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Change your life to change your job: a case study among North-European migrant farmers in the Dordogne District (South Western France)

If previous studies underlined the role of the “rural idyll” to make the decision to emigrate towards isolated rural areas (Lord, 2008), especially among retired people, I would like to highlight a category of North-European migrants who settle in the Southwestern French countrysides: migrants who come to France to set up in farming. We will question the process of anchoring by and in agricultural activities, and more widely in rural areas.

If lifestyle migration studies previously underlined a shift from retired to working people, we would like to underline a new activity involved by those migrants, that is to say farming.

This proposal belongs to the research program CAMIGRI¹, which includes French researchers in Geography. This program questions the role of reception and welcoming of the French countrysides for the international migrants, from several points of view: residential dynamics, agricultural dynamics, reception policies. The selected fields are located in the French Southwestern countrysides, which host a significant number of foreigners (not only seasonal workers).

Our communication is at the crossroads of several ways to consider the foreign presence in rural areas:

- lifestyle migrations : “lifestyle migrants are relatively affluent individuals of all ages, moving either part-time or full-time to places that, for various reasons, signify, for the migrant, a better quality of life.” (Benson, 2009)

-> is our case study relevant to highlight lifestyle migrations ? because the motivations of the migrants I study are at the crossroads of a search for a rural lifestyle, and of a search for a new professional life. The migration implies a lot of economical risks and can lead to precariousness. But it contributes to achieve a life project. The migration doesn't improve a social position, but it makes free regarding the professional position.

- the rural idyll ? here is a kind of end of the rural idyll. Motivations of the migrants I study are not related to the search for an authentic lifestyle, but for the search for a place where to produce, where to settle one's farm, where to earn one's life.

=> farm idyll ?

- rural entrepreneurship

- food justice: what kind of access to land ? to resources to produce food ? is it easy to find land ?

- it questions the process of gentrification, i.e. gentrification where environment plays a major role in making the decision to migrate.

Our main questions are the following :

- how can foreign presence change agricultural systems, by bringing innovation ?

¹ « International migrations in the French countrysides”

- does their presence reflect a process of greentrification, or agricultural gentrification ?
- how can agriculture become a resource activity for the migrants or a way to anchor international migrants in rural areas?

Our proposal is based on in-depth interviews with 16 North-European new farmers who set up in the Périgord District. We completed this material with interviews among agricultural organizations and with a statistical analyse of the rural demographical dynamics, in order to better understand the role that migrants play in more general demographical and agricultural trends.

Studying this figure of new non-traditional farmers coming from North Europe allows us to highlight a new pattern of lifestyle migration that meets economic migration in a changing environmental context. We will focus on 3 points:

(1) motivations to migrate to the French countryside: the migration allows the new farmers to achieve a professional project as well as to start a new life. The characteristics of the Périgord District finally meet the migrants' aspirations.

(2) North-European farmers bring innovations in the local farming systems. They are key players of the development of sustainable farming systems. They practice organic farming and develop direct local food chains and on-farm diversification. They also contribute to maintain agricultural systems facing crisis (the dairy sector) and, moreover, to create new gardening systems.

(3) Finally, those new farmers contribute to demographic and residential dynamics in the Périgord. This raises the issue of hosting policies and initiatives to help them to set in farming. We will show that to set in farming relies more on local professional networks than on foreign community networks.

1. Changing place, changing life, changing job through migration

1.1. Who are those migrant farmers ?

* how many are the foreigners who settle in agriculture in North Dordogne ?

- it is impossible to know for several reasons : nationality is not a criterion when one's buying a house or a farm, there is no public database that allows to identify foreign farmers
+ some agricultural activities are not declared as farm but have other statuses due to the small size of the farm : it can be a NGO for example. So that it doesn't appear in the agricultural database.

* where do they come from ?

- Belgium
- the Netherlands
- United Kingdom
- Ireland

* what about their sociological profile :

- family or couple
- young people (most of them are in their 30s when they come to France)
- who had a previous job in their home country but who want to change their professional life because their actual job doesn't satisfy them;

- who have no farmer in their family, so they have no land assets, no skills in agriculture. They belong to neo inhabitants in rural areas and to neo farmers. This is a major trend in France : they belong to what we call “non-family farmers”, which contributes for 50% to new farm facilities.

- they have no skill in farming, but they have degrees in environment studies, or they have a previous job sometimes related to environment: vet, and so on

Finally, their profile is not really different from the French new farmers who settle in agriculture.

1.2. What are they motivated by ?

* Their motivations are at the crossroads of several fields:

- to change their life: agriculture is seen as a retraining. It is considered as a way to give meaning to one's professional life. Agriculture intervenes as a rupture in the biographical and professional course. So they are not heirs, they are no farmers' sons or daughters.

- to live in the countryside (in relation to their urban origin): this wish is completely accessible in these sparsely populated areas, where agricultural land is cheap, available and where there is a large number of cheap residences that can become second or permanent residences.

- they idealize a French way of life: sociability, gastronomy, milder climate (significant sunshine for market gardening installation projects) + quality of French public services is sought.

The meeting of these 3 motivations explains the installation of North Europeans in agriculture, hence a rather particular profile of migrant farmers.

a. To change their life and to become a farmer :

- becoming a farmer allows you to give meaning to your life + it is a break with the consumerist way of life

- sometimes they are also people in burn-out. Cf example of B.. B&B are a couple of Belgians who set up their agricultural association 7 years ago in the Dordogne. B. is 55 years old. Before, they both worked in Belgium and lived in the Brussels region. B. used to work in an IT consulting company. But she was fired when she was 40. Following this, she burned out. She took the opportunity to reflect on what she wanted to do (in 2004), and she did a 3rd cycle training in environmental management. As soon as she did, she found a job in an industry that was developing environmental standards.

but B. has contracted a serious illness. She took the opportunity to think about what she really wanted to do in her life (at the same time, she had problems at work) => she decided to start farming. She followed training courses in organic agriculture (Ste Marthe farm in Beauce area, oriented towards permaculture). She resigned from her job, and sought to settle as an agriculturist in Belgium. But it is a very urbanized country and there is only few market gardening land near Brussels. Land prices are very high: 1 ha of agricultural land costs 150 000€ in Belgium, compared to 3500€ in the Périgord...

- agriculture is the path chosen for a meaningful occupation. The speech values landscapes and freedom at work

b. live in the countryside + live in a sparsely populated area: rural configurations meet the personal aspirations of neo-agricultural/neo-peasant people:

- attraction for a green environment, for the calm of a region of low density. Those people come from very urban regions in the UK or the Netherlands and build a rural representation as

opposed to urban representation. The discourse of these farmers establishes a clear dichotomy between urban and rural areas: environmental amenities (ponds, walks, domestic animals) are presented in opposition to "cars that are untenable/unsustainable".

some migrate to Périgord explicitly to flee the cities. We quote here a Dutch woman who set up a GAEC (goat cheese) in the Dordogne and even when she lived in the Netherlands, she chose to live in rural areas as soon as she freed herself from her parents.

L.D. : « *Look, when I make my deliveries to Brantôme, I have to visit Brantôme and go back to Bourdeilles, and I look at the view of a lot of people who work in the office and who pay a lot of money to have that view for two weeks a year, and I have that view every week*”

L.M.: *“I was born in Amsterdam for example, but the population was too dense, so as soon as I became independent of my parents, I moved away from that region, and moved to the countryside”.*

“I think it was above all the desire to return to this life, a life where you ride horses and walk dogs and swim in the pond and have sheep, I have always loved sheep and I love the way of life, I choose every day, every morning, what I want to do. If one morning I don't want to clean the legs, I'll do it the next day and what I do seems very, very productive to me, it's morally...tonight I'm going to bed thinking, "I cured 32 feet and I put the sheep out and I saved a lamb's life", and it's for me, it's for my farm, it's good, it's not being in front of a computer all day and no one will read what I did, it's morally uplifting”

See also interview extract of Robin (English winegrower):

R.R.: *“We love life here. When we lived in England, in South London, there was a lot of noise, cars everywhere, to go to work there was a lot of traffic, traffic jams up to the office door”*

=> it underlines the same logic of flight from the big city; this is what motivated the installation in the Dordogne and especially in agriculture

- The rural desert of the French countryside is also attractive for these people coming from very densely populated countries. The Dordogne has low densities: about 25 inhabitants/km²; population declines regularly since the 1970s.

R.H.: *“my brothers and sisters, they were afraid for me, they told me: "you're going to bury yourself in the depths of deep France, you're single, what are you going to do? you're never going to meet anyone, go back to being a teacher in England, you'll be much more socialized" and I tell them: "OK, I'm going back to England, to do a job I don't necessarily like, to live in a country I don't necessarily like, with a climate and cars that are impossible! " And on the possibility of meeting someone, I prefer to be here a thousand times, do a job I like, and then if I meet someone, so much the better!”*

<=> it meets previous researches that underlined “a narrative of escape permeating migrants’ accounts of the decision to migrate, further emphasised by their negative presentations of life before migration. » (Benson, 2009)

1.3. Why and how do they set up in Northern Dordogne ?

* Points of attractivity:

- the choice of Périgord is often a default choice at the beginning : the migrants looked first in other districts or in the Southern part of the Dordogne district, which is more touristic and where Northern European citizens are already well set up.

Example : M. and T. (a couple of French-English market gardener), a couple growing berries and selling seedlings. Ideally, she would have liked to buy in the limestone Dordogne, in the South, because white villages are pretty. But they found it here. They are finally happy to set up in this part of the Dordogne district which seems wilder :

“We said to ourselves "come, we're going to the Dordogne", we wanted to live in a small village”. They wanted the Dordogne, and they looked within the perimeter of the PNR, but not in Haute-Vienne. *“For the price, and for the quality of the trees, the springs, the forests,*

it's too beautiful here! In England, there are no more large areas of forest like this. It's so cool! And here, in terms of nature, there are still animals. »

- finally they buy goods in the Green Périgord because it is a more financially accessible region and because there is more supply in the field of agricultural land. advantage of this sparsely populated rural area: there is available agricultural land, cheap, attractive property prices.

very attractive property prices, lower than in England => divestiture process makes it possible to be ultimately attractive.

Example : a couple of Belgian people from the Liège region, who worked in the paramedical field, and who had the project to set up a market gardening business in Belgium. However, there is a strong demand for agricultural land in Belgium. The land is very expensive. 1 ha costs 50 000 €, "*you have to find them!*", whereas here it costs between 2500 and 3000 € per hectare.

- Example of a Dutch couple doing market gardening: they choose the Dordogne because it is attractive for farms on a human scale. "*we can still find houses with a few hectares around*" = here we can find housing goods that match with the needs of people who want to start a market gardening activity: cheap big houses with a land all around.

- => those 2 examples show that the supply of real estate in North Dordogne corresponds to the needs of the migrant farmers : a house with agricultural land, and not necessarily a farm, because they want to create a place where to live, and not only a place where to work

- isolation and low density are valued. Most of the migrant farmers set up in Dordogne because what they were looking for was a sparsely populated, remote region.

- + the project leaders see that there is a "very rich" network, that there is opportunities to sell directly their products

- some of them discovered the area with their parents when they were kids when they come first as tourists to spend holidays in the region.

* How do they set up ? It varies according to the type of farming. Migrants are involved in 2 agricultural sectors: market gardening and dairy sectors.

- or they purchase a residence with a large plot of land around it, not necessarily classified as agricultural land: this is how the market gardeners install.

"with 100 000€ we buy a house and 2 or 3 ha, and it allows us to set up in market gardening".

Example of B. and B.: in 2013, they came to settle permanently in their house in the Dordogne, with an agricultural project for her. Bernard has kept his job as a consultant in Belgium for an American company and also has the status of a self-employed entrepreneur in France ("*international activities*" for his work in Belgium), which allows him to telework from the Dordogne (in addition, he still has children in Belgium) while ensuring a salary => this allows B. to carry out her agricultural activity without having to have a production volume requirement.

-> it means that B. has "settled" on the land adjoining their residence, which is a very large estate. => it requires only a little investment because the land is not classified as agricultural land; it is in fact attached to the residence.

-> As they are too small (grow on 1500 m²) and they still have the status of secondary residence in the Dordogne (because Bernard has kept his job in Belgium, therefore social security in Belgium), they are not declared as a farm but as a non-profit organization. This means that all income from sales must be reinvested in the organisation (especially for the purchase of equipment) and that B. does not pay herself a salary.

- either migrants take over conventional farms: this is the case for the Dutch who take over dairy or goat cattle farms. In this case, the installation takes a traditional pathway, agricultural support, bank credit, and so on.

2. International migrants, actors of innovation and environmental changes in local farming systems

2.1. Migrants are actors in the maintenance and development of agricultural sectors

* the first case is the case of Dutch taking over dairy farms: agricultural organisations describe a wave of installation from the 90s, in the context of a declining dairy farming industry.

- dairy farming is in decline. Because the isolation of producers is a problem for collection of milk.

- the Dutch take over large breeding: 7 in all on the territory, but with significant milk quotas. Legally, they have corporate forms, with partners.

-> Ferme M.: 150 ha, 180 dairy cows. Has started an organic conversion process to reduce the herd to 150 animals

-> T. and Y. in Jumilhac: 180 ha, 80 Holstein dairy cows

- Profile = farmers who were already making milk in Holland. They come in Dordogne because the price of land is interesting.

- They have a different relationship to the farm: "specific practices" and a specific work organization. For them, the farm is only a professional tool, a production tool. Whereas for local farmers, a farm is a heritage, a place to live, etc.

* the second case is the one of Northern-European migrants settling in market gardening sector: this new activity contributes to the development of the market gardening sector, which has historically been underdeveloped in this beef and veal farming area => These are necessarily farm creations, and not farm takeovers, since market gardening operations are underdeveloped.

The main characteristic of their farm is that they settle on very small farms:

- A priori, market gardening by North Europeans is practiced on small and even very small farms. Among the farmers we met max 2 ha farms for the largest ones.

This corresponds to extensive system projects, most of the time with organic production, but also to a project of life back to the land, with the objective of self-sufficiency.

- sometimes, farms are too small to be declared as an official farm. That's why they often start with the status of joint contributor to the MSA (social security for farmers), or either NGO

- crops still have a problem: difficult sloping ground to cultivate, old equipment...=> difficult working conditions at the beginning and uncomfortable!

In addition, granitic soils are not very suitable for market gardening, irrigation problems...

The profile of these new farmers corresponds to the underlying trend, is that more than half of the installations in the Dordogne are outside the family framework = a revolution in the sociology of farmers. With profiles where installation is increasingly late, people who do not have an agricultural diploma that would allow them to reach the ADI.

2.2. migrants bring environmental innovations in local farming systems

migrants are key players in the transition to more sustainable agricultural systems, by the production methods they use and by the changes they bring into local farming systems.

* they contribute to the transition to sustainable farming because most of the time they use organic methods of production, sometimes permaculture. This fits with their search for a particular way of life:

- first, organic production is motivated by the search for autonomy of the means of production

-> In the Dordogne, organic farming is a little more developed than the French average: 7.1% of organic farms.

-> choice to settle in organic farming expresses a criticism against the practices of conventional agriculture

- organic farming also fits with a life project : this choice of production makes it possible to satisfy the qualitative aspects of a desired lifestyle within the framework of lifestyle migration.

- the choice of organic production can also be explained by the profile of these people: the majority of them are undergoing a professional reconversion => organic farming makes it possible to give meaning to their professional life.

The choice of agriculture, and even more so of the organic production method, is often linked to the profession or training that these people had before settling in agriculture: these neo-farmers exercised another profession (teacher, veterinarian...) before settling as farmers in France, or had training related to the environment (rural development degree in Cambridge, etc)

- The choice to settle in organic farming is also motivated by the search for an alternative way of life, by the will to break with the dominant system. the settlement in organic farming allows the construction of a particular way of life, respectful of the environment, represented as the antipodes of the consumerist society.

=> The individual's relationship to the environment explains the choice to settle organically.

=> greentrification ? (Tommasi et Richard)

- organic can also be a conversion following economical or health problems: this is often the case in the dairy sector, e.g. the Dutch couple T. and Y. or the Ferme M.

* farms held by international migrants contribute also to transition towards more sustainable systems because they use short food supply chains and they value proximity:

- their activity highlights a process of diversification of the farm : they practice tourism on the farm (agrotourism), sometimes using networks of foreigners to attract customers in connection with their country of origin + they process a part of their production (cheese, chutneys, marmalade, and so on)

- they are involved in short food supply chains, but they use different strategies: depending on their lifestyle, their production. All the foreign market gardeners we met mentioned a saturated market because right now there are a lot of market gardening installations in the area, and everyone wants to sell directly. So they are involved in several strategies:

-> for example, S. and P.-Y. sell vegetable boxes at the private retirement home where P.-Y. continues to work part-time

-> Others sell on the farm but on specific slots.

-> markets

-> sale to organic stores or small local shops

-> collective catering becomes a big outlet, but this involves growing few kinds of vegetables, but in large quantities + it puts a lot of constraints for delivery and volumes. But intermediate platform such as MangerBioPérigord, based in Périgueux, is structuring this supply chain.

- for the promotion, a lot of them use social networks, Facebook page...

This reflects a particular profile = agriculture in professional reconversion, former managers. They do not necessarily have the technical agricultural skills, but they do have other useful skills: they come with a well-crafted business plan. They have skills in management, communication, marketing and NICT. And they have the financial means.

- art exhibition [see M. FB page]

=> participate in the diversification of agricultural holdings + consider holdings not only as places of production, but also as places to live, to share social experiences...

=> those practices bring changes in the way to consider a farm : it is not only a workplace, but most of all a place to live. This explains the association of agriculture with other activities.

3. Migrant presence in agriculture and changes of sparsely populated rural areas

agriculture is an activity that helps to anchor migrants in rural areas. This question of the anchoring of migrant farmers is particularly important in sparsely populated areas, where the question of the demographic threshold for maintaining services arises.

=> The presence of migrants in agriculture contributes to the socio-economic and even demographic dynamics in the Périgord.

This raises the issue of hosting policies and initiatives to help them to set in farming. We will show that to set in farming relies more on local professional networks than on foreign community networks.

3.1. Migrant farmers contribute to general demographical trends

The settlement of migrants in agriculture is therefore part of more global demographic trends in these territories. In the Green Périgord, the establishment of Northern European neo-farmers is part of a more global trend of positive net migration, despite a downward trend. It means that despite a negative demographical decline, there is a growing foreign settlement, and farmers are a part of those foreign settlements.

In Dordogne, Brits are traditionally the major nationality among foreign inhabitants:

-in 2015, in the Green Périgord, they count for 4% of the total inhabitants, which means 1667 Brits total. They count for 57% of the inhabitants from a foreign country

- people coming from Benelux (Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxemburg) count for 540 people. They are the first group of foreigners after the Brits.

3.2. The minor role of community networks

Community networks don't play the same role according to the farming sector in which migrants are involved.

* community networks play a major role for the Dutch farmers involved in the dairy sector:

- they buy equipment in Holland, they employ Dutch trainees, link with Heineken to manufacture gouda...)

- being a foreigner is a factor in the circulation of labour on the farm, which is explained by know-how in the dairy sector, with the use of Dutch labour: for example, T. and Y., or M. and A., came to work in France first as agricultural workers on Dutch dairy farms who recruited them through classified ads in Dutch agricultural magazines. They followed the same path: they arrived in France first as an agricultural worker, then settled on their own farm. A network of Dutch people was detected who settled from a few farms (ferme M.).

=> they work as off-ground farms.

- Local people have a vision of them as hard-working people who are not very integrated into the territory: *"The problem of the Dutch population is the language barrier. As a result, they live a little secluded. Hence the fact of concentrating geographically, and living behind closed doors. Because of this operation, they can miss out on the support systems. Because they have little integration into the bodies, they are few in the elected collective structures. It's a pity for them, and for us too. Given their number, this is problematic. The Dutch in dairy, they are mainly there to produce, so they are not present in the collective bodies. They don't really participate in the territory."* (Agriculture Agency of Dordogne)

* community networks don't play a role for the Northern-European farmers involved in the market gardening sector. Organic professional networks rather play an important role when the farmers settle, as other non-foreign farmers (Mailfert 2007):

- MangerBio Périgord platform to sell a part of the production directly

- AgroBio (organic union): mentoring system, meetings, coffee, technical training by peers.

=> This is more important than networks by nationality (no "migratory communities"). Migrants are a part of a professional community on the basis of organic farming.

=> those market gardening farmers are very involved locally in the rural dynamics. They use networks that are outside the community network to run their farming activity.

3.3. hosting policies: toward a "normalization" of foreign farmers

There is no specific policy towards foreigners, but more general actions of the Agriculture Agency in the district, and of agricultural unions which are targeted at "non-family farmers", which constitutes in the Dordogne more than half of the farmers who settle:

- special need for technical support because these people do not have any agricultural training
- need support on installation: Installation Reception Point (PAIT), on available help, the Young farmer subsidies (DJA) request file. But few foreigners go through this system. Because to be eligible for the DJA, you have to pass an agricultural diploma again.

"The DJA file is boring to do because you have to plan everything. And it's a bit like a "consumer society": in year 1, they give 80% of the subsidies and if you earn the equivalent of the minimum wage in year 4, they pay the remaining 20%. But the calculations are biased because in fact, market gardeners do not need a minimum wage to live: first we do not buy our vegetables since we produce them... in addition to receiving the DJA, we have to pay 1000€ in administrative fees. In addition, "it's very system", to reach the DJA, you have to have a certified accountancy. These are not our values" (P.-Y. and S.)

=> Foreign farmers are outside the traditional agricultural system...the DJA is seen as a constraint.

But only a few migrant farmers take those opportunities.

Conclusion

* it can be assumed that the time of installation in agriculture is specific to the fact of being a foreigner, because installation involves a change of life or residence, a risk taking, and can also be linked to a residential process (secondary residence, willingness to settle "in the countryside", in France, in the North Dordogne because it is not expensive). On the other hand, farmers then become part of relatively traditional agricultural dynamics and "normalize": changes on farms are often linked to changes in the economic situation or biographical events.

* finally, this movement of migrant farmers meets the meaning of lifestyle migration: migration allows to improve the quality of life, not from an economic point of view, but because it allows a kind of self-realization.

* can this movement be interpreted as a gentrification in agriculture ?

- on one hand, yes because migrant farmers have a cultural and know-how capital that is superior to the local traditional farmers. They are often overeducated, with diversified backgrounds compared to farmers from the profession. Innovation and sustainability can reflect this process of agricultural gentrification.

- on the other hand, if we consider only economic capital, migrant farmers have no superior capital and, moreover, farming is not a hobby but a real activity to earn a living. To settle in agriculture is an economical risk taking. It explains why, in a couple, the spouse keeps a job outside farming, to guarantee the living.