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Reclaiming the Seeds, Becoming “Peasants”: On-Farm Agrobiodiversity Conservation and the Making of Farmers’ Collective Identity

The emergence of a professional seed industry over the course of the twentieth century has been concomitant with the construction of a regime of innovation favorable to breeders and to a transformation in the nature of plants themselves. (Among the results of this regime are “Distinct, Uniform, Stable” [DUS] varieties and, more recently, genetically modified [GM] plants.) Together, these elements have led farmers engaged in industrialized forms of agriculture to outsource most of their seed-related activities. Such an organization of farming activities is now so embedded in industrialized farming systems that it has become extremely complicated for farmers—and for other actors, as well—to contest it without being accused of opposing progress and modernity.

In the 2000s, however, new developments in the anti-GMO struggle and the toughening of seed laws led an alliance of French farmers organizations to go beyond protest and denunciation and to try to build alternatives to the dominant industrial seed system. The *Réseau Semences Paysannes* (literally the “Peasant Seed Network,” RSP) was set up in 2003 as a result of this alliance. It is dependent on a network of farmers who try out alternative practices, such as reviving heirloom varieties or developing on-farm breeding. The creation of the RSP was accompanied by the establishment of a new category, *semences paysannes* (“peasant seeds”), whose semantic significance will be examined in this essay. After recalling the sociohistorical context surrounding French agriculture and offering an overview of the legal considerations regarding seeds, I will give a brief summary of this movement’s emergence and will examine its social and political implications. I will contextualize the movement by drawing parallels with other environmental contestation initiatives.

Context: French Farming and Seed Laws

As in other European countries, the French agricultural system went through a radical process of modernization after World War II. Emerging from the restrictions and the devastating economic effects of war on the national economy, the country was faced with the urgent challenge of feeding a hungry population. The priority for the French state was

to increase agricultural productivity. In order to do so, the state encouraged farmers to mechanize their production tools, to use chemicals (pesticides, herbicides, fertilizers), and to replace traditional landraces¹ with improved high-yield varieties. The improvement of crop varieties became one of the three pillars of this process of agricultural modernization.

Breeding had started to develop as a professional activity about two decades earlier. At that time, new professional breeders devised methods inspired by state-of-the-art agronomy, which considered “pure lines” (i.e., genetically uniform lines) as “the most perfect forms of cultivar” (Bustarret 1944, quoted in Bonneuil and Thomas 2009). Genetic uniformity and stability was seen as permitting a standardized and highly productive yield, predictable throughout time and space.

In the field of seed legislation, the *Catalogue officiel des espèces et variétés* (Official Catalogue of Species and Varieties) was created in 1932 in order to protect breeders’ intellectual property rights. As time went by, the *Catalogue* became an instrument to help run the “genetic progress”: a criterion for productivity was introduced in 1945, which contributed, year after year, to the exclusion of landraces, while a decree of 1949 stated that only the varieties listed in the *Catalogue* could be sold on the seed market. As a result, by 1961 the *Catalogue* no longer included wheat landraces, and their sale was banned (Bonneuil and Thomas 2009). With the ratification of the International Convention for the Protection of New Varieties of Plants in 1961, the International Union for the Protection of New Varieties of Plants (UPOV) implemented a system of plant variety protection to serve as an international regulatory framework for the seed industry, with the same principles as the French *Catalogue*.

As a consequence, over the course of the twentieth century, farmers in industrialized countries became end users of improved varieties designed and produced by seed companies. It is important to note that on-farm multiplication of seeds continued to be commonplace.²

1 A landrace is a local variety of plant species that has developed through adaptation to its natural and cultural environment. Landraces are contrasted with formal breeds, which are selectively bred to particular standards.

2 In 2007–2008 in France, the proportion of seeds bought from cooperatives reached almost 100 percent for maize, 75 percent for barley, and about 60 percent for wheat. On-farm multiplication is still common, as it allows farmers to save money: farmers buy around one-tenth of the amount of seeds they would need for their entire cultivated surface; they sow them on a multiplication plot and sow the harvest the following year. This practice largely explains why 40 percent of wheat seeds are not bought in cooperatives (Source GNIS. http://www.gnis.fr/images/documents/STA2244_CP-08.pdf).

The transformation of maize seed production (following the introduction of hybrid F1 varieties) in southern France has inspired the sociologist Henri Mendras and his theory of the “vanishing of the peasants” (Mendras 1970 [1967])—these peasants having been replaced by *exploitants agricoles* (“agricultural managers”) over the course of the modernization process. The change in the terms used to qualify the farming profession in the 1960s and 1970s—from “peasants” to *exploitants agricoles*—points to a fundamental mutation of its professional knowledge, its interactions with the surrounding community, and its relation to nature and to the land: in short, of its identity. The term “peasant” was largely dismissive (although not as much as in English) until the 1980s, when left-wing farmers unions rehabilitated the concept by associating it with their critique of the excesses of modernization (Morena 2011).³

The International Seed Treaty,⁴ signed under the auspices of the FAO in 2001, has introduced a paradigmatic shift in this sociopolitical and regulatory context. Written in line with the Convention on Biological Diversity, it contains the same principles, such as the recognition of the contribution of farmers to the conservation and renewal of plant diversity (art. 5.1c) or the right of farmers to contribute to the governance of the genetic resources of plants (art. 9.2c).

The “Réseau Semences Paysannes” at the Crossroads of Various Seed Struggles

The UPOV Convention was revised in 1991. The “farmers’ privilege” to use the product of their harvests for propagating purposes on their own land (included in the 1978 Act) becomes, through the 1991 Act, a much more restrictive “farmers’ exemption,” the modalities and application of which are left to the discretion of states. Certain observers have interpreted this change as a threat to the right of resowing a part of the yield. In France, it led to the creation of the “Coordination nationale pour la Défense des Semences de Ferme,” an organization whose purpose is to defend the use of these so-called “farm-saved seeds.”

3 The term “paysan” appears in the name of several critical movements, the most famous of them being *La Confédération Paysanne*. I never use the term “peasant” as an analytical category, but rather as a category used by the actors themselves. In so doing, I follow Djurfeld and his critique of academic works about the peasantry that, according to him, commit the fallacy of essentializing the “peasantry” (Djurfeld, 1999). Morena has adopted the same line.

4 ITPGRFA, for “International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture.”

Further changes in late 2002 toughened French seed laws for organic farming. Yet most organic farmers consider that the seed industry does not respond to their agronomic needs, as the new varieties are bred *in* and *for* conventional farming systems and are not adapted to the specificities of low-input forms of agricultural production. This new state of affairs has led left-wing farmers' movements that are already engaged in the anti-GMO struggle to go beyond protest and denunciation and to imagine alternatives to industrial seeds.

The RSP was set up in 2003 at the crossroads of the aforementioned movements (farm-saved seeds, defense of organic farming, anti-GMO). It calls for the defense of farmers' rights to cultivate and exchange seeds of varieties that are not included in the official catalogue, doing so in the name of farmers' sovereignty and agrobiodiversity conservation. In practice, the RSP relies on scattered initiatives from farmers and gardeners who have been attempting (some of them since the 1970s) to save or revive heirloom varieties or to develop on-farm breeding (Demeulenaere and Bonneuil 2010). The movement gathers their scattered experiences into one struggle against the hegemony of the seed industry, and unites them around the construction of an alternative to the dominant model.

“Peasant Seeds” and the “Peasant” Category

It was during this period that the expression “peasant seeds” (*semences paysannes*) emerged and was popularized, replacing the concept of “farm seeds” (*semences de ferme*) in activist discourses. This lexical shift was made possible by the political engagement of activists who were close to unions promoting alternative farming models. By voluntarily using the term “peasant” in “peasant seeds,” they were able to link the struggle over seeds to their own promotion of the “peasant” as an alternative to industrial agriculture. What's more, instead of referring to the place where the seeds are produced (the farm), the expression uses an adjective that qualifies both the seeds and those who produce them: peasants. Behind this lies the idea that small farmers still possess a unique professional know-how regarding the lives and the reproduction of plants. As a result, the community of individuals that produces these non-industrial seeds is made visible. Peasant seeds appear as a common good, managed and regulated by a community that shares the same practices and seeds: a “common” whose “commoners” are explicitly identified—the peasants (Ostrom 1990).⁵

5 Contrary to other associations that claim to “free biodiversity” or “liberate the seeds” (e.g. Kokopelli), the RSP is in favor of socially constrained exchanges within communities of farmers (Demeulenaere and Bonneuil 2012).

There is not enough space in this paper to elaborate on the practical dimensions, but it must be emphasized that peasant seeds are not simply a linguistic innovation. The expression's widespread adoption has been followed at the grassroots level by a long process to construct the meaning of peasant seeds. Starting from a diversity of practices (revival of landraces, conservation of ancient varieties, participatory breeding projects involving researchers, etc.), members of the movement have engaged in a series of concrete initiatives to share these experiences and to discuss them and, thereby, to encourage a collective learning experience on practices regarding seeds (Demeulenaere and Bonneuil 2010). The construction process has made clear that peasant seeds differ from farm seeds in that they are not just multiplied on the farm (thus presenting the same genetic characteristics as modern varieties), but are also *bred* on the farm, following “accessible-to-farmers” breeding methods (such as mass selection⁶) and small farmers' criteria.

“Peasant Seeds,” Small Farmers, and the Seed Industry

More than just a shift in vocabulary, “peasant seeds” appear as a new category that goes beyond the previous dichotomy between “industrial seeds” and “farm seeds” (or “farm-saved seeds”). Peasant seeds and industrial seeds differ not only in terms of their origins, but also in terms of their genetic identity and agronomic characteristics. Industrial varieties meet the DUS standards (distinction, uniformity, stability), whereas peasant varieties have a much broader genetic heterogeneity. Industrial varieties are selected *in* and *for* standardized industrial farming systems (which require chemicals), whereas peasant varieties are adapted to low-input and variable farming environments.⁷

This semantic innovation allows the RSP and its followers to “name” a new cause: the cause of farmers who are becoming more and more dependent on the seed industry; of farmers who are losing their ability to make their own agronomic choices; and, finally, of farmers who are trying to revive on-farm autonomous breeding in line with the work of their ancestors. The appearance and rapid spread of the expression “peasant seeds” can be interpreted as a first stage in the sequence of a conflict constitution and

6 Mass selection is a plant breeding method implemented by farmers for centuries. It involves selecting ears or grains “from the mass,” judged visually to be the most interesting.

7 The argument is widely used to assert the contribution of farmers to prominent environmental issues, such as adaptation to climate change.

resolution as described by Felstiner, Abel, and Sarat (1980) (“naming, blaming, claiming”), necessary to make the cause visible (Cefaï 2007).

This shift in vocabulary and in categories lays the foundations for a reversal of the balance of legitimacy between seed companies and farmers. At present, seed legislation in France allows for the payment of royalties by seed-savers to seed companies on the grounds that they indirectly benefit from the “genetic progress” accomplished by breeding companies. Conversely, the representatives of the RSP claim that breeding companies benefit from the farmers’ contribution to genetic resource conservation and development, which constitute the genetic material for improved plant varieties.

This strategy is encouraged and legitimized by the ITPGRFA (the FAO seed Treaty). The implementation of the articles concerning the participation of farmers in agrobiodiversity governance and benefit sharing has engendered a reflection on the definition and defense of “farmers’ rights.” Even though the RSP is not recognized as a legitimate representative of farmers’ voices in France (due to a balance of power more favorable to the mainstream unions), the international context offers a useful leverage point from which to advocate farmers’ rights to seed sovereignty.

The RSP as a Social Movement

In this essay I have described an attempt by farmers to build an alternative to seed production and regulation as it is practiced in the modern agricultural model. What I have sought to explain is that criticisms of the seed industry’s hegemony derive from a discursive and practical engagement that produces a shift in conceptual categories and lines of legitimacy, and contribute to the formation and reinforcement of a new collective identity: the peasants. This figure is neither a complete reinvention nor a revival of past traditions; it has more to do with the social and historical relations between actors in the French agricultural landscape. A similar point has been made by Leach and Fairhead, who compared contestation of forest management in two regions: the Caribbean and Guinea. As they have argued, activists tend to put forward their identity as citizens or as indigenous people, depending on what provides them with the greatest sense of meaning and legitimacy in the specific sociohistorical context in which they evolve (Leach and Fairhead 2002).

In this respect, the RSP shares many features with other social movements in its attempts to define a cause and to make it heard by a wider audience and in the emergence of a new collective identity during the activist process (Cefaï 2007; Chateauraynaud 2011). It also shares specific features with the contestation strategy of communities concerned with forest conservation, especially when they position themselves as stewards of biodiversity. International biodiversity governance has historically been conceived as a trade-off between, on the one hand, easier access to genetic resources, and on the other, the recognition of small communities' contributions to biodiversity conservation, recognition supposedly to be put into practice through benefit sharing (Thomas 2006). Regardless of the actual effects of these mechanisms, small communities have seized on the opportunities opened by this rhetoric to make themselves heard in the area of environmental conflicts. Participatory environmental governance has a performative effect on the way actors present themselves (as “an indigenous and local community,” as “farmers”: cf. Li 2000) and on the way they build their discourses (as stewards of biodiversity). These dynamics should be studied in a comparative manner, rather than transferring into the academic field the divide between wild biodiversity and agrobiodiversity—a divide that translates into a splitting of the negotiation arenas, with the Convention on Biological Diversity on one side and the FAO treaty on the other.

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