



"Protecting and sharing farmland": the rise and partial failure of a simultaneous political handling of demographical and ecological dimensions of "rural regeneration" in France (2014-2022)

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Introduction

In the mid-2010s, two mediatized cases participated to the inscription of farmland concentration to the French national political agenda (van der Ploeg *et al.*, 2015). In the southern part of the Paris Basin's plains, a couple of Chinese firms purchased nearly 2.000 hectares of cropland (Levesque, 2016), whereas in the northern part of the Paris Basin, a French construction industrial established a “1.000-cow farm” by taking the control of nearly 3.000 hectares of fodder land.

In both cases, the juridical framework of farmland regulation, which dates to the 1960s and is known as stricter than in other European countries, revealed unable to stop these large-scale purchases. Indeed, only the farmland ownership and renting markets are regulated: taking indirect control of farmland through the purchase of social shares of societies (owning themselves farmland) has become over the years a more common, and unregulated, way to access land. The delegation of farm work to specialized businesses is also growing and operates as a barrier to entry for newcomers.

The idea that a juridical update would be necessary progressively took form, leading to the socio-political construction of the horizon of a “new” or “great” land law. Numerous organizations from agriculture, law, environment, and public action sectors have taken part to still underway debates. All their statements frame a large array of positions on the future of French rurality and agriculture. France is here understood as only its metropolitan part, as overseas territories land issues are largely dissimilar and handled by other stakeholders and at a different pace.

The objective of this contribution is to question how networks of stakeholders favourable towards rural regeneration (and more particularly generational renewal in agriculture and better inclusion of soils issues in land policies) have emerged and acted to advocate for a simultaneous handling of both topics.

I first show how the horizon of the land law rose from 2014 to 2019, blurred from 2020 and 2022 and now reopens. I then focus on two networks of stakeholders who respectively advocated for juridical evolutions and

Materials and methods

To answer this question, I carried out a review of the agricultural press from 2014 to now: every announcement or statement on the topic was listed in a chronological spreadsheet, to reconstitute the stages of the controversy and identify the main stakeholders. Second, I collected the documents produced by the main stakeholders (press releases, open letters, study reports, scenarios, law proposals etc.) to analyse which topics were addressed in which way by whom. Finally, I build on a corpus of 3.349 tweets mentioning the land law which were published between 2017/01/01 and the second round of the legislative selections, on 2022/06/22. Network and lexical analyses of the corpus were conducted. The research is ongoing and semi-structured interviews with major political, associative, and professional stakeholders will complete the materials. This ultimate stage will benefit from a distant participant observation I am carrying out in one of the organizations advocating for an ambitious land law.

The rise and blurring of the horizon of a “new”/“great” land law

4 completed stages of the controversy can be observed, when a fifth is beginning, and opening a new cycle of expectations.

2013-2017, The missed momentum of the 2014 Law for the Future of Agriculture. As early as 2013, deputies from the Socialist Party, including the organic farmer D. Potier, proposed to widen the pre-empting right of Safer (a semi-public body which controls land ownership by a preemption right) to the social shares' market. The 2014 Law for the Future of Agriculture is shier as their proposal, which they finally manage to shoehorn into two successive laws. Both are nevertheless censured by the Constitutional Council, because of their lack of respect of ownership right and free entrepreneurship principle.

2017-2018, Deputies prepare the land law promised by newly elected President Macron. Early 2017, an expertise report of the Ministry for Agriculture recommends rethinking farmland regulation from the scratch and the candidate E. Macron promises to widen the Safer control to the social shares' market. On the contrary, the new government twice tries to suppress land regulation committees and slightly abandons the idea of a law, in favour of small adjustments. A parliamentary committee of inquiry led by deputy J.-B. Sempastous takes up both issues of access to land and land consumption and carry out a large survey all over the year 2018. Due to internal disagreement, two reports are published, one in favour of more regulation and the other favouring local experimentations. The pre-emption right of Safer is finally widen, but only for farm buildings in shore and mountain areas.

2019-2020, Doubts and progressive withdrawal of the land law by the Government. During months, successive declarations of the Ministry for Agriculture D. Guillaume suggest that a “great” land law is about to be prepared... or not anymore on the agenda. A consultation is launched, with no public results. Parallely, farmland owners' and tenants' unions agree on a potential reform of the “rural lease”, which is unchanged for over 70 years. Position statements in favour of the law multiply, until a great variety of stakeholders unite under the banners “Call for a new land law” (Nov. 2019) and “Protecting and sharing land” (Feb. 2020). But the Ministry takes advantage of the covid crisis to officially give up the project and commits to take measures by decree. During this period, a maximal number of tweets is produced, mainly by deputies of the Socialist Party, the farmer unions Confédération paysanne (member of La Via Campesina), FNSEA and Jeunes Agriculteurs (both on mainstream positions), and the civic land trust Terre de Liens. In 2020, only the most pro-regulation accounts continue tweeting.

2020-2022, Multiple strategies to keep up with an update of farmland regulation. Some elements linked to land consumption issues are finally introduced in the 2021 Climate and Resilience Law. As the expected decrees on land concentration do not come out, the Court of Auditors and the Economic and Social Council urge the government to act. Finally, early 2021, the former head of the parliamentary committee of inquiry proposes a law which grants to the Safer the examination of a newly created administrative authorization for the purchase of social shares of societies owning farmland. But the supporters of a regulatory approach criticize the threshold for control activation, which is considered to be too high. Parallely, and with a particular audience on twitter, two candidates to elections take up the idea of a “great” land law: ecologist E. Piolle during the presidential primary of his party in Summer 2021 and a candidate for the left alliance NUPES in Burgundy (L. Coutellec) during the legislative elections in Spring 2022.

2022 onwards, A reopened horizon, looking forward to the 2023 Orientation Law for Agriculture. During his re-election campaign, E. Macron pledged his government would pass an Orientation Law for Agriculture, with a particular focus on land issues. This new horizon encourages the civil society and professional representatives to try to put on the agenda their respective propositions.

Advocating for “rural regeneration”: from traditional leftist to climatic rationales?

The debates within the horizon of a “great” land law focused parallelly on generation renewal and on soils care, with separate political handlings at the end. The protection of soils in front of land consumption entered a climate-related law, when the distribution of land as a production factor of coexisting farms has so far been the subject of small-size laws. Indeed, whereas the ecological dimension of soils does not show up frequently, farmland is approached through at least 3 lenses (land market control, reform of the farming lease and land tax law).

Interestingly, the most active stakeholders on twitter are those who stand up the more for a simultaneous political handling of both dimensions. They also belong to the strongest supporters of a strengthened farmland regulation, through legislative or even constitutional means. Two networks appear:

- The first is around socialist deputy D. Potier, who is involved since the first law proposal in 2013 and developed connections with law and history scholars, but also with organic agriculture, social Christian and environmental NGOs. Among others, Potier wrote in a 2019 book (mentioning in its title “land justice”) that his “deepest conviction is that there will be no agroecology without succession and that succession is impossible without a fair land policy.” His view focuses on the role of the State, particularly through the recognition of a legal status of soils which would legitimize their protection and the struggle against concentration.
- The second network is centred around the Confédération paysanne, Terre de Liens and Agter, a small but international association dedicated to land governance. The three created a Land Coalition to coordinate advocacy efforts, in non-binding association with other NGOs less concerned by land issues. To them, a better sharing of land is the tool to prioritize to reach climatic and ecological challenges of agriculture.

Only in March 2020 did all farmers unions, in association with NGOs and public institutions, agreed on a call for a “new” land law which handled simultaneously generation renewal and transition of farming models. Rapidly, the mainstream agricultural institutions (majority unions, Safer and Chambers of Agriculture) focused again on mere land regulation issues, whereas the Land Coalition members continued linking both issues, but around climatic challenges and in association with climate NGOs. Farmland regulation is a complex topic for the government, as the many doubts around the land law showed: looking at it from the carbon storage capacity of soils is a new way to legitimize older proposals (Aykut, 2020). According to this new rationale, the farming models which store the more carbon should be favoured, and every parcel of farmland protected against urbanization, as carbon is stored in it. Consequently, the need of a land law would come from the need to mitigate climate change, which is much more socially acceptable than that of helping newcomers settle farms.

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