alternative farming (which included articles by farmers, activists and academics). These included POUR (published by the Groupe de Recherche pour l’Education et la Prospective, GREP), Autogestions, la Revue du MAUSS.

³⁹ Centre d’Etude pour un Developpement Agricole Plus Autonome.

⁴⁰ Action Locale pour un Developpement International plus Solidaire

⁴¹ The CEP-rural formed part of the ‘popular education’ activities of the association Peuple et Culture (PeC) Isère.

stated purpose was to bring together academics and farmers in order to exchange on the issue of marginal farming in mountain regions with the explicit goal of safeguarding a ‘traditional model of farming’ which appeared better suited to the local environment (Chosson, 1995; Muller, 2009: 105). It sought to break down the barriers separating ‘indigenous peasant knowledge’ – gained through centuries of trial-and-error experimentation – and the ‘expert knowledge’ of academics.⁴² This was in line with the context of the time marked by a growing involvement of intellectuals in the working class *milieu* and *autogestionnaire* initiatives. Two researchers from the CERAT⁴³ (Grenoble University), Pierre Muller and Françoise Gerbaux, and François Pernet of the INRA-IREP⁴⁴ were in charge of coordinating the CEP-rural’s activities (Muller, 2009:102). Very rapidly, other ‘peasant’ groups – both local and from other regions – were drawn towards the CEP-rural initiative; intrigued and attracted by its original format and the discussions taking place.⁴⁵

Throughout the early 1980s, the CEP-rural organized a series of seminars – often chaired by either Pierre Muller or François Pernet – and training sessions for farmers to discuss and share experiences on ‘alternative’/‘different’ types of farming (topics included farm-gate selling, mechanization) (Chosson, 1995). These seminars were organised at a national level and gave rise, as was the case during an event organised in Corté (Corsica) in 1982, to more ‘political’ declarations in favour of these ‘different’ types of farming (see, for example, the ‘Manifesto for a different agriculture’). In an attempt to consolidate the emergent national network, the RELIER⁴⁶ network was set up in 1984. The journal *Alternatives Paysannes*, first published in 1981, was another important factor in the CEP-Rural’s national consolidation process.⁴⁷ Coordinated by Pierre Muller, *Alternatives Paysannes* made the views and analyses of academics, farmers and other rural practitioners linked to the CEP available to a wider national audience. As a result of these activities, CERAT and IREP researchers were increasingly invited by ‘peasant’ movements – in many cases linked to the PT – to present their work and to organize practical training sessions.⁴⁸

There were various phases in the work of IREP and CERAT researchers engaged in the CEP-Rural. First of all, and on the basis of empirical research, they proceeded to characterize what they referred to as ‘different’ farming (*agriculture différente*). In his book *Résistances paysannes* (1982), François Pernet argues that the ‘peasants’ engaged in ‘different’/‘marginal’ practices adopt three main approaches: they ‘save’ (*économiser*) money and resources in order to reduce expenses; they ‘make the most of’ (*valoriser*) available resources; and they ‘supplement’ their incomes through extra on-farm or off-farm activities (Pernet, 1982: 77).

Having characterized these ‘alternative’ practices and in view of their extraordinary resilience in the face of the on-going agricultural crisis, researchers attempted to develop new models that could be applied to other

⁴² On the links between ‘indigenous’ and ‘expert’ knowledge and the need for a ‘dialogical democracy’, see Callon, Lascoumes and Barthe (2001).

⁴³ The CERAT⁴³ – linked to Science Po Grenoble and which included CNRS researchers – began focusing on agriculture-related issues. The CERAT’s activities in the field of farming and agriculture drew on participatory action research methods (PAR, ‘recherche action’) (see Muller, 2004: 113-122; Muller, 2009), echoing the work on Farming Systems Research (FAR) and Agricultural Knowledge and Information Systems (AKIS) developed by Röling and his colleagues at Wageningen University.

⁴⁴ Institut Régional d’Economie et de la Planification (IREP). The IREP was initially part of the University of Grenoble’s School of Social Sciences which was headed by the heterodox economist Gérard Destanne de Bernis (founder of the ‘Grenoble regulation theory’). The IREP housed a research group whose activities were specifically centred on agriculture-related issues. The IREP would later be linked to the INRA.

⁴⁵ Among them, the Paysans Travailleurs Pays de Loire, the Syndicat Démocratique des Paysans de Savoie (which would become the CP Savoie).

⁴⁶ Réseau d’experimentation et de liaison des initiatives en espace rural

⁴⁷ *Alternatives Paysannes* became *Alternatives Rurales* in 1992.

⁴⁸ This was, for instance, the case of the Syndicat Démocratique des Paysans de Savoie – which was linked to the PT (see Gandet and Reverdy, 1999).

local contexts and potentially form the basis for a reorientation of French agriculture. In the process, Pierre Muller and Françoise Gerbaux came up with the concepts of ‘rural entrepreneur’ and ‘*exploitation rurale*’. Their hypothesis was that:

“beyond the diversity of practices and individual or micro-collective experimentations, in essence there already exist real professional strategies with their own coherence and that have the potential of calling into question the exceedingly linear analyses of the decline of the peasantry” (Muller, Faure and Gerbaux, 1989: 23).

According to Muller, certain farmers had unconsciously developed a new profession (*métier*): the ‘*exploitation rurale*’. Neither a refusal of innovation, nor an unfamiliar form of ‘specialised farming’, the ‘*exploitation rurale*’ represents an entirely new approach to farming, through its ‘systematic’ farm-based combination of production, transformation and marketization. In view of their inability to attain the same levels of technical performance as more specialised farmers, innovations emerged in the area of commercialisation either through the selling of products or the provision of services (Muller, 1990; Muller, 2009: 105). In light of the commercial function’s importance, Muller progressively came to view the ‘*exploitation rurale*’ as a specific business category (*catégorie d’entreprise*) and its agents as ‘rural entrepreneurs’ with managerial competencies (Muller, Faure and Gerbaux, 1989: 24).

Through its replacement of the ‘peasant’ term with those of ‘*exploitant rural*’ and ‘rural entrepreneur’, Muller and Pernet’s approach was rapidly marginalised within the CEP Rural network and the progressive ‘peasant’ community. Looking back at this period, Muller writes that “this entrepreneurial approach clashed head on with the issue of peasant alternatives which had given rise to the CEP-Rural in the first place and which had enabled its national development (Muller, 2009:107). By presenting ‘peasants’ as entrepreneurs, Muller broke with the PT’s account of ‘peasants’ as workers – which was still prevailing in academic and activist circles associated with the PT. By talking of a new profession (*métier*), Muller also broke with the meanings and symbols that have traditionally been associated with the ‘peasant’ concept and which were essential to the notion of ‘peasant unity’.

Uniting the margins through a critique of productivism

The case of the CEP-Rural illustrates the difficulty of developing an interpretative model for these alternative practices that is compatible with the PT’s strategy. Not only did the ‘*exploitant rural*’ model clash with the lived experiences of many PT activists – especially the *jeunes modernisés* – but in equating farmers with entrepreneurs and no longer explicitly referring to the ‘peasant’ concept, it went against the PT’s attempts to develop a new form of ‘peasant unity’ that combined a class-based and ‘peasant’-centred approach. Since the mid-1970s, and following its unsuccessful attempt to seize control of the CNJA/FNSEA leadership, the PT’s priority was to create the basis for an alternative trade union force capable of attracting the widest possible audience. This meant, on the one hand, bringing together the scattered groups, local unions and grassroots associations that identified with the PT, and on the other, coming up with a trade union discourse that could attract external farmer and non-farmer support.⁴⁹ While this involved attracting marginal/alternative farmers, it also meant securing the PT’s traditional support base: *jeunes modernisés*. While the ‘peasant’ concept was key, the issue was less of associating it with specific practices than of using it to designate all disenfranchised farmers.

Academics were therefore expected to serve this ‘peasant’ cause. As Muller himself admits, “[the CEP-Rural]

⁴⁹ The PT’s *Journées Nationales* in Rennes (1974) led to important debates between those who felt that it was necessary to break with the *cogestionnaire* system – and leave the CNJA and FNSEA – and those who wished to continue fighting from within (Prevost, 1976:115).

experience was marked by researchers' desire to serve a cause: that of small peasants. [...] In the CEP 'rural', researchers were part of a collective whose role was not research *per se*, but to produce a legitimate peasant discourse" (Muller, 2009:108). Researchers were therefore expected to participate, through their work, to the construction of a political project capable of giving a collective voice to marginal farmers. This involved finding a middle ground between the PT's classist discourse and alternative farming practices (unifying a wide variety of groups associated with the PL).

The critique of 'productivism' would form the basis for what François Colson calls "a new unifying discourse" for the PT and other dissident farmer groups (Colson, 1985:75; Fouilleux, 2003:136). It was touched upon for the first time during the PT's *Journées Nationales* of 1974 (in Rennes) through the critique of technical progress. However, far from drawing on environmental and health-related concerns, the PT's analysis was restricted to its negative effects on farmers' incomes: "small and medium peasants, it was argued, do not reap the benefits of technical progress. On the contrary, [peasants] work more and earn less" (PT in Prevost, 1976:37-38).

Throughout much of the 1970s, the PT did not generally recognize alternative farmers as credible models to follow. From the moment that the priority was to develop a trade union alternative, PT leaders were worried that remote alternative practices would turn into the only counter-model. As Bernard Lambert explains,

"There is one thing that I am worried about: are we going to turn these alternative models into a new religion? We used to say that there was no alternative to the 1960s [productivist] model. Are we now going to say that, apart from the alternative model there is no alternative either?" (Lambert, 1984: 48).

As he goes on to write,

"We must not recommence and allow others to inflict upon us the idea that all those who do not enter into the new alternative farming model are good to through out with the trash. If we follow this route, we will all loose out, for the benefit of the agro-industry, the banks, and for the peace of mind of the state. The belief of the [PT] is that antagonisms between the two are secondary" (Lambert, 1984: 58).

The issue for the PT was of convincing alternative farmers to take part in its trade union project, and to become an 'objective ally' of the proletarianised 'peasant' majority (of *jeunes modernisés*). As one former member of the PT puts it, "rather than by conviction, if we declared ourselves open to so-called 'marginal' experiences, it was for tactical reasons so as not to disconnect ourselves from the *départements* where such experiences were well established" (Templier in Chavagne, 1988:257).

From the PT to the Confédération paysanne (CP)

The early 1980s would mark an important turning point for the PT. The first major health and sanitary crises involving French farmers (directly traceable to modern techniques), led the PT to adopt a more holistic approach towards productivism. In 1980, as leader of the PT, Lambert was heavily involved – and criticized – in a public debate surrounding a scandal involving hormone-infected veal (Martin, 2013:97). In the face of rising critiques from consumer groups, Lambert was forced to pay greater attention to the issue of 'productivism'. What this crisis revealed was the need for the PT to address consumer demands and to secure the support of consumer groups (abandoning, in the process, earlier attempts at creating alliances with the working class and labour unions). And in order to do so, the PT had to take up the health and environmental issues (Lambert, 1984: 57).

The early 1980s were also characterized by the PT's institutionalisation. Following, the Left's electoral victory in 1981 and the recognition of union pluralism, PT activists proceeded to set up its own autonomous trade union: the CNSTP⁵⁰ (Lagrave, 1990). By early 1982, the union had around 15000-20000 members (when compared to the FNSEA's 500000). Two national meetings – the 1981 General Assembly and 1982 *Journées Nationales* – included discussions on productivism. As Chavagne writes,

“the affirmation of the unification of the CNSTP was possible on the basis of this calling into question of productivism because it constituted at the time the only available basis for unification” (Chavagne, 1988:257).

In May 1982, a second dissident union was formed: the FNSP (around 25000 members). The FNSP brought together former members of the FNSEA and CNJA. Many of them had participated in joint struggles with PT activists but had attempted to develop a more conciliatory approach from within the FNSEA/CNJA apparatus. Unlike their PT counterparts, they opted for a more moderate trade-centred approach than their revolutionary PT counterparts.

Following the CNSTP's and FNSP's disappointing results in the 1983 professional elections⁵¹ and the PS government's shift towards a pro-FNSEA position, the CNSTP and FNSP discussed the possibility of joining forces. The Right's victory in the 1986 legislative elections and its designation of a former FNSEA President – François Guillaume – as Minister of Agriculture accelerated this process of rapprochement between the two unions, eventually giving rise to the Confédération paysanne (CP) in 1987.

The political transformations of the 1980s also resulted in a decline in the state's interest and support for alternative farming practices. In an attempt to pursue their activities and in view of the CNSTP's anti-productivist approach, a number of 'alternative' farmers were drawn towards the CNSTP. In 1984, they helped set up the FADEAR⁵² whose stated purpose was to discuss and promote rural development policies and alternative farming practices. Like so many other groups and networks before it, the FADEAR was a product of the collaboration between 'peasants' and scholars/researchers/experts.⁵³ As two of its founding members recall, from the outset, researchers and experts were involved in its activities (Malpoux and Berhocoirigoin, 1999).

When combined to the inauspicious trade union context, the growing presence and involvement of alternative farmers within the CNSTP's ranks created the conditions for the inclusion of an alternative farming model – 'peasant farming' (AP) – into the CP's founding motto. Yet, this did not mean that there was a clear-cut agreement as to what AP actually stood for in terms of alternative farming practices. As one former leader of the CP recalls, “for the vast majority of those within the CP, peasant farming [defined] itself as the refusal of productivism” (CP, 2008:55). In other words, in 1987, the CP did not offer a 'positive definition' of 'peasant farming' (Martin, 2013:17).

1987-1998: Towards a positive definition of AP

Within the newly created CP, and in view of the union's continued marginalisation, a growing number of farmers – especially those linked to the FADEAR which was not the CP's development arm – pushed for the definition of an AP concept that went beyond just a critique of productivism. Their aim was to “develop a

⁵⁰ Confederation Nationale des Syndicats de Travailleurs Paysans (set up in 1981)

⁵¹ The CNSTP received 7.1% and the FNSP 5.8%.

⁵² Fédération Association pour le Développement de l'Emploi Agricole et Rural

⁵³ FADEAR, *L'agriculture paysanne : changer de modèle*, <http://www.agriculturepaysanne.org/files/FADEAR-plaquetteA4-web.pdf>

positive definition” that responded to their lived realities and that could form the basis for an alternative farming model (CP, 2008:55).

Three important arguments were used to justify these efforts. First of all, the early 1990s were marked by a series of food scares (BSE, dioxin...) and growing public – and subsequently political – awareness of the environmental crisis (especially following the 1992 Rio Conference). This led to renewed public, media and political attention to farmers’ practices, and to demands for better quality, safer and more sustainable food. Secondly, the 1992 CAP reform (drop in farm-gate prices and forced ‘freezing’ of land) and GATT Accords (limitations on export subsidies and import duties) further justified the need for more autonomous, small-scale and locally sourced farms. Through its participation in alliances like the APEC⁵⁴ in France and *La Via Campesina* (of which it was a founding member), the CP was increasingly encouraged to develop its alternative project for farming in the face of new global threats. And finally, there was a need to distinguish AP from other farming models such as ‘sustainable farming’ (developed by the RAD⁵⁵) and ‘organic farming’ (developed by the FNAB⁵⁶). The CP would do so by insisting on the ‘social dimension’ of AP – pleasing, in the process, those within its ranks for whom the CP’s trade union responsibilities should be the priority. As a former head of the FADEAR (and CP member) explains, unlike other models, AP “brings forward the social dimension that even the idea of sustainable farming does not consider. [...] We are critical of these caricatured usages of ‘sustainable’ that do not include the social dimension” (CP, 2005:102).

A group of researchers – some of which had taken part in the FADEAR’s creation – actively contributed to the CP’s work on AP. In line with the CP’s critique, these researchers considered themselves as being at the margins of a state research apparatus that had surrendered to the ‘ideology of progress’. Among the most active contributors to the CP’s work were Pierre Alphanféry, Pierre Bitoun, Yves Dupont and Frédéric Lemarchand (previously cited). As Lemarchand recalls, “we monitored, observed and often actively took part in the different stages of elaboration of the concept [of AP]” (2002, 91). He and Alphanféry were part of the steering committees of various national AP meetings that were organised throughout the 1990s. A number of academics took part in these gatherings – many of which had been involved either with the PT or in alternative farming projects in the past. One of their main tasks would be to develop a ‘positive’ definition of AP that is acceptable by all sections of the CP’s heterogeneous membership, and especially those who prioritised a trade union approach centred on the defence of ‘peasants’ incomes, regardless of their farming practices.

In their book, *Les Champs du Départ* (1989), Alphanféry, Bitoun and Dupont offer a number of interesting insights into how they perceived the ‘peasantry’ and ‘peasant farming’. According to them, what distinguishes ‘peasants’ from other farmers is that their actions are grounded on notions of solidarity and not profit-seeking. Unlike Muller, Alphanféry, Bitoun and Dupont refer to a distinctive ‘peasant rationality’ that excludes competition between ‘peasants’ and which is centred on practices that are environmentally friendly, autonomous and culturally relevant. The ‘peasantry’ is therefore presented as having a broader social purpose that goes beyond the simple act of producing. They also break with Muller’s analysis in that the ‘peasantry’ does not break with the past but rather bridges the gap between modernity and tradition (see earlier quotes).

Through their participation in the process of defining AP, Alphanféry *et al.* mainstreamed the idea of a ‘peasant rationality’ in order to develop a definition of AP that was acceptable by all sections of the CP. A significant first step was taken between the union’s first strategic report (1987) in which AP was broadly defined as ‘a variety of objectives and practices’ and the CP’s first *Journées d’Eté* (held at Etcharry in the

⁵⁴ Alliance Paysans Ecologistes Consommateurs (1992)

⁵⁵ Réseau Agriculture Durable

⁵⁶ Fédération Nationale des Agriculteurs Biologiques

Basque Country) in July 1990, which discussed the evolutions of the ‘rural world’ (*monde rural*), the societal role of the ‘peasants’ and the aims of AP. The purpose was to develop a project that could serve as a blueprint for a new agricultural model that would respond to a broader set of issues (such as sustainability, solidarity and diversity) (Martin 2005, p.216). The same year, during the CP’s Congress in Clermont Ferrand, AP was defined in terms of both the critique of productivism and the development of an ‘alternative model for society’:

“AP must allow allow peasants, regardless of their zone, to live from their work; it must be favourable to the establishment of young farmers. AP draws upon the autonomy and responsibility of the women and men who practice it. AP stands for solidarity in the distribution of rights to produce [*droits à produire*] in the European and international contexts” (CP, 1990:12-13).

In 1992, the theme of the CP’s General Assembly in Lyon was *L’Agriculture Paysanne, un espace pour l’espoir, un espoir pour l’espace*. AP associations were created. Two national meetings were organised by the CP in 1993 (Saint-Lô, 21st and 22nd May) and 1995 (Vogüë, 7th and 8th December), bringing together ‘peasants’, social movement activists and academics. A series of common characteristics began to emerge. Far from describing a single model to follow, the AP concept included a variety of production systems that were adapted to local conditions. At Saint-Lô, AP is presented as a ‘state of mind’:

“AP is neither a technique nor a model to follow or create, but an overall enterprise that involves all of a peasant’s life and transcends the simple act of production” (CP, 1993).

Through AP, the multiple functions of ‘peasants’ were also emphasised. These include the production of good quality food (FADEAR, 1998:14), environmental protection, North-South solidarity and the management of the rural spaces through the combination of farming and non-farming activities (tourism, environmental preservation, commercialisation of farm produce etc.). In drawing on the ‘peasantry’s’ broader functions (in the countryside and society), AP allowed the CP to not only highlight its non-corporatist approach, but also point to the FNSEA’s inability to address these important issues.

By 1998 and the validation of the AP Charter, the conditions were met for a definition of AP that drew on notions of a distinct ‘peasant agency’. As one CP representative admits,

“the critique of productivism and the proposed alternative, peasant farming, have contributed to revalorise traditional practices (perceived as more natural, more human, more ecological...) and most of all to revalorise a peasant identity and affirm its specificities when compared to the expressions of urban lifestyles, be they expressed by the labour force or the working class. This identity is not only professional (valorising autonomy, and even peasant independence, control over his/her work, her/his know-how and professional choices) but also social (social relations, local grounding...)” (CP, 2007).

In the CP’s definition of AP – and the interpretations that were given of it –, ‘peasants’ do not compete against one another; naturally integrate broader societal issues into their everyday practices (environmental protection, food safety); and are characterized by their adaptive strategies. All these issues are compatible with the contemporary *cogestionnaire* framework. While the ‘peasant unity’ dimension remains central, it increasingly refers to agriculture’s broader societal responsibilities. From a purely organizational perspective, the AP definition is both sufficiently detailed to (temporarily) satisfy those who were engaged in alternative practices and sufficiently vague to satisfy those for whom the trade union approach was essential in order to attract widespread farmer support.

By referring to the idea of ‘peasant agency’, AP takes on a non-prescriptive and therefore inclusive dimension.

Lemarchand clearly recognises this when he writes that,

“the AP concept must not be seen as a model that should be indefinitely replicated throughout the [French] territory, in each farm, as is the case with the prevailing agricultural model, but as a source of ideas, of experiences, of practices and most importantly of ethical and political values, whose purpose is to offer a *framework* for the implementation of *practices* that can take as many individual forms as there are peasants and individual situations” (Lemarchand, 2002: 89).

Each local branch of the CP was thus able to draw on the AP concept in a manner that was attuned to their local farming realities. Ivan Bruneau talks of the ‘dissociation of activist spaces’ to describe the way in which certain sections of the CP could relegate alternative practices (and their promotion) outside of their local trade union spheres. In the case of a CP’s local union in the Orne (Normandy), Bruneau shows how the local union adapts its discourse so as to “validate heterodox practices [...] but without explicitly condemning the prevalent production methods” (Bruneau, 2010: 233). As he goes on to write,

“the task of social representation of the profession effectively leads activists to euphemize the critique, in order not to appear as marginal farmers, or, even worse, as ‘*sermonizers*’, the objective then becomes of ‘*empowering without blaming*’, as an activist explained during an internal meeting” (Bruneau, 2010:233).

Conclusion

Far from reflecting an inherent ‘peasant’ way of being, the CP’s discourse (and before it the PT’s) on the ‘peasantry’ and ‘peasant farming’ (AP) is the historic product of changing conditions and factors. Rather than representing a starting point, our analysis of AP has shown that the process of unifying marginalised farmers shaped the CP’s ‘peasant’ discourse. Through their interactions with non-peasant actors – and in particular academics – the ‘losers’ of post-war modernisation reappropriated the symbolically charged ‘peasant’ term and shaped it in accordance to their priorities and needs. ‘Peasantness’ and ‘peasant farming’ thereby become strategic tools for the advancement of collective interests.

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FOOD SOVEREIGNTY: A CRITICAL DIALOGUE INTERNATIONAL COLLOQUIUM PAPER SERIES

Food Sovereignty: A Critical Dialogue

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A fundamentally contested concept, food sovereignty has – as a political project and campaign, an alternative, a social movement, and an analytical framework – barged into global agrarian discourse over the last two decades. Since then, it has inspired and mobilized diverse publics: workers, scholars and public intellectuals, farmers and peasant movements, NGOs and human rights activists in the North and global South. The term has become a challenging subject for social science research, and has been interpreted and reinterpreted in a variety of ways by various groups and individuals. Indeed, it is a concept that is broadly defined as the right of peoples to democratically control or determine the shape of their food system, and to produce sufficient and healthy food in culturally appropriate and ecologically sustainable ways in and near their territory. As such it spans issues such as food politics, agroecology, land reform, biofuels, genetically modified organisms (GMOs), urban gardening, the patenting of life forms, labor migration, the feeding of volatile cities, ecological sustainability, and subsistence rights.

Sponsored by the [Program in Agrarian Studies at Yale University](#) and the [Journal of Peasant Studies](#), and co-organized by [Food First, Initiatives in Critical Agrarian Studies \(ICAS\)](#) and the [International Institute of Social Studies \(ISS\)](#) in The Hague, as well as the Amsterdam-based [Transnational Institute \(TNI\)](#), the conference “Food Sovereignty: A Critical Dialogue” was held at Yale University on September 14-15, 2013. The event brought together leading scholars and political activists who are advocates of and sympathetic to the idea of food sovereignty, as well as those who are skeptical to the concept of food sovereignty to foster a critical and productive dialogue on the issue. The purpose of the meeting was to examine what food sovereignty might mean, how it might be variously construed, and what policies (e.g. of land use, commodity policy, and food subsidies) it implies. Moreover, such a dialogue aims at exploring whether the subject of food sovereignty has an “intellectual future” in critical agrarian studies and, if so, on what terms.

The Yale conference was a huge success. It was decided by the organizers, joined by the [Land Deal Politics Initiative \(LDPI\)](#), to hold a European version of the Yale conference on 24 January 2014 at the ISS in The Hague, The Netherlands.

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