

[Summary]

Family Farms in France: Between Changes and Permanency

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1. Introduction

Farming in France today has inherited the principles and policies that were designed to exploit and modernize the family-based organization of agricultural production. Growth in size of production structures, specialization of farms and the intensification of land use have been accompanied by efforts to encourage an "enterprise approach".

Nevertheless, the family nature of farming has not disappeared. It is in terms of this dichotomy between the changes and permanency affecting the family nature of French farming that we shall discuss in terms of its history, the forms it takes at present and its challenges.

2. Farming modernization: a family farm model based

As from the 1950s, the trend was towards a shrinkage, specialisation and concentration of family farms, greater mechanisation and the use of chemical inputs, and joint management of the sector by the public authorities and the agricultural profession. Inherited from an alliance between the State and modernising family farmers, the model thus promoted was that of a specialised farm of human dimensions corresponding to two full-time equivalent posts, where work was mainly achieved by the family and destined to provide them with a livelihood from the farm income alone.

As from the 1960s, a series of French laws on farms and producer organisations favoured a farm model under which the person working the land took decisions on strategic orientations, controlled investments, took risks and ensured management of the farm. Even if a farmer did not own his land, he benefited from a strictly regulated land use regime which ensured stability. This strong connection between labour, land and capital provided the foundations for a social and technical model that is still referred to as "familial".

But today is tending to evolve towards more entrepreneurial approaches (Cochet, 2008), but without completely losing its family ties.

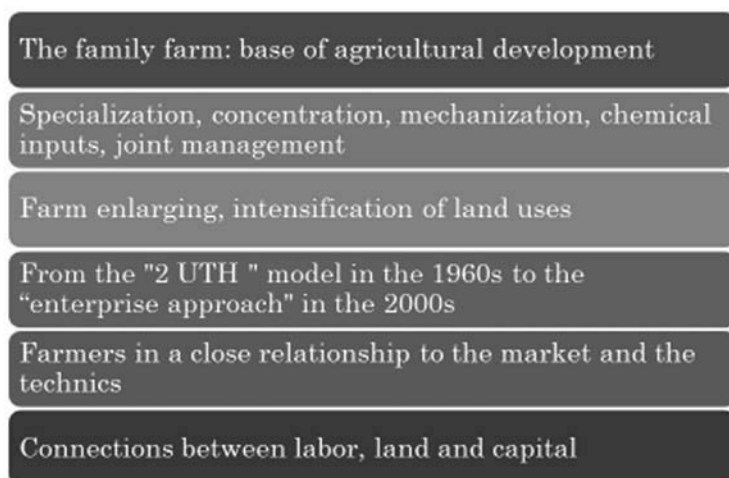


Fig 1. The modernization process

3. The multiform decline of family farming in France

"Peasants", whose disappearance was predicted at a very early stage by Mendras (1967), have transformed themselves into farmers, producers, farm operators and more recently, agricultural entrepreneurs (Mundler & Rémy, 2012).

The number of farms has fallen, from 2.3 million in 1955 to around 490,000 in 2010, employing only 966,000 people, or 3% of the French working population (Gambino et al.,

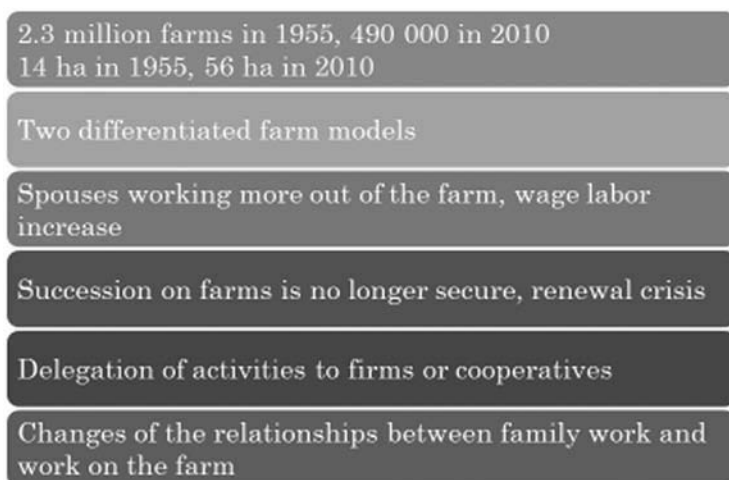


Fig 2. Continuing and weakening the family nature of the farm

2012). At the same time, the average utilized agricultural area per farm has increased from 14 hectares in 1955 to 56 hectares in 2010.

The number of small structures has fallen markedly. It is observed an increasing recourse to salaried employees and the externalization of some tasks since the 1980s, at the same time as a reduction in the family workforce. Spouses are increasingly likely to work off the farm and the number of salaried employees has risen. Mutual aid within the family has also tended to diminish. In addition, the French farming population is ageing and becoming more feminine, while multiple activities by farm households have increased.

However, the farming population has retained certain specific features, notably in terms of how time is used and particularly their relationships with work and the territory.

4. Conclusion

The family farm as an analytical, operational, politic, identity or social category

Contrasted intellectual positions: analytical ambition, decision support objective or farming extension goal

Multifunctionality transformed representations and researches on the family farm

Fig 3-1. Plurality of views of research on the family farm

Various « conceptions » (not exhaustive)

- A micro-economic unit: model coupling, policy impact
- A component of a social system: stratification and social differentiation, determinism / margin of freedom
- A controlled system: decision, practices, innovation

Fig 3-2. Plurality of views on the family farm

In summary, the family forms of farming seen in France reflect a "wise old man" approach that involves elements related to vulnerability (a moderate level of debt and robustness when faced with unforeseen events), inheritance (preserving the future) and transition (moderate capital, education and learning), to time (emphasis on the medium and long term rather than the short term), and to space (development of social links and local relationships).

However, French family farming is now confronted by a crisis of renewal. Only one farmer in five is less than 40 years old.

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