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Denigrating farmers is choosing the wrong target: advocacy for French farmers

The issue

Blocked Paris ring-road, Champs-Élysées covered with straw, French farmers are fed-up being criticised and living in destitution.

Isolation, poverty, bankruptcy, exodus, depression, suicides are hitting a growing number of French farmers who realise that the profession to which they have been dedicating their life allows them neither to live decently, nor to be well considered by their fellow citizens.

Every day, farmers are being criticised and taken for responsible of the unsatisfactory [food quality and safety](#) as well as of the negative environmental impact of agriculture [\[read\]](#). It even occurs that some are being prosecuted by neighbours on the ground of the inconvenience they are supposed to have caused.



The other side of the coin

However, if the French (and world) population eats, it is thanks to the work of farmers, particularly family farmers who, worldwide, produce 70% of food [\[read\]](#). If the world is full of magnificent rural landscapes (irrigated terraces, mountain pastures, green bocage, etc.), it is also because of the age-old work of farmers who maintain the countryside.

What is true for the world as a whole is equally true for France. Moreover, French agriculture is an important resource for the country as it has been producing an exported surplus for decades. Finally, a large part of France's attraction for tourists is the result of a diversity and quality of landscapes that are the consequence of an agriculture that remains relatively diversified (although it has tended to become more homogenous over the last sixty years, because of specialisation and regression of polyculture).

How did France reach this level of farmer bashing and who are the people responsible for the ills for which the rest of the French population is accusing farmers? Are the farmers really "guilty" or should we be looking for the real culprits elsewhere? To find out, we need to look back at history.

Looking back at history

Since the 19th century, public policies have facilitated the creation of close interlinkages between agriculture and the chemical and mechanical construction sectors. After World War II, a period of food shortage, agriculture was encouraged to grow by consuming a growing volume of synthetic fertiliser [\[read\]](#). The use of phosphate and potassium fertiliser reached a maximum during the 70s and 80s respectively, before decreasing to reach levels equivalent to what they were during the 60s (for each around 500,000 tons per year in 2017). The use of nitrogen fertiliser remains until today at a level close to its maximum of the 90s, approximately 2.2 million tons per annum ([IFA](#)). Regarding pesticides for which data is only available after 1990, their use has been decreasing in quantity but not necessarily in toxicity after the peak of 1999, and it amounts currently to around 70,000 tonnes ([FAOSTAT](#)). Moreover, with time, farmers have been urged to purchase a large park of costly agricultural equipment.

Beyond turning the agriculture sector into a client of chemical and mechanical industries, efforts were also made to persuade it to adopt working methods copied from the industrial sector. To facilitate this process, the transition from a traditional agriculture to an industrial and productivist agriculture was supported by the 1962 Law of modernisation of French agriculture and by the European Community (later Union) Common Agricultural Policy.

These policies aimed initially at increasing agricultural productivity, at securing for farmers a level of income comparable to that of other workers and maintaining "reasonable" (i.e. cheap) food prices for consumers. They were implemented through the creation and strengthening of an effective organisational set-up for

research, extension, technical advice and marketing (Chambres d'Agriculture, Directions Départementales de l'Agriculture, cooperatives) in which agrochemical and mechanical companies were given a prominent position. In parallel to this, a specialised agricultural press developed that was to influence producers in their technological choices [[read in French](#)]. Simultaneously, the largest and dominating union within the agriculture sector, the National Federation of Farmers (Fédération nationale des exploitants agricoles – FNSEA) became one of the main vectors of propaganda in favour of these policies. Finally, the transformation of the agriculture sector was supported by protective measures and by a variety of subsidies.

During the 70s, intensification of production, increasing the size of farms and herds, using larger, heavier, more sophisticated and more expensive machinery were encouraged. Those farmers who were not willing to follow the movement were criticised for being retrograde and archaic and they lost their influence within the dominant farmers' union, while those who did were shown as examples to be followed but found themselves highly indebted (luckily for them, a relatively high inflation then – which is no more the case today – made it possible for some of them to manage their way out of awkward situations!).

In the livestock sub-sector, higher productivity and lower prices meant a growing dependency on feed concentrates (grain, flour and meal) coming either from expanding feed crops or from the market, with as consequence an explosion of animal feed imports (first cassava, then soya, in particular) which were multiplied by more than five between the 60s and the beginning of this century.

It became impossible for a farmer to have access to a loan at a subsidised rate unless it was to invest in the latest equipment, purchase improved breeds or establish a working capital to buy more agrochemicals. For a young farmer to obtain a subsidy and a loan for setting-up a farm, it was necessary to hold a diploma or participate in training activities where all the advantages of industrial agriculture were presented, as well as develop a detailed project. As a consequence, whereas in 1970 only 13% of farmers had been trained in agriculture at secondary or university level, they were 43% in 2003 [[read in French](#)].

For the industrialisation of agriculture to be profitable, there was a need for larger production units and plots. Re-parcelling of land was imposed that contributed to the elimination of live fences, hedges, trees and groves that hosted considerable biodiversity, in addition to increasing the size of production units. The number of farmers fell drastically (from 2.3 million units in 1955 to only 590,000 in 2003 of which 370,000 are considered as professional). This made it possible to increase the average size of farms despite a decrease of agricultural area by almost 10% between 1950 and 2003, as land was eaten up by cities and infrastructures, and invaded by forests. The “freed” labour force went to work in the industry against low salaries. Much later, Edgar Pisani, the Agriculture minister of General de Gaulle who pushed for these reforms confessed “I blame myself for having

insisted too much on re-parcelling. [...] I cannot say that I plead guilty, but I have the feeling that I was wrong” [[listen in French](#)].

These policies considerably changed the agricultural context: little by little, many family farms disappeared and were replaced first by GAECs (Groupement Agricole d'Exploitation en Commun or jointly managed farm groupings) after 1962, then by limited liability farming companies (exploitations agricoles à responsabilité limitée – EARL) after 1985 [[read in French](#)], in other words by companies with a clear financial result requirements (if only to reimburse debts) at the expense of the shockingly low earning farm workers.

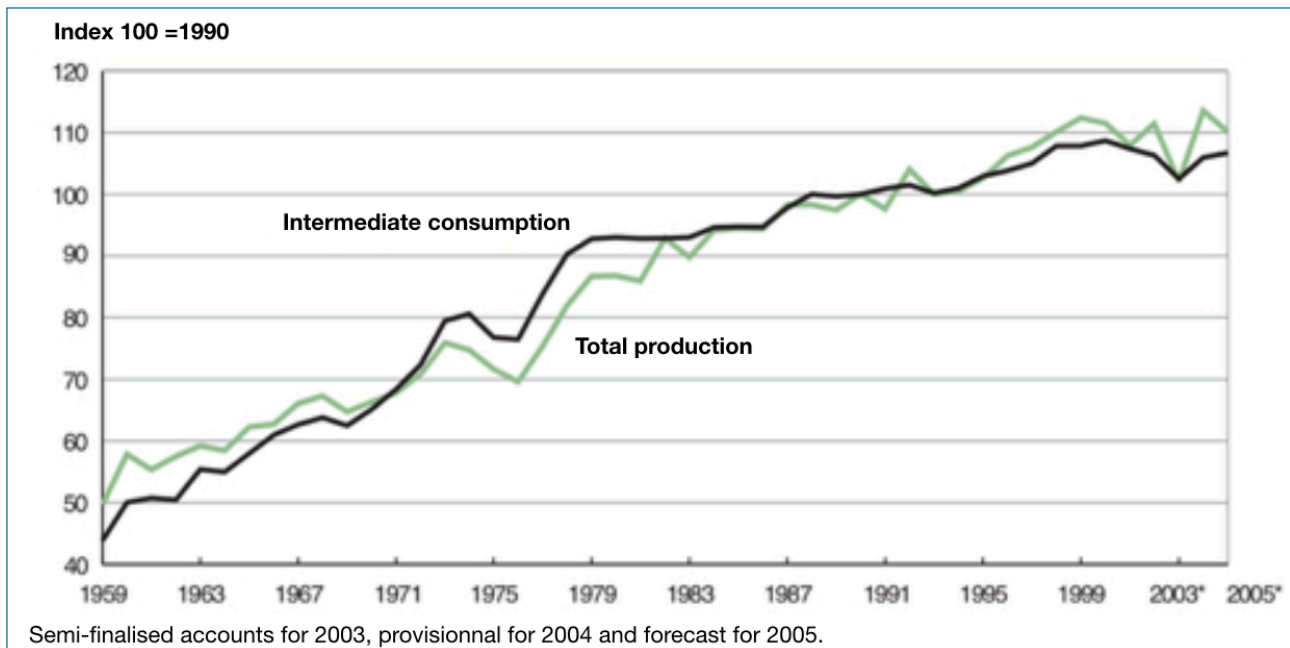
Farmers were therefore not left free to choose the type of agriculture they wanted: incentives, support, funding, laws, everything was pushing them towards a capital-intensive and industrial agriculture. This evolution is still continuing nowadays: between 1995 and 2016, the net capital stock of French agriculture increased from 82 to 126 billion euros (+53%) (FAOSTAT). Simultaneously, farmers’ debts increased. In 2017, the average level of debt of farms was of 187,000 euros per unit (representing a total of more than 55 billion euros), the higher debt rates being found in pig and poultry farming, the two sub-sectors where industrialisation and integration with upstream input-supplying companies was highest [[read in French](#)].

It is clear from these facts that the state of agriculture cannot be considered as the responsibility of French farmers, but rather as the responsibility of those who decided French and European agricultural policies. Indeed, it is the policy decisions that defined the institutional context (research, extension, training) and the financial incentives (price, subsidies, loans) that induced farmers to adopt productivist technologies. Even marketing had its role in the process: for example, in many milk-producing areas, dairy plants – whether cooperatives or not – threatened farmers to stop collecting milk from the farms where the quantity of milk was too small, forcing them to increase the herd size and become more dependent of the feedingstuffs industry and its imported ingredients. As for pig and poultry farmers, they were integrated in a supply (feed and medicine) and marketing circuit in which they found themselves in a situation that, in many respects, anticipated the conditions experienced by today’s “uberised” delivery boys and car drivers.

The result of this policy was definitely a rapid increase of agricultural production, turning France from a food-shortage to an agricultural commodity-exporting country, which was one of the government objectives. Despite a reduction of agricultural land, particularly for fodder crops (less 36% between 1950 and 2018) and a relative stability of field crops, the industrialisation of agriculture resulted in a greater crop production. Over the same period, cattle population increased by little less than 20%, while the number of pigs and poultry doubled.

In total, France’s agricultural production virtually tripled between 1959 and 2005 (see **Figure 1**). However, there are worrying signs that this performance is not sustainable from an economic, environmental and social perspective [[read](#)].

Figure 1 : Index of the volume of production and intermediate consumption of French Agriculture (1959–2005)



Source: [Desriers 2007](#) (translated by hungerexplained.org).

In the meantime, with growing urbanisation, agricultural trade and processing increased. It is this evolution that is largely the source of the currently growing mistrust towards farmers. But it is not farmers who mixed meat-and-bone meal into animal feed, causing Bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), or who cheated by pretending that the horsemeat found in lasagna was beef; it is not farmers who put large amounts of additives (salt, sugar food colourings, food preservatives, antioxidants, emulsifiers, acidifying agents, thickeners, stabilizers, coatings, taste enhancers, sweeteners, etc...) in ultratransformed food that consumers buy in supermarkets. In this case, it is traders, input suppliers, food processors and retail companies that are the culprits, encouraged by the State either deliberately or because of carelessness. The evolution of French agriculture was therefore everything but “natural”.

Accusing the weak? Too easy...

It appears clearly that it is a serious mistake to accuse farmers of being responsible for the ills of food and agriculture in France!

It is even more unfair as it is the very farmers themselves that have been the main victims of the recent evolution of agriculture. Indeed, the second objective assigned to agricultural policy was not achieved: the majority of farmers could never reach a standard of living comparable to that of industrial workers. This failure is evident today despite a massive but very unfair subsidy policy [\[read p.3\]](#). It could be put in part on the account of the generally negative trend followed by agricultural prices, as required by another government objective which was to provide cheap food to consumers so as to be able to limit salaries and maintain a

“competitive” cost of labour in France. It was also due to the fact that other intermediaries – particularly large retail companies – succeeded in capturing a major part of the value added created in the food and agriculture sector, because of their strong position on markets.

This is why today a large proportion of farmers live in deep poverty although they work much more than other professional categories, making it often impossible for them to live a “normal” family life or obtain satisfactory results in an activity that is very much prone to risk (diseases, pests, meteorological events, etc.).

No, farmers cannot be taken for responsible of the state of French food and agriculture. The real responsible people are those who, during past decades, decided agricultural policies and those unscrupulous operators who were ready to do anything to make more profit (fraud, cheating, unfair commercial practices, harmful activities for food quality and safety): their decisions and behaviour threaten health of consumers, sustainability of agriculture and the future of farmers...

So much for history...

What now?

The bottom line of the story is that it is all the more urgent now to establish a favourable environment (institutions, research, extension, training, finance, regulations, etc.) that will support farmers in the transition towards a healthier and more sustainable agriculture and that will offer them satisfactory living conditions as well as better quality and safe food to consumers. [[read](#)].

The drama is that elsewhere in the world, and particularly in Africa, powerful interests are still at work today to push tens of millions of farmers and food and agriculture as a whole into what we know to be a dead-end [[read](#)].

And no-one seems to really care...

To know more :

- Desriers, M., [L'agriculture française depuis cinquante ans : des petites exploitations familiales aux droits à paiement unique](#), L'agriculture, nouveaux défis, INSEE, 2007 (in French).
- [Institut national des statistiques et études économiques](#) (INSEE) website.
- [Agreste agricultural statistics, evaluation and perspectives](#), website (in French).

Selection of past articles on hungerexplained.org related to the topic:

- [Obstacles to transition – Why is it so difficult to make our food system more sustainable and climate-friendly?](#) 2019.

- [The global food crunch: myth or reality?](#) 2018.
- [Is France world champion of food sustainability?](#) 2018.
- [Policies for a transition towards more sustainable and climate friendly food systems](#), 2018.
- [The World Economic Forum's "New Vision for Agriculture" is moving ahead on the ground...](#) 2017.
- [Food, Environment and Health](#), 2014/2017.