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The hedgerow: industrial farming’s “useful idiot”?

The contributions and limitations of radical criticism in sociological analysis

Léo Magnin

Keywords

Common Agricultural Policy, greening, ecologisation

Introduction

What can we, as sociologists, do with radical political criticism? The publication of the study *Reprendre la terre aux machines*¹ (Reclaiming the land from the machines) by the cooperative L’Atelier Paysan (2021) offers a particular answer to this age-old question. Sociologists accustomed to the complexity of case studies are often uncomfortable with overarching explanations that leave little room for nuance. This discomfort generally gives way to polite ignorance, distant sympathy or a sociological study of the critique (Boltanski 2009), but rarely to a robust discussion of the critique’s arguments supported by field surveys. However, just as the social sciences sometimes fuel political reflection, the positions formulated by politically and socially committed stakeholders can offer fruitful avenues of analysis for research that would be regrettable to ignore (Magnin 2018).

The Atelier Paysan is a “cooperative of peasant technologies” (L’Atelier Paysan, 2021, p. 255) whose main activity is self-building agricultural equipment. By training groups of farmers in wood and metalwork, the cooperative examines uses and needs to create tools that can be reproduced, repaired and adapted to each farm. The cooperative members’ approach is opposed to industrial logic: the objective is to promote farmers’ collective autonomy by enabling them to make tools that require less financial investment. This liberating aim combined with defending agroecology manifests itself, however, in a “quantitatively derisory result” (p. 154) in the words of the Atelier Paysan itself with its 22 permanent paid staff, and 700 farmers trained each year. The starting point of this “manifesto for peasant and food autonomy” announced by the book’s subtitle is, then, the authors’ dissatisfaction with the results of their own efforts. The originality of their writing, somewhere between essay and pamphlet, is that their critique is not reduced to identifying opposing forces but is also always self-critical. This reflexivity is not only aimed at the cooperative but also at all the components of the agricultural left-wing that advocate for agroecological farming. Effectively, although the authors’ identities are not mentioned in the book (probably to avoid personalising the spokespersons), the actors who present it in the media were involved before or in parallel with the Atelier Paysan in the left-wing, associative peasant trade union and popular education.

The self-criticism of alternative agriculture consists in denouncing its integration into “the agro-industrial complex” (p. 83), which it nevertheless wishes to depose. The latter includes industries both upstream (fertilisers, pesticides, seeds, machinery) and downstream (agri-food, mass distribution), banks and leading executives of the agricultural world (majority trade unionists, elected representatives and senior civil servants). Despite not using the same concepts, this analysis is similar to the one developed in a political economy book published

¹ For a review, see (Meyer 2022).

around the same time (Ansaloni & Smith 2021)². In both cases, the enlargement of farms and the decrease in their number are analysed as fundamental movements that increase inequalities in the agricultural world and, more generally, social inequalities with regard to food. According to the authors, the industrialisation of farming is fundamentally incompatible with the deployment of agroecology, which requires the despecialisation of farms dependent on large quantities of inputs. This state of affairs is locked in by an economic policy based on international competition that establishes a framework within which agricultural policies have little room for manoeuvre. In these agricultural policies, ecologisation (i.e. the integration of environmental criteria) is therefore structurally restricted to marginal measures.

Reading studies such as these can raise questions for researchers working on comparable initiatives. In my thesis, I studied one of the measures of this ecologisation: the protection of hedgerows in force in the Common Agricultural Policy since 2015 (Magnin 2021b). By analysing the genesis and implementation of the measure, I showed that the rule was negotiated as a matter of urgency, that for this reason it includes many potential circumventions and that it is only rarely applied by weakened administrations. The findings of my monograph identify certain mechanisms denounced by the Atelier Paysan (the weight of the history of agricultural practices, the power of the majority agricultural unionism, and the low impact of agri-environmental measures) from a particular angle. Nonetheless, the manifesto led me to address a perspective previously overlooked in my approach, probably owing to its dimension of research conducted with associative actors. With Afac-Agroforesteries, the main national association that brings together hedgerow professionals working with farmers, I have co-written reports for the Ministry of Agriculture that identify levers for better protection of hedgerows in the CAP (Afac-Agroforesteries and Magnin 2020; 2021). Although critical of the planned implementation of this ecologisation, I did not question the implicit idea that increasing hedgerow protection in the CAP, and more generally taking better account of the environment in agricultural policies, were politically desirable objectives. However, one of the striking theories put forward by the Atelier Paysan is precisely that the institutional advances of agroecology are not small steps that make it possible to progressively transform farming but instead residual environmental guarantees that only reinforce the dominant agricultural model.

This process of compartmentalising ecologisation through marginal measures may be intentional (Fouilleux & Berlan 2022) or unintentional or even completely contrary to the actors' initial intentions. The mechanism is not theorised as such in *Reprendre la terre aux machines*, even though it is, in my opinion, its most powerful political charge. To avoid euphemistic periphrases, I suggest naming this perverse effect “*the useful idiot*”, after the well-known political expression initially used to designate left-wing intellectuals favourable to the East despite Soviet totalitarianism.

By way of example, organic farming is also included in the critique formulated by the Atelier Paysan. According to the authors, the strategy of moving upmarket is, of course, not environmentally harmful in itself. But it is “a complement to industrial agriculture” (p. 100), a complement that cannot count on becoming mainstream because it exists only by virtue of its comparative advantages and the social hierarchy of ways of feeding oneself. The label “*useful idiot*” expresses this contradiction between what is aimed for and what is obtained. It is an example of an old criticism of reformism that, while it relies on the gradual

² For a review, see (Magnin 2021a).

transformation of a system, ultimately only actively perpetuates the very system it seeks to transform. In addition to this structural definition, there is a moral dimension: according to the authors, proponents of organic farming, and even peasant agriculture as a whole (consumers, activists, farmers and researchers), have in common a tendency towards self-satisfaction that reinforces the relegation of the political balance of power by basing social transformation on individual choices.

The authors do not apply this radical criticism to the protection of hedgerows in agricultural policies. However, there is an interrelated theme in the “zones de non traitement” or non-treated areas near homes and residential areas where the use of phytosanitary products is prohibited. For the authors, this measure, championed and obtained in 2018 by environmental organisations, serves only to allow farmers to continue to use toxic products without fundamentally challenging the production and marketing methods that make them indispensable, thus “further entrenching pesticides in agricultural practices” (L’Atelier Paysan, 2021, p 142). Indeed, after the size of these zones was reduced by the State, aid worth 30 million euros was granted to “co-finance equipping farmers with state-of-the-art high-tech spraying equipment in order to ‘reduce’ the quantities of pesticide spread and to ‘limit’ their drifting towards neighbouring homes” (L’Atelier Paysan, 2021, p. 142). In this example, non-treated areas and their environmentalist advocates are part of a technological ‘solutionism’ fostered by the latter’s ‘depoliticisation’. The authors treat this attitude with derision:

“To those calling on public authorities to monitor compliance with non-treated areas near homes, we’re tempted to reply: let’s also set up fridge and cupboard inspection brigades on market days to check that everything that goes into them is organic! Joking aside, let’s stop making these dramatic problems simply a matter of conscience, morality and ‘best practice’”. (L’Atelier Paysan, 2021, p. 164)

Consequently, the aim of this short paper is to put hedgerows to a similar test: are hedgerows, and with them all those who defend their greater consideration in agricultural policies, the useful idiots of the dominant agricultural model? This reflexivity is not introspection but rather the re-investing of a research topic based on dialogue with a critical discourse. The discussion is therefore organised in two stages. Firstly, it presents the arguments showing that hedgerows can support consensual ecologisation that marginalises a more profound transformation of the agricultural economy. Secondly, however, I then explore the limitations of this position by arguing that if greening via hedgerows is indeed marginal, it is not reduced to being a useful idiot but participates in ecologisation from the margins.

I. The consensual hedgerow: a driver for the marginalisation of structural ecologisation

The hedgerow is a cultural object that now has positive connotations. For several years, there has been a craze for trees (Dupré 2020) as seen in numerous publications aimed at the general public. The phenomenon is spreading to the academic world, which some people regret, seeing in this, sometimes rightly, an arbitrary poetisation of the human sciences (Poupeau 2020). As ordinary bushes and trees, hedgerows are enjoying this renewed public curiosity, and this can be seen in the frequent articles in the local press reporting on hedges planted by schoolchildren. The act of planting is not politically neutral, and conveys meanings that are used more or less openly by funders, whether public or private. Planting a hedge is a way of acting for the environment that is positive (it does not involve reducing consumption), local (plantations cannot be delocalised) and visible (the action becomes a long-term part of the landscape). Furthermore, the hedgerow is presented as an environmental “Swiss penknife”

that may sometimes be confused with a panacea: water filtration, restricting air erosion, shade for livestock, carbon sequestration, local wood production, biodiversity corridor, etc. Landscape ecology (Baudry & Jouin 2003) provides scientific justifications for the peasant practice of bocage, which is part of an environmental history that also has an aesthetic value.

These physical and social characteristics give rise to the consensual politicisation of hedgerows: they appear as a single *solution* to multiple problems. In other words, they are both a material response to environmental problems (without the need for advanced technology) and an effective tool for political communication. This politicising of hedgerows is not only a matter for local spatial planning policies, but has become a matter of general policy. Recently, President Emmanuel Macron showcased the plantation of 7,000km of hedgerows thanks to the France Relance Programme launched in response to the Covid-19 pandemic³. Julien Denormandie, his Minister for Agriculture from 2020 to 2022, pursued and strengthened this gesture by repeatedly announcing that the next CAP will be the “Hedgerow CAP” (Sanson & Moret 2022)⁴.

It could be hypothesised that this hedgerow consensus stems from the fact that it is *marginal* both literally, in that it surrounds fields, and figuratively, as it does not directly affect agricultural production – hedgerows cannot be eaten⁵. However, conventional farming, defined by Benoît Daviron as “chemical farming”, is precisely a type of farming that has historically focused on the production of food biomass, thanks to the development of fossil fuels and synthetic chemistry (Daviron 2020). From this angle, it can be argued that the political focus on this marginal element can lead to the marginalisation of a more systemic ecologisation. From this perspective, the hedgerow is no longer a framework to spread greening but rather a fence that prevents it from reaching the heart of the production system.

A “Hedgerow CAP” would indeed illustrate a consensual environmental willingness that could, however, be a way of circumventing deeper disagreements. The measures to plant and protect hedgerows, as legitimate as they are, may give the impression that agriculture’s greening is now only a matter of time even though environmental issues such as reducing the sector’s greenhouse gas emissions, restricting the use of phytosanitary products, limiting water consumption and reducing dependence on synthetic mineral fertilisers essentially remain in the trees’ shadow. Effectively, the question of productive and food democracy is not posed through the partial prism of hedges: what should we eat and produce in order to limit environmental shocks and adapt to them, come what may?

The media and political success of hedgerows also masks the fundamental question of who, tomorrow, will look after the hedges planted today. Available surveys unequivocally show that hedgerows are disappearing because the size of plots of land is increasing along with the size of farms per farmer, and therefore farmers have less and less time to maintain their remaining trees (Jouin 2003; Perichon 2004; 2005). The social issue of taking over farms is crucial here because it reveals a conflict of timeframes: hedges are planted, admittedly, but the lifespan of trees is decades while 43% of farmers are aged 55 or over (Agreste 2022). Similarly, the co-existence of a “Hedgerow CAP” and fiscal policies that encourage over-equipping with machinery – a phenomenon that concerns not only the Atelier Paysan (p. 133) but also the Ministry of Agriculture itself (CGAAER 2021) – is paradoxical given that the size of tractors leads to the destruction of old paths lined with hedges, which are now too narrow.

³ See his speech in the Ministry of Agriculture’s video “[Plantons des haies](#)”, 8 April 2021.

⁴ “Les chantiers que le ministre doit boucler avant l’élection présidentielle”, *Terre-Net*, 30 September 2021.

⁵ At least since the massive disappearance of subsistence practices that took from hedges blackberries for jam or hazelnuts for oil (Lizet 1984).

For all these reasons, it is no exaggeration to claim that the hedgerow's success may, effectively, play the role of the useful idiot for an agricultural model that has remained unchanged in its technical, economic and social foundations. In this regard, the Atelier Paysan's critique is instructive – decreeing that hedges must be planted and protected without, however, addressing the socio-economic mechanisms that have determined their destruction for decades is an inherently illusory 'solution'. This is reinforced by the fact that the announcement of a 'Hedgerow CAP' not only coexists with the status quo of a political economy focused on the accumulation of capital within an ever smaller number of farms (-20% in ten years), but accompanies a policy of prolonging and intensifying this trend. In any case, this is one interpretation that could be made of the "third agricultural revolution" announced by President Macron⁶, which, focused on progress in "genetics, robotics and digital technology", is likely to prolong an economic model of selecting farms according to their investment capacity rather than their agroecological commitment.

II. Reclassifying the hedgerow: ecologisation from the margins?

If the reference to hedgerows sometimes plays the role of useful idiot in today's agricultural policies, does this mean that any action carried out to promote hedges can be reduced to this? In order to answer this question, we need to move away from the focus of political communication and consider how agricultural policies are negotiated and implemented.

Hedges are not only landscape images but also physical elements that are not as popular as the 'bocage' aesthetics. In the 1950s, French law described hedges as "obstacles to rational land-use" because they prevented expanding plots of land and thus mechanising them. Because of the shade they cast, they are also accused of lowering crop yields. And lastly, they require time for their maintenance even though they no longer provide the services expected by the farmers of the first half of the 20th century: barbed and electric wire have replaced hedges as fences, and electricity and fossil fuels have made the bundles from their pruning superfluous. They have therefore gradually become physical 'constraints' for specialised agriculture based on standardising spaces.

However, from the 1980s onwards, planting policies were implemented in the departments of western France. For decades, these replanting policies coexisted with direct or indirect support for the destruction of hedges. Since 2015, CAP cross-compliance has made the maintenance of hedgerows mandatory. Although the measure is only rarely applied, it remains a regulatory ban that applies to all farms. The parallel with organic farming is therefore no longer relevant here since it is not a question of a voluntary commitment based on a niche market. It also differs from the "decentralised" and "fragmented negotiation" (p. 139) of non-treated areas on a local level that the authors deplore.

This measure reflects the hedgerow's progression in agricultural policies, but also puts its consensual success into perspective – it remains a contentious political object. To dwell only on the hedge's success in the State summit's political communication would ultimately mean only taking into account the surface of the political facts. In fact, the protection of hedgerows in 2015 was only obtained by the defenders of bocage thanks to European budgetary pressure, against the wishes of the majority agricultural unions (Magnin 2021b). These power struggles have influenced the definition of hedgerows protected by the CAP in France: the definition adopted in 2015 is restrictive, does not cover the diversity of French hedgerows, and has not been modified in the CAP 2023 despite the appeals of tree professionals.

⁶ <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2021/10/12/presentation-du-plan-france-2030>, consulted 25 October 2022.

The same tensions are at play in the new CAP that takes hedgerows into account to an unprecedented degree: in addition to being protected by cross-compliance and supported by agri-environmental measures under the second pillar, they play a greater role in the first pillar with environmental aids known as “eco-schemes” (Sanson & Moret 2022). Nevertheless, this state of affairs must be seen in the context of CAP negotiations, which are beset from start to finish by power struggles with the majority agricultural trade unions. The FNSEA (France’s national union of farmers’ syndicates) opposed measures affecting hedgerows, in particular by trying to influence hedges’ equivalence coefficient so that one linear metre would be worth 100m² instead of 10m² of ecological surface area. These objections show that hedgerows are not just the useful idiot of chemical agriculture, but that they are a nuisance to its representatives. The denunciation of the “systematic avoidance of conflict” (p. 176) that the authors of the *Atelier Paysan* (2021) diagnose in agroecological organisations does not apply to the professional world of hedgerows.

For agroforestry advisors, integrating hedgerows into the regulations is as much, if not more, a cause for concern as it is for satisfaction. In their everyday work, rural tree professionals see the discrepancy between the law and the facts: ripping up hedges continues, and ageing hedgerows are not maintained because of lack of time and skills lost over three generations of farm specialisation. If the State, local authorities and companies wish to finance plantations, these funds arrive as a matter of urgency in structures that lack resources, because the financiers generally wish to finance one-off spectacular actions (so many kilometres planted) without providing long-term support to professionals, for example by funding jobs. The superficial political success of hedgerows exposes them to political recuperation by private and public actors whom they distrust, as well as to competition with newcomers who are potentially opportunistic and who do not have the technical knowledge or the relationships of trust they have built up in their areas, sometimes since the 1980s for the oldest structures. This is how agroforestry advisors perceive the political reappropriation of their work, far from the “triumphalist declarations” (*L’Atelier Paysan*, 2021, p. 158) of certain organic farming representatives whom the authors of *Reprendre la terre aux machines* lambast for their optimism.

This is not to say that the social logics of opposition are absent from local level, but real political negotiation can take place there, unlike in national CAP negotiations where the pro- and anti-hedgerow camps are more rigid. By providing a technical discourse on hedgerows, agroforestry advisors participate in ‘agroecological diplomacy’, in that they make sense of hedgerow protection regulations from the point of view of the farmers they work with (Magnin 2020). Although they sometimes have to deal with tense situations such as the CAP suspension of land consolidation, they do not adopt an overbearing position by imposing environmental requirements on farmers’ practices. Instead, they provide an opportunity for consensus with regard to hedgerows. The social polysemy of the hedgerow allows for these shifts in meaning: it is an agroecological infrastructure but also a marker of landscape identity, a source of wood, an object with long-lost technicity, not to mention that its destruction is costly. These interactions are opportunities for socialisation to agroecology, all the more effective as it is not imposed as such⁷. The task of these advisors is, precisely, to reach out to ‘historical’ farmers (*L’Atelier Paysan*, 2021, p. 253), in other words, conventional farmers who inherited their farms, with whom the authors encourage establishing connections.

⁷ However, it cannot be said either that hedgerows are a gateway that, once pushed open, naturally leads to farms’ total transformation. The consequences of reclassifying hedgerows as an integral part of the farm on the rest of its components is an avenue of research that future empirical studies could address.

If agroforestry advisors act as diplomats between the administration and farmers, this is not by nature but because they are already obliged to negotiate and compromise within their own organisations. The Afac-Agroforesteries brings together organisations that, on paper, are varied or even antagonistic: the Chambers of Agriculture, under the aegis of the majority agricultural trade unions; hunters' federations, which maintain a population of wild fauna that may damage crops; environmental associations, not known for their cordial relations with mainstream conventional farmers or hunters; local authorities, subject to the vagaries of local votes; companies, whose economic model is radically different from the structures mentioned here, etc. At national and local levels, the Afac's work is an example of an attempt – sometimes successful, sometimes not – to overcome the “sociological confinement” (L'Atelier Paysan, 2021, p. 166) into which, according to the authors, the left-wing peasant and ecologist movements risk sinking.

We should also take note of the fact that this constant compromise does not lead, as one might expect, to a purely technical political position or to the weakening of the ambitions to transform agriculture, i.e. to the “depoliticisation” (p. 173) denounced by the Atelier Paysan (2021). On the contrary, even though Afac-Agroforesteries positions itself as an expert body on a specific subject, in 2019 it joined the ‘Pour une Autre PAC’ platform, which became the ‘Nourrir’ collective in 2022, bringing together environmental associations and the peasant left. Taking this stand, after twelve years of existence, is relatively risky for an association because it places it in a defined camp in the agricultural arena. This positioning stems from a desire to overcome the obstacles that Afac members have encountered in their work for hedgerows, locally in technical advising, and nationally by participating in CAP negotiations.

Conclusion

The main lesson of this paper is to highlight the benefits for sociology to take seriously the political analyses of stakeholders, not only as objects of study, but also as sparks to inspire the sociological imagination. The method developed here is not a theoretical assessment of the authors' positions, but the testing of some of their arguments in a case study related to their discourse. This challenge allowed me to take a fresh look at my object of study, hedgerows, from an original perspective while identifying its strengths and limitations, in the hope that researchers and field workers may find useful analyses.

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