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

Antoine BERNARD DE RAYMOND

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

*Keywords: field crops; specialization; family farming; partnership; farm management.*

## **1. Introduction**

The 2010 French agricultural census confirmed several long-term trends in domestic agriculture: like elsewhere (Ilbery and Bowler, 1998; Mather, 1992; Pritchard and McManus, 2000), the number of farms is steadily declining, and remaining farms are becoming larger and more specialized. France now has fewer than 500,000 professional

farms, with an average size of 74 ha (Agreste, 2011-a)<sup>1</sup>. One possible interpretation of these trends is that they correspond to global changes and to the emergence of a neoliberal food regime (Friedmann and McMichael, 1989; Friedmann, 1992; McMichael, 2005) based on free international trade and biotechnology (Burch and Lawrence, 2009; Pechlaner and Otero, 2008). The internationalization and liberalization of agricultural markets are said to be forcing farmers to adapt to a more competitive global environment by lowering production costs – a process which entails a shift to larger and more specialized farms (McMichael, 2009).

According to this rationale, the process of specialization and expansion mainly consists in adjusting to global economic constraints (Friedmann, 1993: 34, McMichael, 2009, Pechlaner and Otero, 2010). Based on a case-study of specialized field-crop farming in the east of France, this article aims to nuance this approach by showing that farm specialization is not only a response to external economic pressure, but also relates to a series of internal factors, such as workload, family structure and farm management. If one takes these elements into account, it is possible to reveal a variety of experiences and trajectories, a new diversification in farming models and new types of organization (in terms of work, management and partnerships on farms) behind the apparent shift towards larger and specialized farms. The process of specialization thus raises issues not only in relation to the economic performance of farms, but also with regard to an entire model of

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<sup>1</sup> Agreste is the statistical service of the French Ministry of Agriculture. See Agreste's Website: <http://www.agreste.agriculture.gouv.fr/>. In France, professional farming is defined by two criteria (Rattin, 2007): on the one hand an economic size greater than 8 European Size Units (statistical unit of measurement corresponding to approximately 1.5 ha of wheat) and on the other hand a quantity of work greater than 0.75 Annual Work Units (statistical unit of measurement corresponding to one person's full-time work over a period of one year, i.e. approximately 1,880 hours).

agricultural development, based on family farming (Marsden, 1984, Moulin, 1991)<sup>2</sup>. Rather than seeing the reproduction or disappearance of farming models as being simply linked to a global *food regime* (McMichael, 2005, 2009), we need to look at farm specialization as a process which affects various aspects of agriculture and which incrementally transforms family farms. Rather than the disappearance or reproduction of family farming, the relevant issue raised by specialization is the potential separation of elements usually joined together in family farming (Cheshire and al., 2013, Johnsen, 2004, Pritchard et al., 2007).

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

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

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

farm management. Finally, I show that these transformations raise issues about the modernized figure of the farmer, relying on the juxtaposition between work space, residence and family (Cf. Johnsen, 2004).

## ***2. The persistence of family farming in a capitalist environment***

The issue of family farming in modern agriculture has been the subject of extensive debate among scholars (Magnan 2012, Mooney, 1982, Pritchard *et al.*, 2007, Reinhardt and Barlett, 1989). In particular, these debates relate to the contributions made by Marxist approaches, which considerably renewed north-American rural sociology at the end of the 1970s (Buttel *et al.*, 1990, Buttel, 2001). The continued persistence of family farming throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century – characterized by family ownership, family work and the coupling of business and household (Gasson and Errington, 1993) – constituted a challenge for Marxist analysis, which predicted the development of a capitalist agricultural system based on large-scale wage labor farms (Marx, 1887, 1969). To explain the absence of such developments, some Marxist sociologists have highlighted the distinctiveness of farming (Friedmann, 1978, Mann and Dickinson, 1978). Farming is here assumed to be unsuitable for capitalist corporate control, because of the seasonal, perishable and variable nature of agricultural production. This intrinsic variability is thus supposed to constitute an impediment to capitalist penetration into farming. Following Weber, or authors of the Marxist tradition (such as Chayanov or Kautsky), other rural sociologists have disputed this point of view. Mooney thus suggests going beyond what he qualifies as “teleological analysis”, which presupposes the disintegration of the petty-bourgeoisie, giving way to a head-on confrontation between the proletariat and the

capitalist class (Mooney, 1983). For Mooney, there is indeed a capitalist penetration into farming (as indicated by farmers' indebtedness in order to mechanize their farms and buy land), but like in other sectors, it makes "detours" (Mooney, 1982). Capitalist penetration in agriculture does not lead to a simple polarization between the proletariat and the capitalist class, but to a contradictory class location and to the development of various family farming models which are increasingly integrated into the capitalist system. It is possible to maintain family farming within a capitalist environment because evolutions in farming models follow not only an economic rationale, but also subjective and ideological determinants (Mooney, 1983, 1987). Following on from these initial debates, rural sociology was filled with controversies surrounding the future of family farming, essentially opposing two schools of thought, the *subsumption school* and the *survival school* (Bjorkaug, 2012, Johnsen, 2004). For proponents of the subsumption school, family farming was destined to be integrated into capitalist circuits (Friedland et al., 1981, De Janvry, 1980) and thus to fall under either formal or real capitalist control (De Haan, 1994). In particular, this approach gave rise to works on the *disappearing middle* in the 1980s (Buttel and LaRamee, 1991). For the survival school on the other hand, family farming was likely to maintain itself precisely because the partial non-commodification of assets (land, work) made it more competitive than capitalist farming which was subject to a strict imperative of profitability (Friedmann, 1978, Mann, 1990). Later on, these debates became less central, due to the increasing importance of research on globalization or on food regimes (Friedmann, 1987, Friedmann and McMichael, 1989), leading to a shift in social science focus from farming to international agri-food systems. Nevertheless, in such approaches the issue of farming models and of the

competition between family farming and corporate farming remain present, if only latently (Friedmann, 1987, McMichael, 2005), as can be seen from recent debates on global landgrabbing (Magnan, 2012).

Works on the persistence of family farming or contemporary research on the competition between family farming and corporate farming in the context of a corporate food regime (or third food regime) generally adopt a structuralist approach (Bjorkhaug, 2012). These macro-level analyses leave little room for the points of view of the actors, for an analysis of their motivations and for the micro-level processes which cause people to shift from one model to another (Johnsen, 2003). Similarly, they do not grasp the diversity in trajectories and experiences which lie behind the apparent convergence of aggregate statistics (Long, 2001). The food regime approach does not conclude that a single agrarian production model is uniformly imposed upon all actors, but the preservation of a wide diversity of farming models is generally viewed as a form of resistance to a supposedly dominant norm. The global institutional arrangement acts as an external environment to which actors have no choice but to adapt. By adopting an actor-oriented approach, one ceases to see them as disembodied social categories, to look at the strategies that they bring into play to appropriate an institutional framework (Long, 2001). Social change then appears not as the unequivocal consequence of a new global political norm, but as the singular product of the appropriation of these norms by actors (Tennent and Lockie, 2001). In addition, focus on actors allows us to shed light on the diversity of motives for action. As stated, debates on the persistence of family farming were very much marked by a Marxist approach (or even neo-Marxist or post-Marxist, as with the *food regime approach*) for which the capitalist yardstick is the appropriation of

surplus value by capital. It is within such an analytical framework that family farming appears to be a paradox, a sign of contradiction or detour. From a Weberian perspective, capitalism is characterized not by the commodification of labor but by the accounting imperative of profitability, of balancing income and expenditure, input and output (Weber, 2003). This is why, for Weber, we can talk about capitalism, even in Antiquity (Weber, 1976). The other difference between Weber's approach and Marx's approach is that for Weber, the economy is simply one form of rationalization among many, and not the central force which transforms society (Weber, 1978). Furthermore, the economy can itself be molded by other forms of rationalization – religious, political, ethical, legal or technical (Weber, 1993). From this point of view, we can analyse family farming not as an obstacle to capitalist development (as in Mann and Dickinson, 1978), but as a shortcut to such development, i.e. straight away as an original form of agrarian capitalism which comprises not only an economic model but also its own ideology, a model for social integration (based on family and on solidarity between farmers) and specific work organization (see the following section). It then becomes possible to apprehend changes affecting family farming not in accordance with a global logic of reproduction or of shifts from one model to another, but in an incremental manner on the basis of singular forms of hybridization between different models (Pritchard et al., 2007, Hervieu and Purseigle, 2013). Specifically, the issue is to look at how family farms are losing certain features of the ideal type of family farming, keeping some and integrating others borrowed from a corporate model. The current phenomenon of concentration and specialization in farms can thus be interpreted not simply as the rise of corporate farming, in response to the demands for competitiveness of a globalized market, but also as the connection of

different processes such as the transformation of family structures, of farmers' lifestyles, of the diversification of production techniques, of forms of partnership and of farm management.

### ***3. The rise (and fall?) of family farming in post-war France***

The literature on the persistence of family farming often leaves little room for the institutional and policy frame of modern agriculture. In fact, taking this institutional or policy frame into account helps put the paradoxical nature of family farming into perspective (Calus and Van Huylenbroeck, 2010), as the *intended* goal of modernization policies was in fact to build family-based agriculture (Gervais et Tavernier, 1976). In France for instance, modernization was sharply inspired by the vision of the farmers' union *Jeunesse Agricole Catholique* (Catholic Farm Youth), which aimed to reconcile productivist goals with a conservative view of social order (Colson, 1980, Cleary, 1989, Lem, 1988). Their influence can be seen in the 1960 and 1962 *Lois d'Orientation Agricole* (Farm Acts), which made the “*exploitation à 2 UTH*”<sup>4</sup> (two-worker farm) a national goal (Moulin, 1991, Rémy, 1987). The two-worker farm was clearly an ideological norm, an economic model and also a social norm (Laurent and Rémy, 1998): it was designed to provide sufficient work for two people (implicitly a man and his wife). Government services then strove to locally define the minimum surface area and suitable technical systems required to satisfy this norm (Atrux, 2011).

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<sup>4</sup> UTH stands for “Unité de Travail Humain”, meaning full-time worker.

Against the oft-asserted principle of separation of business from household as a precondition to modern capitalism<sup>5</sup>, work, family and residence concentrate on a single locus (“the farm”) under agricultural modernization. By securing land use rights, the 1946 Tenant Farming reform (*Statut du fermage*) favored the stable establishment of farmers in a given agricultural space<sup>6</sup>, and, through the legal notion of *exploitation agricole* (farm), marked the advent of an agricultural system which surpassed the opposition between owner-farming and tenant farming (Laurent and Rémy, 1998): beyond the issue of landowner identity, it is the merging of the farm manager (*chef d’exploitation*) and the farm worker into the same person which characterizes the agrarian system put in place<sup>7</sup>. Whilst wage-labor developed strongly in French agriculture through to the 1950s, the modernization of farming (mechanized production, family work) led to a “de-salarisation” of farming and to the rise of a model based on independent workers, backed by their families (Gervais and Tavernier, 1976).

These post-war transformations led to the settlement of farmers on specific lands, allowing them to catch up with the traditional elites of rural spaces – landlords, etc. (Laferté, 2012). The number of farmers dropped steeply (Hervieu and Purseigle, 2013), but those who remained were able to become local elites by attaining positions of political power (Koebel, 2012). Farmers putting down permanent roots, and the equation of the farm manager with the farm worker, were therefore a feature of rural

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<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, Weber’s insights on the role of double-entry book-keeping in the development of modern capitalism (Weber, 2003).

<sup>6</sup> Farmers’ stability in space, then, is characteristic of modernization, not of traditional rural patterns. On inner rural space mobility in 19<sup>th</sup> century France, see Rosental (1999).

<sup>7</sup> The term “*exploitant agricole*” (farm operator) which is officially used serves that purpose, by equating farm management with field work.

modernization<sup>8</sup>. So rather than being a paradox, family farming appears as a historical *compromise* between State and peasantry: family-based farming not only *resisted* modernization but *developed* and consolidated into it (Remy, 2010).

Furthermore, to ensure that domestic production was sufficiently high – and to avoid the double “threat” of corporate and socialist farming types – farmers were given a legal tool which enabled them to create formal business partnerships and run their farms with other farmers (Barthez, 2007): the *Groupement Agricole d’Exploitation en Commun* (GAEC – *Common Farming Group*), created in 1962. The status and role of the GAEC is ambiguous: while it has a corporate form, in principle bringing farms into a corporate rationale, the vast majority are created between family members (Barthez, 1993, 2007).

Whilst the family-farming model dominated throughout the 1960s, it was to the detriment of competing models such as peasant farming or corporate farming. As from the 1980s, following a major agricultural crisis in the 1970s and faced with the emergence of industrial farming, the corporate model began to dominate once again (Muller et al., 1989). In 1985, a new status of non-trading farming company was created – the *Entreprise Agricole à Responsabilité Limitée* (EARL – *Limited Liability Farm Company*) – which for the very first time made it possible to separate professional assets from family property and to separate the farmer, as a worker, from the remainder of the family: one major difference between an EARL and a GAEC is that it can have a single member (Laurent and Rémy, 1998). Nevertheless, an EARL is not an ordinary company - it is not

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<sup>8</sup> The modernized family farm thus brings into contrast two prior models: small peasant-owner farming and tenant farming controlled by traditional landlords (Agulhon, Désert and Specklin, 1976). Note again that before the 1946 Land Rights reform tenant farming was totally different from what it was afterwards.

freely transferable, for example. This corporate rationale has been reinforced on several occasions since then, so as to facilitate the adaptation of French agriculture to European and global markets, encouraging the creation of trading companies in agriculture, or opening on-farm investment to non-farmers, as with the *Société Civile d'Exploitation Agricole* (SCEA), which makes it possible for investors outside the agricultural profession to provide capital (Olivier-Salvagnac and Legagneux, 2012). The recent 2006 LOA (*farm bill*) thus openly called for the development of entrepreneurial forms and for the development of wage labor in order to promote the competitiveness and multi-functionality of French agriculture at global level (Mundler and Rémy, 2012).

In agriculture, corporate forms have increased by 4% per year since 1988, representing 30% of farms and approximately 50% of farmed land in 2010 (Hervieu and Purseigle, 2013: 153). Companies correspond to farms with an average size of 180 ha (wheat equivalent) and employ an above average level of non-family manpower (Rattin, 2007). Among the medium and large-size farms<sup>9</sup>, there are now 170,000 individual farmers, 76,600 EARLs, 36,000 GAECs, 21,400 non-trading companies and approximately 5,000 limited companies (Agreste, 2011-d). According to Olivier-Salvagnac and Legagneux (2011), only the non-trading and limited companies can be considered to have real corporate structures, given that the vast majority of EARLs and GAECs are made up of persons maintaining family links.

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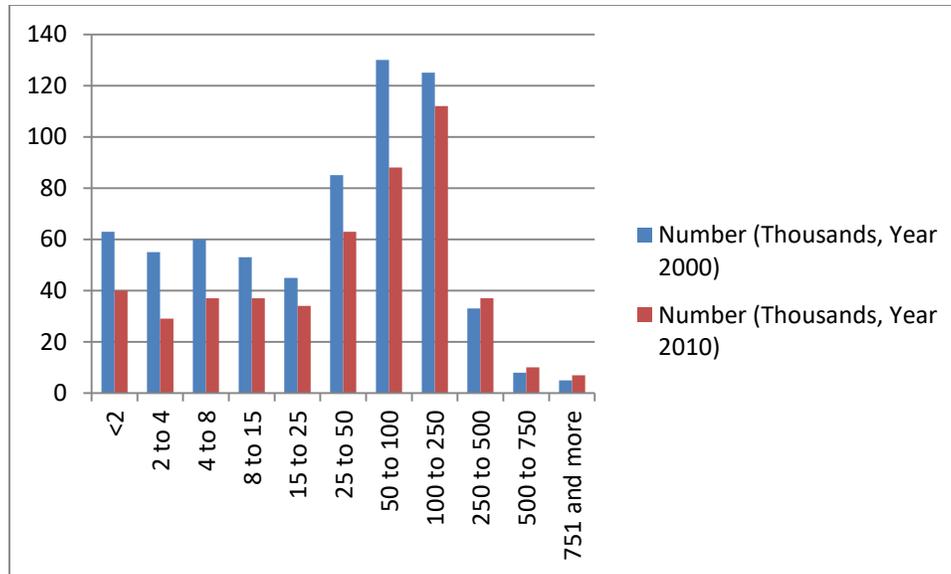
<sup>9</sup> Medium and large-size farms are statistical categories. They relate to a potential level of production with an estimated value of at least 25,000€ for medium-size farms and of 100,000 for large farms.

These transformations in legal models for farms are not dictated solely by market changes and by agriculture's integration into industry; they are also dictated by transformations in family structure and work organization. In particular, one major change since the farm bills of the 1960s is the shift of housewives outside of agriculture, with the majority now having salaried jobs away from the farm (Blanc and MacKinnon, 1990). To an ever-increasing extent, farmers are now men working on their own (Nicourt, 2013), without any help from their wives or another family member (Agreste, 2011-a). Furthermore, although the dominant model is still for farms to be passed down within the family, an increasing number of individuals from outside the family are entering farming (Agreste, 2005, Bernier, 2006).

This evolution in work organization runs alongside structural transformations in French agriculture since the end of the 1980s. The number of farms went from over a million in 1988 to 490,000 in 2010 (Agreste, 2011). This overall drop in the number of farms went hand in hand with a strong fall in the number of small farms (<50 ha) and with an increase in large farms (> 100 ha), (see Graph 1).

*Graph 1*

Distribution of French farms according to their size, in 2000 and 2010



Field crop farming is now the specialization most frequently adopted by farmers. Farm concentration mainly benefits farms which are already specialized (Agreste, 2011-e). Farms specializing in field crops are those with the largest average surface area, approximately 122 ha (Agreste, 2011-e).

To summarize, French farming has been marked by structural trends tending towards the reduction, concentration and specialization of farms, to the individualization of farming work within the family group and to the emergence of corporate forms the “firm-like” nature of which remains hard to determine.

#### **4. Data and method**

This article is based on an in-depth farm-gate level inquiry among “field-crop farmers” in the north of the Côte d’Or *département*, in Burgundy (eastern France), in the area of Châtillon-sur-Seine, approximately 80 km from the regional capital. While the south of Côte d’Or (the area of Dijon and Beaune) is world-famous for its fine wines, food and

landscapes, the north remains almost unknown to the public. It is an essentially rural region, with a very low population density compared to regional and national figures. The population of northern Côte d’Or has been in permanent decline for decades, falling to its current level of approximately 20,000 inhabitants (INSEE, 2008). Châtillon-sur-Seine, the main local town, has approximately 5,500 inhabitants.

*Insert map of France<sup>10</sup> and map of Côte d’Or<sup>11</sup> here*

In northern Côte d’Or, the “modernization” of agriculture after WW2 manifested itself with the establishment of farms of dozens of hectares, generally based on integrated crop-livestock systems (for the most part including dairy) with field crops intended for animal feed (Mathal 1969; Barthélémy and Boinon 1973). Cereal crops were gradually developed within these dairy farms (Royer, 1970), until they became the main farming orientation at the beginning of the 2000s (Agreste, 2010).

In the Châtillon-sur-Seine *canton* where the study was mainly conducted, farms have an average size of 138 ha (Agreste, 2011b), whereas in the Côte d’Or *département* it is 115 ha, against an average of only 77 ha throughout the rest of France.<sup>12</sup> In 2005, for the whole Burgundy region, the average size of specialized field crop farms was estimated to be 155 ha (Agreste, 2006).

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<sup>10</sup> Source: <http://statistiques-mondiales.fr>

<sup>11</sup> Source: <http://maps.google.com>

<sup>12</sup> In France, there are traditionally 5 administrative levels, from the smallest to the largest: *Commune* (town or city), *Canton*, *Département*, *Région*, and *Etat* (State). There are 36,000 *communes*, 4,000 *cantons*, 95 *départements* and 22 *régions* in metropolitan France. Each *canton* has an average area of 150 km<sup>2</sup> and an average population of 15,000 inhabitants. Note that Châtillon-sur-Seine is both a town and the name of the local *canton*.

Like elsewhere in France, the number of farmers in this *département* is in continuous decline, and farms are becoming larger and more specialized. The total number of farms (professional and non-professional farms included) in Côte d’Or dropped by 20% between 2000 and 2010, to 4900. Small farms decreased by 41% and medium farms by 30%, whereas large farms increased by 0.6% (Agreste, 2011c). Cereal crops represented the main specialization (35% of farms, as against 25% for vines and 17.5% for mixed crop-livestock systems), (Agreste, 2010). In terms of the legal status of farms in Côte d’Or, 2,600 out of 4,900 farms are run individually, 450 are GAECs and 1,200 are EARLS (Agreste, 2011-c).<sup>13</sup>

This text is based on a qualitative study through observation and interviews of cereal-crop farmers in the north of the Côte d’Or region between 2010 and 2012. As stated (see section 2), the aim of this study was to grasp the significance that farmers attach to specialization and the processes through which specialization is deployed. There were 44 interviews, of farmers, but also of counselors from the Chamber of Agriculture and of employees from the largest farming cooperative in the region. The sample of farmers interviewed (n=30) was created through the “snowball effect” which began with a list of contacts provided by a counselor from the Chamber of Agriculture. Regarding the sample build, we studied farmers who regularly take part in Chamber of Agriculture meetings and who are concerned by the challenges of technical and economic innovation. During the course of the interviews, the interviewees were asked about their career paths, family history, work organization, changes to their farming structures, their income and how

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<sup>13</sup> One can logically assume that the remaining 650 farms are civil societies.

their investments were financed, their participation in different work-related groups, and, finally, their leisure activities. The purpose of these interviews was to understand the reasons, the experiences and the consequences of specialization from the farmers' point of view. In addition to these interviews, for one year we followed the meetings of an agricultural experimentation and development group (*Geda*) from the local Chamber of Agriculture.

Interviewed farmers are all men, between 25 and 60 years old for an average age of 50 at the time of the interview (standard deviation: 7 years). With the exception of 5 bachelors, they are all married or living with a partner. The spouses/partners all have salaried jobs (teacher, nurse, secretary, etc.) away from the farm, with four exceptions who work on the farm. With two exceptions, they are all sons of local farmers, and operate the farm they inherited from their parents. Clearly, their parents typified the core of the modernized agricultural profession, based on family farming. Most interviewees had expanded the farm after setting-up. These farms range from 67 to approximately 550 ha, with an average size of 243 ha (see Table 1).

*Table 1*

*Distribution of interviewees in terms of farm size*

Farm size (ha)	<100	From 100 to 250	>250
Frequency	1	17	12

So compared to national averages, they belong to the group of “large farms” (see Graph 1), and roughly correspond to the now modal case of farms comprised between 100 and 250 ha. Regarding farm status, there are 7 individual farmers, 13 GAECs, 7 EARLs and 3

SCEAs; one interviewee is a salaried employee. Farm-gate level transformations are thus clearly consistent with a structural movement towards farm concentration *and* (at the same time) specialization.

Technically, interviewees all use conventional farming methods, except for one farmer who is currently converting to organic farming. Most interviewees claim to be highly skilled technically and have invested in a wide range of farm machinery in particular those who have adopted no-till or Simplified Cultivation Techniques (SCT)<sup>14</sup>. Most of them have set up on-farm grain storage devices, in order to benefit from the local cooperative's incentives for staggered delivery. Since 2005, a few interviewees have started to sell their harvest on their own, on the futures market.<sup>15</sup>

Both statistical and ethnographic data show that interviewees come from the heart of the modernized agricultural profession, that their farm structures respond to contemporary economic pressures, and finally that their economic strategies are based on technical or market innovation rather than on farm scale. But, as mentioned above, this does not tell us what field-crop specialization means to farmers or explain the various implications of the specialization process.

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<sup>14</sup> Simplified Cultivation Techniques means all techniques designed to eliminate working the earth. The most striking aspect of SCTs is non-labor. SCTs nevertheless relate to a vast range of practices which have in common the fact that they break away from looking at soil as a mere support for production, presenting and optimizing the actual activity of the soil within farming production (Goulet and Vinck, 2012).

<sup>15</sup> This fact is noteworthy, for in France farmers usually sell collectively through co-ops or grain traders, and get the average price obtained by these sellers.

## ***5. We have never been specialized. Specialization and the reorganization of farms***

Field-crop specialization is not just a response to market incentives; first and foremost it results from a withdrawal of dairy farming, i.e. from a disconnection between a productive norm and a work norm (section 5.1.)<sup>16</sup>. This specialization process is compatible with different productive trajectories which are not necessarily congruent with a logic of competitiveness through economies of scale (section 5.2.).

### ***5.1. Field crop specialization as innovation by withdrawal***

Although in public and media discourse “field-crop farmers” often seem to be a cohesive and strongly organized group, it is important not to take this term for granted. It is the history of farmers’ unionism and then of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) which carried the identification of the farmer with a product, or a value chain (Hervieu and Purseigle, 2013), making expressions such as “field-crop farmer”, “rancher”, or “dairy farmer” seem obvious. Yet these common expressions tend to confound and equate the farmer’s trajectory with his or her farm’s trajectory. Starting from this distinction, it should be observed how people (farmers) throughout their life course connect themselves with other people (life partners, work colleagues, etc.) and other entities (farms, agricultural development institutions, technical artifacts such as plows, tractors, or pesticides), and the way in which the specific trajectories of these people and entities influence their life courses.

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<sup>16</sup> The title of section 5 is a reference to Latour’s work (1993): behind the apparent adjustment to market logic, there are a variety of motives and a reconfiguration of links.

Before seeing the term “field-crop farmer” as a personal characteristic, grain specialization should therefore be resituated in the farm’s history. If all interviewees have one thing in common it is their agreement that field-crop specialization means *giving up dairy farming*. In other words, for these interviewees, being a “field-crop farmer” has no significance as such; it is not a positive assertion, but is negatively defined as the fact of having ceased livestock farming. The establishment of field-crop farms might thus be described as a case of “innovation by withdrawal” (Goulet 2008; Goulet and Vinck 2011): revisiting the Actor-Network-Theory (Callon, 1986; Latour, 1987, 2005), Goulet and Vinck show that innovation not only consists in the *extension* of a socio-technical network, but also in the *withdrawal* of ties or actants from some activity, which brings about a reorganization of associated milieus. As a matter of fact, for all our interviewees, the cessation of dairy production seemed to be a priority, as much in terms of work, sociability, and lifestyle as for economic profitability. In the extract below, one interviewee explains the reasons why he abandoned dairy farming 5 years after his father retired:

- In 1997-98, I was fed up with animals. I already had quite a few things, so I got rid of everything in the space of two years. So I left the pastures to some young people who were setting up a farm, and I went back down to 167 hectares, what I’ve got today, just in grains.
- *What didn’t you like about the work?*
- Well, raising animals is time-consuming. I’d started to have some responsibilities at the cooperative, so with one board meeting per month in Dijon, when you’re a field-crop farmer you have the date a month in advance, it’s manageable, but when you’ve got animals it’s more difficult, with the calving... I mean, you need someone to be there. And then for me raising animals took half of my time

for 20% of my bottom line. It didn't take long to work that out! And with 197 hectares, with a wife who worked outside and who didn't want to come to the farm...

[Man, 56 years old, grain farmer, 167 ha]

While interviewees single out the workload, the unprofitability, and the impossibility of organizing activities in the medium or long term as motives for stopping animal production, the latter remark concerning the role of spouses allows us to illustrate the fact that the orientation towards field-crop farming takes place at the interface between individual reasoning (workload, economic profitability, leisure time) and family-focused reasoning. What made the mixed-production farm model possible for so long was the resource of family labor, with the “invisible work” of spouses (Lagrave, 1987).<sup>17</sup> As indicated above, the interviewees' life partners usually had paid jobs in town, unconnected with farm work. When they took over a farm that was not already committed to a formal partnership and when their parents retired once and for all, interviewees rapidly came to question the pros and cons of continuing with dairy farming. As one interviewee emphasized:

I think growing field crops is the most effective solution for an individual business.

[Man, 61 year-old, 360 hectares]

A farmer specializing in arable crops thus corresponds to tensions between workload and work organization, economic profitability, and family and social life. For the interviewees, the basic motive behind field-crop specialization is the time-saving that is

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<sup>17</sup> “Invisible” because very weakly associated with a legal status that would open access to State welfare programs, especially retirement programs.

achieved by stopping livestock farming. This is why interviewees frequently refer to field-crop specialization as “simplification”. This process of specialization thus brings about a series of technical, organizational and social re-orientations.

The move away from livestock farming came about in a situation where farmers found themselves having to manage their farms on their own, whereas farming had previously had a collective dimension. As stated by all interviewees, this withdrawal of dairy is about “saving time” so that it can be spent differently, in the work context as well as outside. In practical terms, this entails two kinds of change: firstly, as regards the farm, “simplification” is compatible with several production trajectories, and farmers engage in one or another, depending on their own life-cycle stage or their lifestyle expectations, or even political preferences; secondly, as regards the farmers themselves, field-crop specialization also affects their relationship with the agricultural profession and the way in which they practice agriculture.

## **5.2. Three farm trajectories**

The specialization and size of farm are generally assimilated in *food regime literature* (McMichael, 2009). Regarding the second food regime, H. Friedmann thus wrote: “*Farms increased productivity and scale through technologies borrowed from key automobile and chemical industries. As they became locked onto a technical treadmill, they also became increasingly specialized*” (Friedmann, 1993: 34). As a matter of fact, field-crop specialization is compatible with several possible reorientations of the productive trajectory: de-intensification, expansion, diversification and industrial

integration. The link between specialization and large-scale crop-growing would thus appear to be a special case resulting from a set of conditions.

Regarding de-intensification, time-saving allows faster access to the same bottom line as before, and the farmer sets himself up on a trajectory of de-intensification of his farm. 6 interviewees fit this model. They were all at least 50 years old at the time of the interview, with farms smaller than 200 hectares. 2 are members of the *Confédération Paysanne*, a farmers union critical of the so-called “productivist” model. One of these unionists explained:

When we began to understand how [the new CAP] worked, maybe we changed our plan of attack a bit, and maybe we de-intensified ... you know, we didn't seek the highest possible yield. Even now, we still have a guarantee for part of our bottom line, because of CAP subsidies. So the influence of the yield is a lot less important. Because it's not in wanting to reach an average of 90-100 *quintaux* [9-10 metric tons] that you'll necessarily earn more, and maybe in yielding like 70 or 75 *quintaux* by intensifying less, you're going to have a better margin, and for me, this line of thought began at that time.

[Man, 53 years old, 80 hectares plus an additional 80 hectares with his brother, since 2003]

Rather than trying to increase production whatever the cost (with all of the costs incurred), some farmers try to maintain their income levels whilst keeping their farms as they are and optimizing costs.

Conversely, productive and technical simplification may be put to the service of either a strategy of farm intensification or/and a strategy of expansion of cultivated acreage –

leading in both cases to an increase in the volumes produced. 16 interviewees follow this strategy. It should be noted that they are younger (47 on average) and have larger farms than the sample average (309 ha compared to 243). Given that these expansion strategies are developed within a context of work individualization, by definition they go hand in hand with a new mechanization of the farm and thus with increased costs. We notice that these farmers in particular use SCT's, primarily in an economic perspective of increasing "output":

You've got to be constantly thinking ahead, because [the CAP 2013] isn't going to improve things. So I think that you've got to keep expanding, expanding to always save on the cost of mechanization, to work faster, and then to try to better rationalize costs, work. It's not always easy. Sometimes we take a leap somewhat into the unknown, I know I have colleagues over towards the plain who do direct sowing into cover crops, who don't work the soil at all anymore. That might be one possibility - I believe it is, even if I don't want to do it too fast.

[Man, 41 years old, grain farmer, 260 hectares (of which 140 are farmed on an entity shared with another farmer)]

These interviewees try to keep their farms competitive through mechanization, so as to increase returns whilst at the same time farming larger areas. As they are the only full-time workers on the farms, mechanization also enables them to work faster – whence the attraction of SCTs, which reduce labor time.

As a third orientation, simplification may leave room for a new productive diversification which – although it might occupy a low percentage of the farm's acreage – offers a high added value. This diversification might be compatible with the previous two orientations, as the process of livestock elimination and field-crop specialization frees up a lot of time

that can be spent on other activities. Eight interviewees with different profiles were found to have diversified. For some, diversification may remedy a total lack of interest in mainstream agriculture which has already induced them to specialize in field crops. For others, diversification may respond to a need for a higher income, in a situation where farm expansion is (whatever the reason) not possible. Among the field-crop farmers studied, one has become involved in the cultivation and sale of truffles, another in grapes, and yet another in trading straw, an offshoot from his main activity of grain production. Another has decided to convert to organic farming and to open a bakery on the farm premises<sup>18</sup>. Diversification is even more possible, or likely, because it is difficult to have a farm composed exclusively of land suitable for grain production (notably due to slopes). A farmer in this situation may either rent out such lands to livestock owners, or try to develop other crops, in which case specialization is only an intermediary step towards new diversification models.<sup>19</sup>

## ***6. Farm work and farm management***

In sections 4 and 5, I described the technical, economic, and social reorganizations linked to field-crop specialization and how field-crop-specialized farms emerged as a consequence of the withdrawal from dairy). In particular, this specialization develops in a

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<sup>18</sup> Note that in his case, his wife has left her job in town and returned to work on the farm and run the bakery.

<sup>19</sup> A fourth pathway is possible, which consists in orienting the farm towards industrial integration: in order to secure an outlet for his grain, the specialized field-crop farmer can try to set up an off-land livestock facility, which will use farm grain as animal food. I did not observe this directly among our interviewees, but numerous cases related by the local press of residents' mobilization against the establishment of meat processing plants (porcine or poultry) show that this strategy does exist locally. The reason why I could not observe such a strategy in my sample may be that it is characteristic of larger farms, which need to diversify their outlets in order to survive.

context where there is generally only one family member working full-time on the farm. This dual process of productive specialization and work-individualization challenges the family dimension of farms in two ways: it raises the issue of the emergence of new forms of partnership between farmers, allowing them to dissociate business assets and family patrimony (section 6.1.), and that of the decoupling of farm and home on the one hand, and of farm work and farm management on the other (section 6.2.).

### **6.1. Forms of partnership**

As stated in section 2, the creation of common farming groups (GAEC) was crucial to the construction of post-war capitalist family farming: these forms of common farming made it possible to reconcile the two apparently contradictory requirements of preserving family structures and increasing productivity and production (Cleary, 1989, Lem, 1988, Moran et al., 1996.). This type of institutional arrangement has the effect of limiting the separation between business and family (Barthez, 2003, 2007, Bessière, 2010). This section presents some original forms of partnership between field-crop farmers observed in the field, and shows that the competency of these associations is precisely their reversible, selective and entrepreneurial nature (as opposed to restrictive, family-oriented and patrimonial). In this type of association, the intra-family transmission of the farm ceases to be the principle motive for action, giving way to motives relating to lifestyle, to a shared vision of farming and to profitability.

As highlighted in Section 5, field-crop specialization is compatible with different farming trajectories. For those interviewees who are on the road to de-intensification, and those

who are approaching retirement, the question of joining forces with another farmer does not necessarily arise. For those who find themselves at a less advanced stage in their life cycle and who wish to either expand their farms, intensify production or change diversification patterns in order to improve farming income, partnership options are raised more or less directly. From the moment where the farm (even specialized in grain production) goes over a certain size (and despite multiple orientations allowing the increase of “output”) it becomes difficult to work it alone. Heavily individualized farm operations thus once again give rise to the issue of forming a work group.

First of all, one of the specificities of the partnerships then formed is that they do not necessarily have a legal basis. Official statistics for farm statuses, based on legal categories, cannot therefore adequately capture this type of association. Secondly, interviewees involved in this type of farming partnership claim that it is based neither on neighboring<sup>20</sup> nor on family<sup>21</sup>. As opposed to neighboring, these partnerships allegedly rely on shared affinities, and as opposed to family patrimony, on non-pooling of assets. Saying that their partnership relies on affinity, farmers mean they share *(i)* the same technical options and *(ii)* the same way of life. The pursuit of free time is one of the goals of the partnership, as the partners can replace each other when one is away:

It's safer to be associated with someone. But you've really got to get along ... I also had buddies my own age in the village but from the mentality point of view, I couldn't have gone into partnership with them. [...] Everyone's got his goals, but I wanted to get out [of the model] of the farmer who never goes on vacation, who never has a weekend off, and who works like crazy. So I wanted to

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<sup>20</sup> When the contiguity of plots from different farms allows the farmer(s) to work faster.

<sup>21</sup> When partnership is about building or expanding a *patrimonial* asset.

take vacations, and I know that in the village there are colleagues my age and I don't think they go on vacation, I never see them leave.

[Man, 41 years old, grain farmer, 260 hectares (140 of which farmed in an entity shared with another farmer)]

Non-pooling of assets is, in farmers' eyes, a key to the success of this kind of partnership, as it leaves room for reciprocal trust. Here, interviewees clearly distanced themselves from the GAEC model, where the partnership engages the family and its patrimony, and where a breakup of the partnership will jeopardize continuation of the farming operation (Barthez, 2003, 2007). Unlike the family model of association, interviewees seek easily reversible arrangements, which tend to be a pre-condition for their full commitment. As these partnerships are based on affinity, the partners believe that the quality of their relationship, as with all relationships, can only prove itself over time, and that it is only with time that the compatibility of the two "characters" can be seen. Knowing that they are taking a risk by investing their capital, future partners are careful from the outset to put in place a framework that will allow the partnership to be dismantled easily. They also find out that this kind of partnership would not have been easy to set up if they had not already specialized in field-crop farming, and if livestock had been involved:

The idea of each one keeping his own farm was also an insurance in case of trouble, of a disagreement. [...] Each one of us had his own farm and then if we have a fight after 2-3 years, each one goes home and then it's over. We didn't mix everything together. It was an insurance also to test it out for a few years, and then ultimately it stayed like that. [...] When we started, we still had livestock. So pooling [wasn't an option because] we didn't necessarily have the same genetic value. Because you take a long time establishing livestock quality, the herd is formed over generations so

it's not easy. And if we'd mixed everything together to make a single entity, if we separated later it would have been more difficult to re-separate a herd. Separating equipment isn't hard, it's just a scrapheap.

[Man, 41 years old, grain farmer, 260 hectares (140 of which farmed on an entity shared with another farmer)]

A third aspect of these partnerships is that even if they are supposed to be based on affinity, that does not mean they are symmetrical, as a profound division of labor takes place within the partnership and partners specialize in particular activities, which they carry out on both farms. This implies that certain technical options (crop rotation, seeds, use of pesticides, harvesting, etc.) are decided in common, and that each partner may delegate at least a part of the fieldwork on his own farm to his partner.

For instance, one of the interviewees belongs to a CUMA (cooperative for the use of farm machinery) consisting of several farmers, and is associated more closely with three of them, 3 brothers who are in a GAEC (several years younger than him) on a neighboring farm. The starting point of this partnership was the joint purchase of a combine harvester. While the two farms are legally separate, agricultural work is carried out entirely in common in a system of reciprocal services. Specifically, the three brothers in the GAEC do most of the fieldwork (sowing, harvesting, chemical treatments) and bill the interviewee for their work hours. He maintains that he has not “*climbed on a harvester for 15 years.*” He, in turn, takes care of the common accounting and the straw. The partnership allows someone nearing retirement to limit his physical work on the farm as much as possible, while it also allows the brothers in the GAEC to increase theirs. The

interviewee insisted on the dual nature of this partnership: the fact that it is built on a shared attitude towards agriculture, on mutual trust between partners, and on the easily reversible nature of their partnership. These two aspects are linked in the interviewee's mind: the fact that the partnership could easily be dissolved in case of a problem or disagreement, without it causing problems with regard to asset sharing, favors the full commitment of partners to the joint venture, in a climate of reciprocal trust, and without regrets.

Another interviewee illustrates a somewhat similar form of partnership: co-owned equipment and work in common with another farmer, who also uses SCT's. The interviewee stresses the fact that his partner lives a few kilometers from him, but that he was not able to form such a partnership with another farmer in his own village. The main difference in this partnership is that even though each of these partners still owns his own farm, together they created a third economic entity, an SCEA, comprised of rented land (140 ha). This third entity is about 10 km away from both farms. The three entities remain legally independent from one another and each of the partners is still in principle free to cultivate his own farm as he sees fit, yet the different entities increasingly tend to represent a single management of the crops, their rotation, cultivation and harvesting.

There was a clear legal, financial, and decisional separation, though we talked about decisions, so that we have the same treatment schedules, the same crops, we don't do too many things differently, because together we went up to around 300 hectares, so we had to avoid stretching ourselves out too thinly.

[Man, 41 years old, grain farmer, 260 hectares (140 of which farmed on an entity shared with another farmer)]

As Barthez (2003) points out, in GAECs the reference to home (without necessarily having a “real” blood relationship between GAEC members) often overshadows the economic dimension of the relationship. As a result, relations between GAEC partners are emotional, so that any possible break-up is experienced as a “divorce”, and is by definition long and painful for all parties concerned. In both cases of partnership presented here, the concerned parties anticipate the negative consequences that emotional ties might have for the economic partnership. From the beginning they sought to establish an easily reversible basis for their partnership, and to make a potential separation as simple as possible. The corporate dimension of the partnership and the clear separation of assets are designed to prevent the affective dimension of the partnership from becoming overwhelming, to a point where partners would cease to see any common interest. This claimed flexibility is built on the uncoupling of social scenes, which paradoxically allows the affinity dimension of the relationship to establish itself, in favor of the shared economic and technical project. Because it induces a common management of plots across farms and a marked division of labor between partners, this type of partnership is suitable for a delegation of farm work from one farmer to another. For this reason, it becomes possible for partners to develop entrepreneurial management of their farms, aimed first and foremost at profitability, rather than patrimonial management, which aims at the preservation of a global asset (the farm), for the continuation and transmission of the farming operation (to a child).

## **6.2. Distancing business from household?**

The political success of the family-farm model turned the coupling of property and work, of farm and home, into a consubstantial attribute (Gray, 1998) of this farming model. As noted by Johnsen (2004) and Cheshire et al. (2013), one must conceptually separate these elements in order to understand the current transformations of farms.

The first of the two cases presented above has an additional specificity: one of the farmers involved no longer lives in the village where his and his partners' farms are located, but in Dijon, the regional capital city, 80 km (about 1 ½ hours' drive) away. His wife worked for her entire career in this city, and their children were educated there. The farmer only spends long periods of time on the farm during periods of heavy work, particularly in the summer (harvest, tillage, haying, seeding), when the whole family stays on the farm. The arrangements he progressively put in place around his farm have allowed him to separate not only farm management from farm work, but also business from home. This separation is not only cognitive (as in accounting) but also physical: this farmer and his family live most of the time in the regional capital city, and he spends little time on the farm:

The profession is evolving Fast with a capital F, that's what's great. So we don't have to be the farmer my father was, for example. [...] I was often away from the farm, until now, when I can practically be 100% absent, since my colleagues know all my fields. They could do the work for me. Well, of course for a fee, but I could almost be absent and manage a farm today, so long as I had someone who could do the work. That's the result of the 15 years we've been together and the trust we have built up. But today, I can free myself up 100% to go and play golf if I want to.

[Man, 58 years old, grain farmer, 220 ha]

This farmer was nearing retirement at the time of the interview, and was wondering if his children would want to take over the farm. But for him, if one of his children were to take it over, it should in no way be by obligation or pressure, and above all not be to come and live and work in the village.<sup>22</sup> The solution that seems workable to him under these conditions is that one of his children takes over the farm with a partner, and that they hire a farm manager to do the work. So this arrangement is not just about work or productive efficiency; it also has cultural implications (Johnsen, 2004): by living in the city with his family and developing an urban lifestyle, the farmer is also able to distance himself from social integration into the farmers' professional group and from the rural social space.

Another interviewee presents a symmetrical case. In this case, decoupling did not occur because the farmer lived elsewhere than on his farm, but because, whilst he continued to live on the family farm, he had developed new farming activities which took him away from the place of his initial activity. Indeed, over several years he had developed a truffle plantation on his farm, which meant that he frequently had to travel in order to sell his truffles. The interviewee clearly points out that the growing and selling of truffles constituted a liberation from a job that he found boring and which he had taken up only in response to family pressures. At the time of the interview, the interviewee declared that he was preparing to buy additional truffle plantations in the main truffle-producing region in the south-west of France, approximately 500 km from his farm. His farm thus has several locations and strong links with business activities.

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<sup>22</sup> *"I think it'd be a shame if it stopped there, because we've had this farm in the family for three generations, but on the other hand I'm not going to ask my children to come live here [in the village]. There's only old people here!"*

In both cases, the paradox of this process of decoupling of farm and home, of work and property, is that for the interviewees it is precisely what makes transmission to an heir possible; it is because farming ceases to be a physical job, an occupation confining one to a rural region in demographic decline, that the intra-family transmission of the farm once again become desirable.

This decoupling between work scenes and family/residence scenes attracts the attention of those farmers who are most critical of current trends in the profession and its work, especially those who have maintained a mixed-crop-livestock system.

These guys, they're serious entrepreneurs, fine. So these guys, they work themselves to death, I mean, they go out there at night and that lasts right through the sowing periods, the treatment period, the harvest period, and then they get on the computer to see if the market's up, if the market's down ... and possibly these guys in fact live in Dijon, and what I criticize is their lack of commitment to the region,, how you're involved in your village, in your region, how you make it work. I don't know if it means something to these guys that the local hospital is closing or if they couldn't care less. [...] I think they are guys who don't see anything other than the business aspect, they are certainly more open than I am, from a certain point of view.

[Man, 51 years old, mixed crop-livestock, 205 hectares, 150 head, GAEC with his wife]

Local farmers who have kept a mixed farming system are critical of “field-crop farmers” for two related reasons: firstly, they criticize them for no longer investing in agricultural development organizations and, more broadly, for contributing to “rural desertification” by the kind of farms they establish; secondly, they consider this type of farm to be non-transmittable (because of the excessive acreage and/or over-capitalization):

There isn't any hope left these days. There are seven farmers left in [the town]. In ten years there won't be any left at all. [...] [Field-crop farmers] have ultra-simplified their farms, but they haven't asked themselves if someone can take over the farm afterwards. There won't be anything after what they've done. That's why we kept the farm in mixed production, so it can be passed on as a whole.

[Man, mixed productions, GAEC with his wife]

Finally, this twofold criticism gives rise to a third, broader one, concerning the inequality of treatment of livestock farmers and crop farmers (in particular as regards the distribution of CAP subsidies), and concerning the distortions of competition that field-crop farming introduces in relation to the taking over of available farms.

Farmers who still raise livestock describe the trends mentioned in this article as a threat to agricultural and rural development. Yet criticism of these trends in farming stems from the core of the profession, which itself corresponds to the family-based professional model presented in the introduction. That is probably why these farmers focus their criticism on a very few cases of complete disconnection between farm and residence.

## **7. Conclusion**

To counter economic interpretations of transformations in farming, rural sociology has frequently suggested that actors' motives were not only economic and that the ideology associated with family farming, its cultural dimension, were what made it possible to understand why it was preserved (De Haan, 1994, Mooney, 1983). In such a perspective, the challenge of analyzing family farming is its reproduction through the critical moment

of transmission to an heir (Bessière, 2010, Champagne 2002, Marsden, 1984). Rather than focusing on the ideology and issue of inheritance, this article has shown how, as an institution, family farming can be understood as a set of practices which can, in part, be separated from one another, and which farmers are able to recombine in a singular fashion, depending on the context. Instead of viewing the transformations in family-farming models in terms of a binary logic of reproduction or disappearance, this article sees changes to family farming as the detachment of certain characteristics from the basic model, the preservation of certain others, and their recombination with characteristics borrowed from other models. The social change in farming would thus appear to be more incremental and procedural.

First of all, field-crop specialization cannot be unequivocally interpreted as a process of adjusting to new competitive constraints and may be compatible with the notion of de-intensifying or secondary diversification. Secondly, specialization is a strong challenge to the very meaning of family farming. As a tool and objective of public policies for modernization, family farming used to be based on work being done by a couple, the identity created by the farm owner and the worker and the connection between farm and home. At the same time as women leaving farming, field-crop specialization – through withdrawal from dairy farming – allows for a major reduction not only in overall working hours, but also in time spent working in the fields, i.e. the work most closely associated with agricultural production. In certain cases, this limitation of time spent in the fields goes hand in hand with the decoupling of workplace and home, and with the construction of diverse business activities, which reduce the productive vocation of the business.

Finally, more than the global reproduction of the family farm, this case study is an invitation not just to look at how family farms incorporate corporate rationales, but also – and more fundamentally – to nuance the purely farming vocation of the business and the rural belonging of those involved.

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