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Construction of a « new » professional model in agriculture : on-meadow breeding

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Summary

Today, we are witnessing a process of enhancement of the value of breeding as an agricultural professional model. We are not addressing any type of breeding, but specifically breeding based on the feeding of animals with grass.

This process is settling notably in areas where environment protection claims are strongly expressed. It is the case with the Charente marsh where the League for the Protection of Birds militates in favour of its remediation as a wetland. This situation exemplarily illustrates the fact that today the definition of professional qualification criteria is not only internal to the agricultural professional circle. It refers to a process of discussion – between farmers of course – but also with different social actors that intervene around and in agriculture.

In the case of the Western Marsh, the stake of the discussions between actors is about the definition of management rules for the marsh that could reconcile agricultural activities with the protection of the wetland aspect of the marsh, and form the subject of terms of reference ("OGAF environment" since 1990, "farming territorial contracts" today). Analysis focuses on the identification of the way this process of definition (re-definition) of « good farmers » engages and operates. Which social interaction processes could explain the requalification of the Charente marsh ? And which social actors has been engaged in this interaction processes ? This interplay is observed according to an interactionist and cognitive approach, on two levels : on the level of technical arguments (the confrontation of the ways the marsh utility is conceived and problems are expressed) on one hand, and on the level of social positions on the other hand. What devaluation, re-evaluation of practices and social positions are operating ? What selective hierarchy of agricultural production systems accompanies this evolution ?

Beyond the redefinition of the job of breeder, this communication underlines the complication of the technical norms systems related to modernity and to the criteria of professional excellence in agriculture. In the studied case coexist the value enhancing of meadow-based breeding and of cultivation on the high lands of the marsh. The present redefinition of the job of farmer would hence be different from what occurred in the 50's and the 60's, when a unique professional model prevailed.

The authors question about the representation of modernity conveyed through the model of the meadow breeder and bring up some paradoxes (for example between the enhancement of the « moral » and « economical » value of breeding, since the revenue from this activity remains relatively lower than the one from cultivation). In this situation, how is it possible to be a breeder and modern ? This association is built on the present confirmed break-up between technical progress and quality of life progress.

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Introduction

The recent succession of food crises (BSE or "mad cow" disease, dioxins, foot and mouth epidemic) has speeded up a change that had already been perceptible for ten years or so in the expectations of citizens and consumers in western countries with regard to agriculture. They are becoming increasingly demanding in terms of product quality and food safety. Not only are these expectations now formulated more directly, they are also relayed on a large scale by the media and the authorities.

Linked with this development, we can observe that the agricultural production models and the norms on which they are founded are now being challenged; the criteria of "modernity" and of the "good farmer" that have been in force since the post-war years no longer correspond to the vision of an agriculture capable of responding to these expectations.

This evolution is characterised by a twofold process. On the one hand, certain products of livestock farming are blacklisted, with the media playing on fears of poisoning: the meat offered to consumers, for example, may contain deadly prions. On the other, we can observe the rehabilitation of livestock farming in which the animals are fed on grass. Farmers who feed their animals with plant products from their own farm are increasingly encouraged. It is therefore not livestock farming as a whole that is being condemned, but a particular type of farming – the "productivist" approach in which animal feed is based on industrial by-products.

This conflict between different models also concerns other types of agricultural production whenever they come into competition with grass farming for space. This then leads to a critical examination in terms of values. In certain areas, we can see grain farming being condemned.

This process occurs particularly in areas where demands for protection of the environment have been expressed with force. Such is the case of the marshes of the Charentes region, where the *Ligue de Protection des Oiseaux* (LPO) is today fighting for the rehabilitation of the area as wetlands when, since the 1960s, the intensification of agriculture in this area has been achieved at the expense of livestock rearing, with the draining and cultivation of land.

This situation is the perfect illustration of the fact that the definition of the criteria of professional qualification is no longer an internal matter within the farming profession. It also involves a process of discussion with other protagonists who intervene in or around agriculture. In the case of the marshes of western France, the issue of these discussions between these different protagonists concerns the definition of rules for managing the marshes capable of reconciling farming activities and the protection of the marshes as wetlands. These rules will then have to be written into the texts of public policy.

The central issue which we will be analysing here is this: **how does this process of *"defining" (redefining) what a "good" farmer is***, which has led in certain areas to an improvement in the standing of livestock farmers at the expense of cereal producers, operate?

In particular, we are seeking to understand the following points:

- Who are the different protagonists who take part in this process of redefining professional models and what role do they play? In what places of discussion and through what sets of relations do they take part in this?
- If by professional model we mean a set of norms associated with values, as well as a way of positioning oneself within the profession and in society, what is the system of norms on which the grass-farming model is based? Which current technical norms are being challenged and which are being promoted or even created to define this "new" model?

The sociological issue: the development of technical norms, a social product

We will tackle these questions through a cognitivist approach, positioning our observation on two levels:

1) on the level of the technical arguments: how and through what debates are the different ways of conceiving the use of the marshes confronted with each other? How are the ideas of all those involved changing (or not)?
2) on the level of the dynamics of the social positions of those taking part in these debates: what are the consequences of these developments in terms of strengthening or weakening their positions?

In all these observations, we are basing ourselves on the idea that the norms and ways of conceiving things on which farming practices at a given moment are founded are a social product (Berger and Luckmann, 1986; Geertz, 1983). These norms, a set of decision-making criteria and categories of thinking which give meaning to their activity and on the basis of which the farmers position themselves within a context, are constantly being reassessed in the light of the changes with which they are confronted and the problems they have to solve. Now this process which accompanies the redefinition of the "right ways to do things" and the production of relevant responses largely operates in dialogues (Mead, 1963; Bakhtine, 1977).

These dialogues exist on several levels. First of all, there is the "ordinary" dialogue within the local profession (Darré, 1996): farmers in contact with each other on a day-to-day basis in the course of their activity (mutual aid, neighbourly relations, organisation of work, etc.) talk about what they have to do and how to go about doing it. This milieu is characterised by a structured system of relationships and social positions. Several studies of professional dialogue networks have shown the links that exist between the structure of professional positions and the forms of debate, leading to dynamics of change in practices that differ from one place to another (Darré et al., 1989; Lemery, 1988; Ruault, 1991).

On a second level, both informal and formal exchanges also exist between farmers and other protagonists in multi-actor bodies set up with the purpose of applying, or even in some cases defining or adjusting, measures of agricultural policy or regional and local policy. In this case, it is generally the leaders of the profession who take part in the debates with various institutional representatives (State administrations, wildlife protection associations, oyster-farmers' association…).

We were thus led to take into account two levels of observation: the level of the *département* which is the favoured administrative echelon for the implementation of national or European agricultural policies, and the local level of the individual marshes where the farmers work on their land. Each of these levels is associated with different types of social configurations, each of which constitutes a specific place of discussion. We studied the different types of debate to which these different forms of organisation of the actors give rise: how important is the discussion of technical norms in those exchanges and how do these different debates contribute to creating meaning for each of the protagonists involved?

On the level of the *département*, we can also observe the expression of a "social ideal of the good farmer", a set of norms associated with certain values, which defines a profile of professional excellence. This expression is elaborated progressively by the institutional actors through their interrelations, but also in the relations with their institution, which can be of national or European scale. On the level of the marshes, it is a question of seeing how the farmers "cope" with these professional norms (discussing among themselves and with other protagonists), adjust them or defend other norms.

From the methodological point of view, we therefore paid great attention to the content of discussion in these different places (the way in which ideas circulate, the gap between the different views expressed, the tensions and any contradictions that there might be). These places are characterised by their social configuration (composition of the group and social standing of the people present).

The material we studied is made up of the content of these debates noted down in the course of meetings between 1997 and 2000 in several institutional bodies, on the one hand, and among groups of farmers in two marshes, on the other. This was complemented by interviews with the various protagonists (farmers, representatives of the environmental cause, researchers from the INRA or representatives of development bodies)[1]. The points our observations focused on were as follows: the subjects discussed; the way in which the various protagonists formulate the problems of the marshes and qualify the use of the marshes; the way in which the different farming practices are described and qualified, the way in which the "way to do things" and "choices" are argued. These debates have been placed in the context of agricultural policy decisions, of which we have retraced the evolution between 1990 and 2000.

As far as the structuring of social positions among the farmers is concerned, a study was carried out on the networks of relationships between them: who discusses with whom, who is entitled to speak, who is recognised, who "represents whom" (Mériau, 1997). We then turned our attention to developments within this structuring.

Our analysis revealed two distinct periods, with a turning point at the beginning of the 1990s in terms of the profile of the "good farmer". In the light of the questions above, we will now examine each of these periods in turn.

1. 1970 to 1990: cereals as the future of farming in the Charentes marshes

From the Middle Ages through to the 20th century, the water in the Charentes marshes was "tamed" in the name of public health and of agronomics, as canals were dug and land was reclaimed from the sea. After the Second World War, the era of agricultural modernisation set about exploiting this land through farming.

This national emphasis on draining marshland remained strong until the 1990s. We will see how it was transmitted by the institutional protagonists on the level of the *département*, and how it was expressed locally in the professional norms of the farmers in two marshes located to the north and the south of Rochefort: Moëze and Voutron[2].

1.1- A vision of marshland use shared by the institutional protagonists on the level of the département

Through a Decree issued in 1958, the development of the marshes of western France was made a national priority and the Ministry of Agriculture backed the creation of a research team specialising in the problems of agricultural development in marshlands: the research

[1] The research mentioned here was carried out in the framework of the Aramis – PNRZH project (national wetlands research programme) at the request of the coordinator, the INRA in Saint-Laurent de la Prée, which wanted to perform a study of the possibilities for involving farmers in the elaboration of new marsh management rules. (See Candau, Ruault, 2002).

[2] The essential part of our work on the local level was devoted to these two sectors, each of which corresponds to an area managed by a marsh association. They were selected for their differing characteristics in terms of their hydraulic systems, the configuration of the parcels of land and the systems of farming.

centre of the *Institut National de Recherche Agronomique* (INRA) in Saint-Laurent-de-la-Prée was founded in 1964. Public-sector researchers thus undertook work into the ways of controlling water on the level of the individual parcel of land: drainage (trenches, banks, underground drains), and tillage techniques were developed and then used to cultivate more land in the marshes.

At the same time, the Ministry of Agriculture launched operations to renovate the hydraulic networks. Two years after the marshes of western France were classified as a deprived area (1980), the Western Marshes Development Scheme (*Schéma d'aménagement des Marais de l'ouest*) encouraged the rehabilitation of land through drainage. The farming profession (Chamber of Agriculture, professional unions), the individual marsh management associations and their federation, and civil service departments (Agriculture and Forestry Department, *Préfecture*) came together in their respective capacities to set aside a budget to support drainage work in the State-Region Plan.

The State, the region, the *département* and even the professional associations all took part in this marshland drainage project. So powerful was this shared vision that draining subsidies were maintained in the State-Region Plan for the period 1989 to 1993 (for a sum of FRF 200 million) despite a warning from the European Commission in 1989 threatening to make European financing (social-structural funds of Objective 5b) conditional on compliance with the Wild Birds Directive, thus implying that tilling of grassland be brought to an end. It was only as of 1993 that these subsidies were finally dropped.

The results of this research and public aid devoted to drainage could have been used to improve the production of grass and the use of grassland. However, all the drained, levelled plots of land were ploughed over for cultivation. There were two main reasons for this. First, the grain-farming model was seen as embodying modernity in agriculture at a time when the main institutional professional protagonists were promoting efforts to free farmers from the natural and biological constraints of the profession – modernity was seen as being synonymous with gaining control over living things. Stuck with their animals, livestock farmers, in contrast, remained dependent on biological constraints (enslaved, some would say) and all the more so when the livestock was out in the fields. Secondly, the policy of grain prices and production quotas applied to farms favoured grain farming from an economic and financial point of view.

1.2- Debates among farmers structured in the image of the hierarchy of professional models

Against this backdrop, the extension of cultivated land continued until the beginning of the 1990s, going hand in hand with a sharp decline in livestock breeding and concentration of farms, with the land in the marshes increasing in value, in particular for grain farmers on higher land faced with limited possibilities for extension there.

In the sector of Voutron and Moëze, one quarter of the farms abandoned their livestock (dairy or meat production) over the last 15 years and the majority of farmers have sought to increase the area of land devoted to cereals.

The profession of "marshland farmer" based on the distinction between cereals / livestock

A grain farmer from Moëze explained this evolution: *"Livestock farming wasn't doing very well, there wasn't much money in it and it involved more obligations than cereals. On top of*

that, in the marshes in summer, you earn nothing out of it... We had the possibility of dropping livestock because we have a large surface area".

Cereals were synonymous with "profitability" and "less work" and cereal farming was therefore held in higher esteem on the whole. In this way, the devaluing of livestock activities led to the discrediting of the livestock farmers themselves, qualified as being backward and poor. A farmer producing only cereals said of livestock farmers: *"unlike us, they haven't done any work in the marshes, it's not a criticism but they don't earn much".* A young dairy farmer said that: *"the grain farmers are much better recognised than us by society, someone who looks after cows is seen as someone who has not managed to evolve. A livestock farmer always has to be there with his cows, while the grain farmer can set aside some free time, he has responsibilities.... it's like at the Chamber [of Agriculture], there are practically only grain farmers representing the farmers".*

A certain number of "livestock farmers" (those for whom livestock represents the main source of income) considered that they had no choice but to carry on, in many cases due to the geographical location of their land or the size of their farm. In this vision of things, livestock farming was not a choice. The distinction or even opposition between cereals and livestock appears to be the prime factor in the way in which the farmers describe the kinds of production. The size of the farm and the distance between the centre of the farm's activities and the marsh are two other important criteria used to make the distinction between the "marsh farmers" and those of the "highlands".

Livestock farmers do not have a single vision or profile, however; there are different kinds of livestock farmer and the way in which their activity is perceived varied, in particular between the two sectors. While in Moëze the preference for grain farming was dominant, in Voutron, where the livestock farmers represent a larger proportion of the farmers in the area, some of them stated a preference for rearing their animals.

To what extent is this hierarchy of professional models mirrored in the characteristics of local social organisation? Analysis of the farmers' dialogue networks highlighted differences from one area to another (Mériau, 1997):

- in Moëze, a marked divide between livestock and livestock plus cultivation, on the one hand, and cultivation only on the other, with the latter occupying a predominant position;
- in Voutron, a more strongly "integrated" network, that is to say the bond-forming criteria are less closely linked with economic size or the type of production. Among these farmers, there are no professional representatives of the *département*.

Representation of the profession in the hands of grain farmers

Despite these differences, the predominant position of the grain farmers is a feature of the whole of the marshland area and can be seen through two significant facts:

- They control the collective management of the hydraulic networks: they occupy the main positions of responsibility in the marsh management associations (in both marsh associations, the president is a crop farmer). Water management is defined in accordance with the needs of large-scale cultivation and water levels are therefore kept as low as possible.
- The profession is represented in the development bodies and the associations by grain farmers, including in the bodies dealing with the future of the marshes. The Marshland Commission of the Chamber of Agriculture, for example, is composed of farmers elected to the Board of the Chamber of Agriculture; at the beginning of the 1990s, the majority of

them were grain farmers. Discussions within this institution were thus centred on public aid and the results of research in favour of drainage and the levelling of the marshlands.

The dominant position of grain farmers in professional debates

The analysis of discussions in the meetings between farmers in the sectors of Voutron and of Moëze in the autumn of 1998[3] highlighted the dominant position of the grain farmers in every aspect of debates within the profession at that time.

- The form of debates in Moëze was characterised by the fact that discussion was concentrated around a small number of people, not only because these people took up a large part of the speaking time, but also because the discussion was organised around their vision of things. Most of the arguments put forward by the other speakers in fact supported the positions adopted initially by these leaders.
- The content of the debates was characterised by the fact that it was difficult to make specific mention of problems linked to livestock farming. When livestock breeders did speak out, their opinions were "set aside" in the name of the "need" to adopt a common standpoint. The grain farmers, the defenders of the "large-scale cultivation and drainage of the marshes" system, spoke in the name of all the farmers (setting themselves up as the guarantors of the general interest of agriculture in the marsh). Throughout the meeting, they expressed themselves in the name of the livestock breeders and of the profitability of livestock farming which, so they said, necessarily involves the levelling of the marsh: *"Outside the classified areas the farmers should be allowed to level their land. Even for grass production, so that people can live off their land... they can't with the current subsidies" "In short: crops are OK, the rest isn't viable ... "*

Only one "demand" was perceived as being acceptable, and that was the right to level the land or obtain sufficient financial support and, in the end, change things as little as possible. The livestock farmers "confirmed" the positions adopted by the grain farmers: *"I've got 60 hectares of marshes, I want to level the land but I can't... with dairy cows you can't produce milk on uneven marshland".* Whenever attempts were made to express preoccupations specific to livestock farming, these concerns were rejected by the professional leaders as being unacceptable. In this way, diverging positions were forbidden.

All things considered, the way in which the figure of the "modern farmer" was defined – and the criteria involved – would appear to be relatively similar on the institutional level and on the local level. The norms associated with cultivation of land were the reference shared by all the farmers and they provided the foundations for a hierarchy of modes of production from both the technical-economic point of view and the social point of view.

This hierarchy is no doubt more obvious with hindsight than it was at the time the model was formed – at the time, it was also the subject of some uncertainty (Billaud, 1998) – but it was also backed up by a "consensus" between agricultural policy measures and an economic situation, research programmes and interventions by agricultural development bodies that all contributed to a trend towards a single model.

2. Professional debates and negotiation between the different actors: the construction of a new professional model (from 1990 to date)

From 1990 onwards, environmental concerns – expressed with force by the representatives of the nature protection associations – found their way more and more frequently into

[3] These meetings were organised on the occasion of the launch of the local action system presented later.

discourse on agricultural policy, and the development of the Charentes marshes through farming was called into question. Four events (among others) had a significant impact on the process of challenging the drainage and cultivation approach: the setting up of the first agriculture-environment operations (OGAFs) in 1990; the signature of a protocol aimed at reconciling agricultural production with protection of the environment (1992); the complaint filed against grain farmers for ploughing grassland in the marshes (1995); and the creation of two groups of farmers to think about the future of the marshes (1998).

2.1 - How production methods were brought into question by the institutional protagonists

The environmental OGAF: public aid for marshland livestock farmers

On the implementation in 1990 of agricultural-environmental measures encouraged by the European Union, the Chamber of Agriculture's agricultural advisor in charge of the development of Rochefort marshes saw this system as a possible way of making up at least a small part of the earnings gap between livestock breeders and grain farmers. According to his assessment, the earnings per hectare in 1990 came to FRF 0 for livestock farmers and to FRF 2,000 in grain farming. He came to an agreement with the leaders of the LPO and the representatives of the State agricultural department (DDAF), with whom he was working on defining a set of specifications, to include "the preservation of natural grassland" as one of the main principles.

By giving financial incentives to livestock rearing on the land in the marshes, this OGAF marked a major turning point, for the only public funding allocated per hectare until then was for the drainage of parcels of land.[4] The farmers' leaders in the Moëze marshes, who were all grain farmers, made no mistake and excluded the agricultural adviser from their development body when he attempted to launch this measure.[5]

Going beyond the purely financial issues, the technical norms adopted also defined professional norms: the "good" farmer in this case was a livestock breeder feeding his animals primarily with grass. He must have only a small number of animals per hectare of grassland (we are speaking here of extensive farming with 0.6 to 1.4 Large Animal Units (LU) per hectare) and a significant proportion of grassland in the total surface are of the farm. When the OGAF was renewed in 1997, the percentage of grassland in the total surface area was introduced as a criterion used to calculate the amount of aid granted. The obligations of the basic contract were simply the existing practices in terms of number of animals and fertilisation of the parcels of grassland.

It was natural grassland, and thus the wet grassland, that was being targeted here for rehabilitation: the first clause of the specifications stipulated that the farmer *"must preserve the permanent natural grassland and must not plough or level it"*.

The signature of an agriculture-environment protocol: the marshes must remain green

In 1989, the European Commission threatened to make the payment of the structural funds granted on account of Objective 5b conditional on compliance with the Wild Birds Directive;

[4] The grass subsidy was set up in 1992 and did not make any territorial distinction.

[5] *"In Saint-Agnant, when I suggested thinking about the environmental OGAF, I was excluded from the Management Board of the CRDA. I was not invited to any meetings for 6 or 8 months. (...) But when the Marennes farmers* [marsh where the first OGAF was set up] *received the booklet, the Saint-Agnant farmers suddenly wanted to* [set up an OGAF]" (agricultural counsellor at the Chamber of Agriculture, June 1999).

thus implying that public funding of drainage be brought to an end. This threat became all the more pressing when, in August 1991, the Ministry for Regional Development and the Environment classified 17,000 hectares of marshlands as *Zones de Protection Spéciale* (ZPS*).*

These two steps on the part of the authorities were the result of lobbying by the LPO of the institutions in question to put an end to the ploughing of grassland[6]. The confrontation between defenders of the environment and farmers became such that the *Préfet* was instructed to intervene, leading to the signature of an "Agriculture-Environment Protocol" in December 1991.[7] The aim of this was to go further than the previous measures (the environment OGAF, in particular) by defining a set of specifications respecting the objectives of environmental protection of the marshes while taking into account the economic objectives of the professional actors, and first and foremost the farmers, who are the main users of the land in the marshes.

A principle of dialogue was established for the definition of these specifications. A system was set up on the level of the *département* to bring together the institutional protagonists concerned by management of the marshes to discuss their points of view: the signatories of the protocol plus the LPO, the individual marsh associations and their federation, and scientific experts (including the INRA). At the heart of the discussions, as we shall see later, were the issues of setting water levels and keeping the grassland wet, and more broadly that of keeping livestock-breeding in the marshlands.

The Martin case (1995): grain farmers taken to court

These meetings had been going on for 4 years when, in early 1995, 20 hectares of meadows in unlevelled marshland were levelled for cultivation. This land belonged to Mr Martin and was farmed on a tenant-farming basis by Mr Courant. It was located in the Moëze marsh, in a perimeter classed as a ZPS. The administration and several wildlife protection associations filed a complaint against Mr Martin and Mr Courant for infringement of the 1992 Law on Water *"for having dried a wetland of more than 1000m^2 without authorisation, and having built embankments".*

Initially, the magistrate's court of Rochefort discharged the accused in late 95 on the grounds that the area was not "wetlands" but *"dried and without embankments"* (cf. *L'agriculteur Charentais* of 24/01/97). But after a great many developments, the Council of State found Messrs Martin and Courant guilty in early 2000.

This affair was followed very closely by farmers. It revealed the fact that grain farmers could be taken to court for ploughing land in the marshes, and not only by environmental protection associations, but also by certain administrations.

The deployment of a local action system in Moëze and Voutron (1998): the turn of the livestock farmers to speak

The decision to try an approach involving the farmers from the marshes more directly in the consultative bodies, rather than purely through their elected professional representatives (a

[6] For more information and an analysis of the conflict opposing the nature protection associations and the farming protagonists, see Billaud, 1996.

[7] *Protocole d'Aménagement et de Gestion Concertés des Marais de Charente Maritime* - Préfecture de la Charente Maritime. La Rochelle, 6 December 1991. Signatories: the *Préfet*, the Presidents of the Local Council and Regional Council, the President of the Chamber of Agriculture, the Presidents of the regional shellfish-breeding sections of Marennes Oléron and Ré Centre-West, and the President of a nature protection association (the SEPRONAS).

decision proposed by the INRA) came after the failure to define a set of specifications despite a large number of meetings having been held.

A so-called "local action" system was set up with the methodological support of the sociologists of the GERDAL[8] in two hydraulic management areas: those of the marsh management associations of Moëze and Voutron. In concrete terms, the aim was to bring together, in each sector, the farmers working their land in the marshes to give them the opportunity to express the difficulties they were encountering and to discuss their view of developments in their activity in the marshes. On the basis of the problems expressed in these meetings, working groups would then be created in order to elaborate, with the help of teams of facilitators, solutions (one group, one problem) or at least proposals, and to discuss them with the other people concerned.

Once these groups were formed, a choice had to be made from among the problems that had been formulated (about ten in each sector) in order to know which of them the farmers wanted to concentrate on as a priority.[9] As well as the number of people enrolled for each problem, a second factor also came into play in this choice: the common desire of the Chamber of Agriculture, the INRA and the Gerdal to involve the opinions of the livestock farmers. And so it was that two groups composed mainly of livestock farmers began their meetings in each of the marshes in autumn 1998.

- The group in Voutron worked on the question *"How to ensure we are consulted and listened to regarding the measures in the pipeline."*
- The Moëze group looked into the question: *"How to continue livestock farming in the marshes and make a living out of it."*

The launch of this action gave a concrete indication in two areas of the desire of two traditional institutional interlocutors of the farmers: the Chamber of Agriculture and the INRA, to let the livestock breeders have their say on the specific matter of the evolution of farming activity in the marshes. For the INRA, it was a case of establishing dialogue with professionals who were more in tune with the new research objectives that it was setting up: livestock rearing systems, natural grasslands and territory. One of their study programmes covered the methods and practices of grassland management.[10]

A new vision of livestock breeding by the institutional actors

In its own way, each of these four events has marked the changes occurring in the vision the institutions have of the farming profession and in the social standing of livestock farmers on the agricultural development stage.

The environmental OGAF caused a sensation because it attempted to revalue breeding financially. At the same time, it laid down aid eligibility criteria which were to become a

[8] The GERDAL was solicited in the research programme PNRZH – ARAMIS and the LEADER programme of the *département* in a twofold capacity: 1. to carry out a study on the forms of social organisation of the marshland farmers and an observation of the dialogue measures underway, in order to highlight the factors likely to favour cooperation between people. 2. to plan and support the set-up of a working measure with the farmers, as part of the dialogue objective.

[9] On the one hand, the team of facilitators could only physically monitor one group per area. On the other hand, the farmers did not feel concerned by all the problems expressed. They were asked enrol for the ones they wanted to deal with.

[10] The aim was to evaluate its ecological impact on the environment and to "*provide the tools to characterise the grasslands*." With an interest accorded to the rationales of protagonists and the marshes as a whole, the research works had to "*contribute to maintaining and developing an agricultural yet ecologically sustainable use of the marshes, in economically viable farms integrated into the development of an area with many different protagonists"* (research programme 1995-1999).

reference for the technical management of marsh grasslands, although not without the livestock breeders disputing them over the following years. Lastly, it marked the arrival of new participants in debates in and around farming activities, such as the representatives of nature protection associations whose viewpoint is now taken into consideration by the public authorities.

The agriculture – environment protocol took this one step further, highlighting the fact that this negotiation with these protagonists (including the administration) was taking on obligatory status, and the "monopoly of use" of the marches that they had enjoyed previously was "definitively" contested (Billaud ,1996). In a way, this negotiation became a part of their profession. The very formulation of a specific question considered as a priority - "*How to ensure we are consulted and listened to regarding the measures in the pipeline*" - is a sign of just how important this aspect of things is in their professional preoccupations.

With the Martin case in which ploughing of grassland was condemned in court, the legal system confirmed the choices made previously on the level of social values.

This process of rehabilitation encouraged livestock farmers to enter the public sphere of debate; this was what was started when the local action measure was put in place.

2.2 Discussions between the LPO and livestock breeders about the ecological vocation of the marshes: towards cultivated grassland

We will now take a closer look at the type of debate these events have given rise to locally. The representatives of the wildlife protection associations, the most significant of which on the local level is the LPO, had always affirmed the "biological and ecological" vocation of the marshes and criticized its use for farming. They qualified the marsh from a strictly environmental point of view, through its rich fauna. The exceptional habitat conditions for birds provided by wetlands were stressed as needing to be preserved.

At the moment when the Agriculture–Environment protocol was signed, the objective expressed in this respect was to reduce the gap between the existing management of the marshes and the "biological optimum". This involved raising the water levels, the main subject of negotiation with farming representatives. *"The objectives concern parcel hydromorphy and aim to maintain a hygrophilous plant life that is rich in patrimonial species:*

- *The need for frequent submersion when the migratory birds pass (January to March) in order to preserve or even improve the conditions for wild birds (greylag goose, black-tailed godwit, ruff);*
- *Drops in water level for nesting at the end of the winter and in spring (from early April to mid-July).*
- *The need for flooding of spawning grounds on the grasslands from 15 January to the end of February in relation with the network."* (LPO, Technical Committee meeting, July 94)

In the face of these objectives, it was initially farming activity as a whole that stood accused. However, the stalemate in the negotiations about the raising of water levels was to lead the representatives of the environmental cause to change their view of farming activities. The many discussions they then had with researchers in agronomics and the representatives of agriculture led them to differentiate between livestock and grain farming and, in the light of this, to widen their objectives (Ruault, Candau, 2000): the LPO now recognised that livestock rearing and the conservation of the area as wetlands could in fact be reconciled.

At the same time, direct dialogue "in the field' with farmers led the representatives of the LPO to consolidate this association, and to fine-tune their vision of things by differentiating between several types of practice within livestock farming as a whole. After a visit to a dairy farmer in Voutron, a representative of the LPO said this (interview June 1999); *"I've seen the environmental quality of this system. We must recognise this as being an effective tool. It is a model in terms of grass production. It exploits the grass with extraordinary finesse, and as such deserves respect."*

The aims of the LPO thus finally came to be revised: *the priority is to maintain livestock breeding in the marshes, and to maintain existing systems,* with the use of the natural grasslands (even when it is not the only basis for feeding animals on a farm). This preservation then became a means in itself to move towards an "environmental management" of the marsh. *"But unlike grain systems, these systems do not have an assured viability, and their economic fragility must be taken into account"* (Representative of the LPO, interview in June 1999).

This more in-depth awareness of farming practices on the part of the LPO went hand-in-hand with a more precise consideration of space. From this point on, the discussion with the livestock farmers revolved around finding ways of adapting the application of the technical norms that had previously been laid down for the whole of the marsh (reaping date, level of fertilisation…). The representatives of this institution thought that "*once the environmental objectives have been set on the scale of the marsh, linked with an appreciation of biodiversity on this scale, different measures according to the farms and their characteristics – plot division among others – may be applied"* (LPO, Meeting with the farmers, June 2000). The question of levelling, hitherto taboo, could now be tackled and the LPO now recognised that "*the basins do not all have the same aquatic value. We have to qualify the nature of the habitat… We have to qualify the plant life and pinpoint things according to the farmer's project. If we lose one type of habitat, perhaps we will gain another"* (LPO, meeting with a group of farmers, June 2000).

The confrontation between the "ecological" point of view and the practical point of view of the livestock farmers led, thanks to "technical discussions" on the subject of the differentiated application of environmental protection norms, to a more complex way of classifying space. In particular, we note the emergence of a new category of space: that of (levelled) cultivated grassland, whereas before people spoke only of natural grassland or cultivated land. This grassland, devoid of any great proven ecological interest, ensures plentiful grass production for the livestock farmers and thus improves the long-term viability of livestock activities.

In the name of the biological richness of the habitat, the livestock breeders, stigmatised until recently for having missed the "train of modernisation", are now perceived as being the guarantors of the future of the marshes and have regained a social standing. Is this change in the rules of legitimacy in institutional debates and the rehabilitation of livestock farming in the eyes of non-farming actors shared in agricultural circles? How do the livestock farmers themselves perceive the technical norms selected by these protagonists? An analysis of debates in the profession provides some elements of response.

2.3. On the local level, the emergence of new subjects specific to marshland livestock farming in debates between farmers

In the course of the meetings marking the launch of the "local action" system in the marshes of Moëze and Voutron[11] in the autumn of 1998, farmers were invited to express their thoughts on how they saw the future of their activity. The debate was organised around several subjects reflecting different levels of analysis of the situation. This discussion that was to continue for two years in the two working groups was to reveal a certain number of tensions.

Some preoccupations relating to the global evolution in the conditions in which they work were shared by all the farmers in the two areas:

- the feeling that they are increasingly dependent on subsidies and worries as to future changes in marshland protection measures which are perceived as becoming more and more restrictive. *"If you take away the whole subsidy system, you can't manage! There are 30 farmers here, but if you take away the subsidies, not one of us can make a living". "Inside the Natura 2000 perimeter (which will concern the Moëze marsh), we'll even have to ask for permission to cut thistles!"... It's not our land any more".*
- The fear of losing control over real estate and water-management operations, due to the presence of new members (the LPO and the *Conservatoire du Littoral*) in the marsh management associations in their capacity as landowners.
- The feeling that they are not consulted about the implementation of marshland protection measures. "*It is not possible to refuse to adapt, but what we want is the right to speak and to be heard, for it to be worthwhile".*

These preoccupations reflect a vision of the profession marked by the model of the land-owner and farmer, the economically independent "company chief" free to exploit his land as he sees fit. It is this ideal professional identity which is profoundly affected by the obligation imposed on farmers to account for what they do in the marshes in return for subsidies which seem to them to obey criteria of definition and allocation on which they have no say.

Going beyond this backdrop, a process of thinking through rearing techniques fell into place in each working group in connection with the objective of "making themselves heard" and of bringing their weight to bear on the negotiations to define the rules for managing the marshes.

This thinking came to be based on the highlighting and analysis of the variety of different situations and modes of production. In this way, they distinguished between those who rear livestock and those who do not, those who irrigate and those who do not and the different ways of exploiting the marshland parcels to feed the animals, depending on the ownership structure of the farm.

- Some livestock farmers thus pointed out different needs in water: *"the crops must not be extended too far into livestock areas, I'm down in the marsh and I have enough water". "There is nowhere like enough dialogue, there are people who are watering the land... Why not store it up in winter and leave the water to the oyster farmers and livestock in the summer?"*
- This expression of diversity was also reflected in the challenging of certain practices in terms of fertilisation: *"Nitrogen, when there is spreading in the Muron marshes and it rains afterwards, it goes into the water and then the cattle drink it".* Or on the subject of what form development should take, one livestock farmer pointed out that levelling is no longer so profitable today, *"unless they give us 11 000 Francs per hectare".*

[11] All the farmers working land in the marshes, that is to say 70 per sector, were invited to these meetings. A little under half of them turned up, that is to say about thirty in each sector.

- Finally, and this was a central issue in the debate, the consequences of environmental protection measures are not the same for everybody.

These points are all signs that professional debate has opened out and that it is now possible to formulate questions that are specific to livestock farming. Basing ourselves on the question chosen at the beginning in Moëze, for example - *"how to continue livestock farming in the marshes and make a living out of it"* – the point for the livestock farmers is to bring those who decide on environmental measures to define criteria that take into account the difficulties or losses of earnings linked with the conditions on wetland parcels.

The analysis of individual situations led the livestock farmers to put the problems to be resolved if they are to live from their activities into more precise terms:

- It is difficult to feed the animals only with marsh grassland, hence the necessary combination of natural wet grassland and dry cultivated grassland. "*The quality is not right when the animals come out of the marshes, grass does not finish them off right … …it's OK when the farmer also has high land*". For those without high or drained land, they need to be able to defend the need to level a part of their land in the marshes to improve fodder production (in terms of quality and quantity).
- Although the notion of quality is present in their reasoning, the farmers consider that it is difficult to achieve quality in the marshes, whether in dairy or in meat production. *"I am a dairy producer with 55 % of my land in very bad marshes. I have problems with cells in my milk resulting in big penalties on the price…" "You can't make good-quality meat with poor-quality fodder…"*

These different examples show that the redefinition of the criteria for qualifying the modes of use of marshland parcels does not mean that crop farming is devalued in the eyes of the farmers, far from it. It is important that the marshes provide reserves of fodder in order to "free the high land" for crops to be sold. The latter constitute an important additional source of earnings.

Changes in relationship systems and the challenging of the grain farmers' monopoly on representation of the profession in institutional forums of debate.

The emergence in professional debate of the issues of livestock farming is perceived by grain farmers, however, as a challenge to existing models. This is all the more true in that the fact livestock farmers are speaking up reflects a challenge to the monopoly of grain farmers on representation of the profession in the institutional decision-making and debate forums where agricultural issues are dealt with. In fact, this professional representation of marshland farmers will be modified by the proposals made to the livestock farmers, by the agricultural development and research organisations in particular, to take part in the bodies where the dialogue is taking place.

This process of emergence of new forms is therefore changing social positions in the local farming milieu. The grain farmers know what they are doing when they react to initiatives on the part of groups of livestock farmers to organise discussions with ecologists by trying to demonstrate the uselessness or even the "dangerous" character of such steps: *"you'll see; you'll get used".*

Although after two years, the permanence of the livestock farmers' working groups raises hopes of a new configuration of dialogue networks, paradoxically, local recognition of these farmers is not assured. For the moment, it would appear to be relatively dependent on the legitimacy acquired by marshland livestock farming issues in relations with the institutional actors who are the "partners" of the farmers.

There are several points indicating their willingness to take specific livestock-farming issues into account. The research programmes set up by the INRA are one. The Chamber of Agriculture initially adopted a relatively sceptical attitude towards these groups, waiting to see what results they produced, but at an assessment meeting held after one year, it encouraged the group of farmers in Voutron to continue its work and to make proposals to the multi-actor bodies in charge of drawing up the CTE (a new agricultural policy intervention system in France). Delegates from the group were thus invited to take part in their meetings. This was made possible by the creation of discussion places in which the central subject was livestock farming or, more precisely, marshland livestock farming.

Conclusion

We are seeing a process of rehabilitation of livestock farming around the figure of the "extensive" farmer or, more precisely, the farmer using natural grassland.

This process of redefining the profession of farmer is taking place in several places of discussion and affects several institutional fields (agricultural policy, agricultural development, research, environmental protection policy, the legal system), thus making it all the more efficient. Although the participation of some of the protagonists is in no way new (the farmers, researchers, State departments, *Préfecture*), that of others, such as the wildlife protection associations, is however.

Through the large number of different forums and the way in which debate is constructed there, not only between participants with contrasting systems of reference, but also within a professional category (farmers, in particular), it clearly appears that the evolution in professional models (in this case the emergence of grass farming) is not a linear process. On the contrary, it is made up of tensions and contradictions that operate on both the cognitive and social levels. For example, although grain farmers appear to be opposed to this model, they nevertheless continue to benefit from high professional recognition. The farmers are most attached to the idea of independence (of not having to justify what they do, which is not the case when it comes to respecting sets of specifications) and aspire to be freed of certain obligations: the young are not particularly attracted by livestock farming that remains much more demanding in terms of work. This divergence is also reinforced by the existing gap – and this is a paradox – between the "moral rehabilitation" and the "economic revaluation" of stock farming, with earnings from this activity remaining much lower than those from grain farming.

This divide between two models does not cover differences of scale or of place of discussion: we do not observe a logic of domination exerted on farmers by the institutional protagonists. It runs through the agricultural organisations and marshland farmers just as it runs through State departments. We can see in this dynamic a characteristic feature of the way in which the redefinition of technical norms operates: the emergence of new questions and subjects of debate are discussed in different places that are not isolated from each other. These places are interrelated, in particular through the fact that some of their members belong to several of the places, and they have complementary roles (Ruault 2000).

In the discussion between farmers and defenders of the environmental cause, the evolution of the qualification of space has been settled through the confrontation of opposed ideas expressed at the beginning in the form of objectives that were incompatible with each other. In order to ensure at least minimum understanding (with a view to coming to an agreement), it was necessary to bring about the emergence of new subjects of debate likely to be recognised as being relevant by those on different sides. This led to an adjustment of the respective ways

of seeing a spatial object common to agricultural activity and to the biotope: natural grassland (implicitly recognised as being wet).

The discussion between farmers was also necessary to come to a more complex, precise interpretation of the land and a redefinition of the criteria adopted (and recognised) to qualify parcels, notably by seeing natural grassland as being complementary in relation to other types of land producing fodder.

Through the example of the Charentes marshes in which the professional model of the grain farmer continues to be valued alongside the increasingly recognised model of the grass farmer, we can see a component of today's modernity: the co-existence of a variety of models. We can see increasingly complex systems of technical norms and a process of diversification of the criteria used to qualify "good farmers". The current redefinition of the profession is not taking place, as it did in the 1950s and 1960s, through the promotion of a single professional model. This study also shows that this very much cognitive process goes hand-in-hand with the restructuring of the usual places of professional discussion and of the forms of social organisation.

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