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Attachment to the land.

From Modern violence to eco-sensitive bonds: toward an agriculture of relations

Introduction

As all inquiries, this one starts with an enigma, emerging from an encounter with a spontaneous and yet strange wording: the fact that many farmers — people that I have directly met on my field inquiries or that I have indirectly met by reading and watching sociological and historical materials about French agriculture — when asked about the relations between them and the land they work with, spontaneously talk about an *attachment*. This is the problem from which this inquiry starts: what does it mean, for a farmer, to say that he feels *attached to his land*? What this instinctive wording of *attachment* seems to imply, is that the relation to the land cannot be fully understood through the Modern prism describing the relations to non-human entities in agriculture, that means with concepts such as property or exploitation. My hypothesis is that there is something else behind this use of the word *attachment*, something complex and quite undefined, something undescrivable with our Moderns categories; an attachment to a land and its history, to a landscape and the texture of a soil, to a flora and a fauna, in a word an attachment to *an entangled web of ecological, sensitive and co-constitutive bonds*.

Mapping the attachments: a political problem

First, to define a theoretical framework for this inquiry on the problem of attachments in modern agriculture, we need to focus on this spontaneous wording of an *attachment to the land* as a mapping problem, or, to be more specific, as a way of questioning the old modern political map. In a 2000's paper, "Factures/Fractures", Bruno Latour proposed to rethink the modern dichotomy between emancipation and attachment as a false problem. For Latour, because "we have never been really moderns", the problem was never to truly free ourselves from any kind of attachments, but always to choose between positive and negative attachments. More recently, in his *Inquiry into modes of existence*, he proposes the following definition for the concept of attachment, which I'll use as a conceptual structure for this talk:

The term "attachment", like "association", draws our attention to the other beings necessary for existence (...) and therefore enables us to get away from the idea of emancipation and autonomy by taking attachments in the positive sense and by re-qualifying emancipation as a sliding from one attachment to another (not as the absence of attachments).

Following Latour's proposal, in order to go beyond this old map — which have been, as French philosopher Serge Audier recently pointed out, a strong and structuring divide between Left progressists and ecologists during the last century — we need to fracture this single axis diagram by arguing that we are always-already entangled-beings, part of complex, co-constitutive, and interdependent assemblages, and that it is illusory to think of emancipation as a liberation from any kind of attachments.

But that being said, how can we approach our particularly fantasized form of attachment – the attachment between a farmer and his/the/our land – without being trapped in the old binary axis? The old map would oppose on one hand a reactionary perspective, barresian and petainist, inheritance of nationalist's use of the concept of *land*, and, on the other hand, a strictly modern perspective of emancipation through progress, based on a narrow definition of materiality, leading to an ideology of “leaving the ancient ties behind”.

So how can we get out of this modern trap? Or, to be more specific, how can we criticize the dominant agricultural model, which, as we will see, clearly connects the very possibility of emancipation to a liberation process from any so-called natural attachments, without falling into the usual reactionary counterpart of modernization which considers that the only alternative is to go back to the good old days?

In other words, how can we make sure that the new perspectives opened by agroecological approaches will lead to a real *ecologization* of agriculture, and not to a new step of modernization or to a nostalgic reaction? In a recent interview in *SOLDES* journal, Latour proposes an inspiring but yet unsolved program for doing so and “resetting modernity”. Drawing on Emilie Hache's book, *What we care for*, he says:

What is the territory on which we are settled? What are the agencies, the potencies with which we are ready to work with? It is this replanting, this re-rootedness which define current politics. Except that this process of re-rootedness requires to take into consideration a bunch of things that we don't really know how to deal with, especially left-wing thinkers: attachment to places, to traditions, to loyalties, all kind of attachments that are assumed to be reactionary – and that often are, but not necessarily. [I translate]

The problem is clearly posed: we need to take root, to criticize the modern illusory program of systematic emancipation from any kind of attachments, but at the same time, we also need to avoid the reactionary trap of a toxic and nationalist way of being attached to a land. And as I said, this problem is particularly sharp in agriculture, because it has this long history of being a shelter for reactionary values. But we can guess that there is another land to care for, something that is neither a resource-land, in which one plot is substitutable to another all pedological, agronomical and biochemical characteristics being equal, and nor a land-of-the-ancestors, a form of a blood-and-land attachment on which romantic nationalism once — and still — flourish. This awareness leads us to look for a path beyond the old divide between freedom and ties, by introducing, as Baptiste Morizot proposes in his book *Les Diplomates*, relations with non-humans into politics and other living's territories into geopolitics, as a new way to diplomatically deal with entanglements and attachments.

Agriculture modernization: violence and emancipation

I would like to now focus on how agricultural modernization have dealt with those *attachments to the land* as an impediment to progress. This will allow us to understand the preliminary conditions for this new way of noticing and taking care of our attachments.

The question here is: why modernization needs to get rid of attachments – or at least to make believe that it allows farmers to get rid of attachments? The key concepts to start unravelling this problem are *scalability* and *substitutability*, which are two necessary conditions for agricultural modernization. Here, by agricultural modernization, I mean more specifically an objective alliance between industrial constraints and an agronomic science structured around a

nomological and prescriptive epistemology. The concept of *scalability* is very well defined by Anna Tsing in her recent book *The Mushroom at the end of the world*. Her idea is that *scalability*, that means the ability to scale up without changing the framework of a project, has been “the formula [that] shaped the dreams we have come to call progress and modernity”. To illustrate this idea, she takes an example which can be interesting for our perspective: the Portuguese sugarcane plantations in colonial Brazil at the end of the sixteenth century. The characteristics of those kind of plantations are first the interchangeability of planting stock, and second the interchangeability of workers. This is the point where *substitutability* and *scalability* become the necessary conditions of a big scale pre-industrial project – and later of every industrial one. To ensure those features, the Portuguese used deterritorialization technics as a way of making both plants and workers deprive from any kind of attachments and, as Tsing says, “oblivious to encounter”. For plants, this was done by a strangely heralding technic of bringing cultigen from Europe and then cloning them by vegetative reproduction. By doing so, plants had few interspecies relations, and were “scale up ready” without the necessity for any local, ecological or agronomical inquiry. And for workers, slavery was the answer. Following the same pattern, enslaved Africans were used as attachment-free workers, with neither social relations nor ecological or territorial bonds.

Above and beyond its particular and yet forerunner context, this example of sugarcane plantations shows the strong link between *scalability* and *substitutability* as attachment-depriving tools. Applied to extractivist agricultural modernization, it becomes an epistemological problem of metrology for agronomic sciences, with strong ecological, social and political consequences. The metrological pattern follows this logic: if you want to compare, exchange and rationalize the use of the land, you need to establish standards. And to establish standards, you need to cut off parts of the material world that exceed any possibility of standardization – and modelling – because of their inherent complexity. This is what I call, for the specific problem of agro-industrial modernization, the process of *agroformation*. The concept of *agroformation* is a direct reference to the idea of *terraformation*, invented by science-fiction writer Jack Williamson to name the transformation of a planet to make it habitable by Earth-like life. Sharing with *terraformation* a geo-constructivist inclination, *agroformation* can be define as an extensive transformation of the land to make it cultivable under the techno-scientific principles of dominant agronomy.

To achieve this goal, *agroformation* needs, among other things, to proceed to a systematic disqualification of all the remaining forms of attachments, in order to ensure both scalability and substitutability without the interferences of the complex tempos of an entangled assemblage. And where do those attachments still lurk? Both in farmer's knowledges and narratives. Two processes are needed to get rid of those existing attachments, and to replace them with a modernized web of new attachments. The first one is the systematic disqualification of situated agronomic knowledges as empirical approximations or even worse as superstitions. This undertaking mostly relies on an authoritarian agronomic epistemology, which started to structure itself in France and Germany at the end of the nineteenth century around agricultural chemistry. This historical form of agronomy tends to use the normative power of positive science to hop from local explanation to nomological prescription. The second part of this process is the critic of any kind of sensitive and caring relation to the land as part of an obscure agrarian sentimentalism. This process has been well explored by ecofeminist's critics of the Green Revolution, and characterized as a colonial and patriarchal takeover. Once you've achieved both processes, once the perception of the land has been freed from what Anna Tsing calls a "rush of stories", you can easily replace those old, situated, entangled stories by a new unified narrative of emancipation and progress – which is only, in real terms, a replacement of the ancient attachments by a new reliance to the technical and industrial infrastructure. And the price for this large-scale rationalization of attachments is an immense violence done to what and whom farmers used to care for.

Conclusion – Ecologizing agriculture: the bonds of agroecologies

Now that we have briefly seen how agricultural modernization has made every attachment invisible and unspeakable, we need to go back to our initial problem. The persistence of the spontaneous wording from which we started our inquiry tells us something: modernization didn't manage to really get rid of the old attachments. It has only managed to make them blurry, undefined, indescribable. This is why the sentence "I'm attached to my land" can be seen as a fuzzy way to speak of an entanglement of care and bounds, because modernization deprived us from a richer lexicon to describe the complexity in the middle of which we stand.

But many farmers I've met during my field inquiries reclaim, in a militant political way or within the daily fabric of their practices, the right to speak afresh about the complexity of their attachments, both in epistemological, practical and sensitive terms. The matter is, as Bruno Latour once said, to reclaim "the right not to be deprived of the bonds that make one exist". From what I have witnessed, this reclaim can take many forms: a new awareness of the soil as a complex ecosystem that allows a deep change of agronomic practices and an empowerment regarding scientific knowledge; an explicit use of attachment as a point to defend a territory or a specific being – a particular tree a neighbour wants to cut off for example; a more local-to-global perspective in which an attachment to a situated and threatened land leads to a political involvement to defend agricultural lands in general against artificialization. But in all those different situations, an "art of noticing", as Tsing puts it, seems to come out of those renewed attachments, echoing what Baptiste Morizot calls an "eco-sensitivity", that means "a sensitivity to the vibrant tracery of the living world, to its streaked cosmos of meanings and interactions". And I think this underlying link between caring and reclaiming, points out very accurately the apparent eco-political paradox which is at the very heart of the agricultural ecologization issue: how, being aware that we are co-constituted by our relations with an entanglement of other beings, we can acknowledge that those attachments can bound us, while freeing us at the same time?