The emergence of “firm” agriculture in France: Characteristics and coexistence with family farms

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Until now, French agricultural production has mainly been based on family farming systems. When it was created in the 1950s, the clear policy goal of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) was to assist the development of family farming systems in achieving food self-sufficiency. Fifty years later, in 2000, the CAP reform promoted the concept of multi-functionality and aimed to defend a certain model of agricultural development that reinforced the role of family farms. Despite such apparently strong policy support, the family farming model is clearly no longer universal. Field surveys of farming systems conducted in different regions of France within the context of our "*Agrifirme*" research project, as well as in-depth interviews with stakeholders in the agricultural sector, point to proof of the emergence of new forms of agricultural production, which appear to be very different from the family farming model. The main goals of this paper are, first, to present the interdisciplinary conceptual framework we have designed in order to better classify new forms of social and economic organizations within agricultural production and, secondly, to present the preliminary findings of one of our regional case studies. This paper focuses on the study of rice farming systems in the Camargue region (South-East of France), where there are very diverse forms of new organizations associated with "firm" or "corporate-style" agriculture (agricultural service-supply agencies, "corporate" farms, "capitalist-driven" family farms, etc.). We will present a typology based on several major organizational and functional criteria: e.g., complex forms of governance driven by different types of logic, new relationships to markets and resources, and new forms of workforce organization. Finally, we will discuss the factors underpinning the emergence of such new forms and the dynamics at work in the coexistence of such forms with more traditional family farms.

Camargue: a unique territory predisposed to a shift in the structure of family farms?

The major changes that have occurred in the way farming is organized socially and economically in France despite public policy's clear drive to promote a single model – that of family farming – encourage us to identify the continuities and breaks that have shaped such changes historically over the long term. Influenced by globalization, financiarization, and technological changes, a type of organization that for now we will call "firm" or "corporate-style" farming has developed and is a particularly suitable topic for such research (Hervieu and Purseigle, 2011). This new form is based both on a multiplicity of decision-making entities, each with its own interests, and a widespread reliance on new, non-agricultural, tangible and intangible resources. Is the emergence of very large "corporate" farms an *ex nihilo* novelty or does it represent the resurgence of a pre-existing model (Friedmann, 2005)? Does the diversity of this remodeling include types of farming without farmers and does it reify forms of hybridization between different production systems? To begin to address these questions, we have chosen to focus on one French region which is unique in the atypical organization of the social and business aspects of its farming: the Camargue region.

As sociologist Bernard Picon has noted, the Camargue region is an area that “harbors social activities which, although representative of national trends, take on forms here which are very unique, often immoderate, almost a caricature” (Picon, 2008, 14, translated here). Like a magnifying mirror for the upheaval that has occurred in farm structures more broadly, the agricultural distinctiveness of the Camargue region appears related to the historical inability of traditional farming communities to establish themselves in a natural environment reputed to be “hostile”. This may be why the Camargue region avoided the “usual safeguards and shields which protect against the penetration of economic innovation in rural areas” (Ibid., 51, translated here), paving the way for practices which did not conform to the “farming ethos” and to the rise of industrial-like trends driven by investors. As we have argued elsewhere (Purseigle, 2011), the Camargue region is home to an agricultural reality that cannot be reduced to a farming issue alone and which does not always comply with the existence of rural societies. Indeed, starting at the turn of the 20th century, agriculture in the Camargue region was controlled by two types of investors who divided up the territory. On the one hand were farmland owners in the fluvial-lacustrine zones and on the other hand were industrial entrepreneurs from the salt works in the lagunal-marine zones. According to Picon, the presence of these historical investors was tied to the inability of small farmers to acquire the capital necessary to “exploit natural areas that were difficult to master”. Their co-existence facilitated the creation of a “socially created biological diversity”: “the economic balance between the salt monopoly and farmland owners resulted in a rich biological productivity in central ponds which, subjected equally to the salt water and fresh water introduced by each party, became brackish” (Picon, 2008, 84-85, translated here).

It was in this context that rice farming was developed in the post-war period. Rice was not grown for its own merit “but to make profitable the introduction of fresh water necessary for other more profitable crops” (notably the planting of grape vines following the phylloxera epidemic that destroyed French vineyards) (Ibid., 91, translated here). Rice farming interested French families that had left Morocco and Algeria, as well as many industrialists and merchants from Marseilles who had begun investing in the Camargue and Crau areas by buying up land from the start of the Second World War (R. Livet quoted by Ibid., 92). The landifundium land structure of the Camargue region allowed such players to invest in large properties “in a single operation”. As historian R. Livet has argued, from this period onward, land was less exploited by agronomists and more by business men concerned with increasing the value of their newly acquired real estate (R. Livet quoted by Ibid., 92). Discretion was the norm with land acquisitions at the time and, in addition to problems identifying the boundaries around the first acquired lands, investors were virtually invisible. Indeed, although it was a land of agrarian colonization, the Camargue region was also an area in which landowners only very rarely lived on their properties. Alongside investors that were part of the elite from nearby Arles and Montpellier, a new figure quickly emerged in the form of “foreign” investors from Paris and Lyons who owned the largest properties (D. Begot quoted by Ibid., 53). The rise of rice farming only encouraged this type of investor, as did the role of farm directors and a managerial figure: the “manager” (D. Begot quoted by Ibid., 54).

It was not until 1981 and a recovery plan for rice farming initiated by professionals and public authorities in an attempt to support rice farming in the Camargue region that the “Camargue Rice” channel really asserted itself. Our observations in the field point up not only the arrival of new actors in the chain (investment funds, multi-national corporations, established families of business people, etc.) but also an evolution in the role of older actors (sovereign wealth funds buying farmland, farms becoming true agribusiness firms, etc.). We are particularly interested in such recent changes since they appear to prefigure changes now underway in other French regions that are nonetheless very different from the Camargue region and which did not seem predisposed to the emergence of “corporate-style” farming.

An approach based on the construction of ideal-type “corporate” figures

Our approach for identifying and classifying farms associated with “corporate-style” farming is based on the construction of ideal-types. An initial analytical framework was created based on an overview of the literature that could help us examine the definition of family farming and redefine the boundaries of farming. The documents analyzed were from three fields: rural economics, industrial economics, and rural sociology. This analytical framework was first applied to farms in the Camargue region which, as noted above, offer exceptional diversity in the existing types of farmland management and in the organization of agricultural production. Thirty-eight interviews were conducted in the fall of 2009 with farmers, farm operators, and farm managers who were both owners and non-owners[1]. During these semi-structured interviews data was collected about the characteristics of each farm (type of farming, capital structure, properties, workforce management, relationship with other actors in the chain, perception of changes in agriculture in the area). In addition to the farm surveys, interviews were also conducted with directors of cooperatives, representatives from the profession and from the French national land agency (*SAFER – Société d’Aménagement Foncier et d’Etablissement Rural*). Initial analysis allowed some of the farms surveyed in 2009 to be identified as “corporate-style” entities and these were the focus of a second visit in 2011. The goal of this second set of interviews was to further refine the social and economic criteria used to construct the ideal types.

Alongside this, a mapping of large properties was done based on two databases maintained by the Provence-Alpes-Côte d’Azur (PACA) region’s *SAFER*. These included the known land market database (from 2002 to mid-2009), as well as the land and property register database. Our research focused on three municipalities in the Bouches du Rhône department: Arles, Les Saintes Maries de la Mer and Port Saint Louis du Rhône.[2] Processing of the data from the land market database allowed us to:

- identify each transaction conducted during the period and, for each, to identify the surface area involved and its price;
- analyze the actors in the market per transaction to know “who is buying”: farmers/non farmers and even, when the information was available, the legal form of company acquisitions (property investment companies [*SCI*s], agricultural land groupings [*GFA*s], etc.).

Finally, we used GIS to do a cartographical analysis of property accounts in the municipalities of Arles and Port Saint Louis with:

- a representation of property accounts by surface area bracket;
- a localization of large accounts and type of owner (notably for company forms).

[1] Most of these interviews were conducted in the fall of 2009 in the context of a study on the PGI Camargue rice chain conducted by students in their third year of specialization in the DAA Agromanagement program at the National Polytechnic Institute of Toulouse – Toulouse National Institute of Agronomy under the supervision of Valérie Olivier and François Purseigle. Of the farms interviewed, some were identified as “corporate” figures and were thus the focus of a second visit in 2011 in the context of the “Agrifirme” research project.

[2] We were confronted with a technical issue. Indeed, it was possible to prepare the land and property register database for only two municipalities (Arles and Port Saint Louis) since there is no Electronic Land Register for the municipality of Saintes Maries.

Identification of hybrid forms and/or shifts from family farms to "corporate-style" farms

Studies on the evolution of French agriculture agree on the profound changes which have affected farms since the end of the Second World War and the creation of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP): increase in size, increase in capitalization levels, rise of company forms, increase in the share of salaried workers compared to the overall workforce, diversification of activities to other agriculture-related activities (processing, direct sales, agricultural tourism, agricultural supply services). They identify as the main drivers of such changes modernization processes in the sector and the rural exodus that began in the mid-19th century and was accelerated with implementation of the CAP in the 1960s. The economic mechanisms at work have been interpreted and there is widespread consensus in rural economics literature regarding these analyses. Faced with inelastic demand, the great productivity gains made possible by technological progress have shifted supply-demand balances, price levels, and the profitability of activities; they have as such worked to the benefit of the most economically competitive farms. Further consensus appears to exist in this body of literature which implicitly advances a hypothesis about the permanence of the family farm model despite the major changes that have affected agricultural structures. The terms employed by different actors to describe the scope of the changes underway – "upheaval" (Braudel, 1985), "major change" (INSEE, 1993), "radical transformation" (Marchand and Thélot, 1997) – are unequivocal; such terms further appeared in Philippe's analysis of the new roles and new jobs for farmers in French society (Lacombe, 1990). And yet, everything appears to imply that the family farming model itself has not been fundamentally affected. At best, there is talk of a "modernized" version of the model and acknowledgement of its great diversity: the use of "small", "medium", and "large" farms based on agricultural statistics to describe different types of farms; the terms "managerial" farms and "multi-purpose" farms are employed by Laurent *et al*. (2003) to describe new types of production; agricultural "firms" is used by Desriers (2007) to question the relevance of a fifty-year old statistical definition of farming; "capitalist-driven" farms and "competitively modernized" farms are used by Bazin (2008) in his attempt to describe the agricultural firms that are constantly expanding and acquiring capital but which nonetheless remain family-run businesses.

Agricultural changes in the Camargue region reflect the general trends seen at the national level (see Table 1). Although it appears to be slowing, the overall number of farms is still decreasing. There is a concentration of structures with a continuous increase in the average utilized agricultural area (UAA), particularly among large farms. Company forms are becoming increasingly popular but they are mostly conceived of in the context of family-based structures whose main goal is to facilitate new set ups and transfer from one generation to the next. The family remains closely connected to the farm. Like the number of farms, the number of independent farmers and joint farm operators has continued to decrease, but this labor category remains numerically dominant among the overall body of permanent farm workers. Independent farmers remain the main managers of an almost exclusively family-produced productive capital and of a predominantly family-based workforce (on average 46% of the workforce in 2010 in the French Gard and Bouches du Rhône departments). There is less reliance on permanent staff from outside the family on farms, but to compensate for this there is a larger delegation of work to agricultural service-supply agencies and farm-machine cooperatives (whose share in the total volume of annual work, although it was less than 2% in 2010 at the national level, nonetheless doubled between 2000 and 2010).

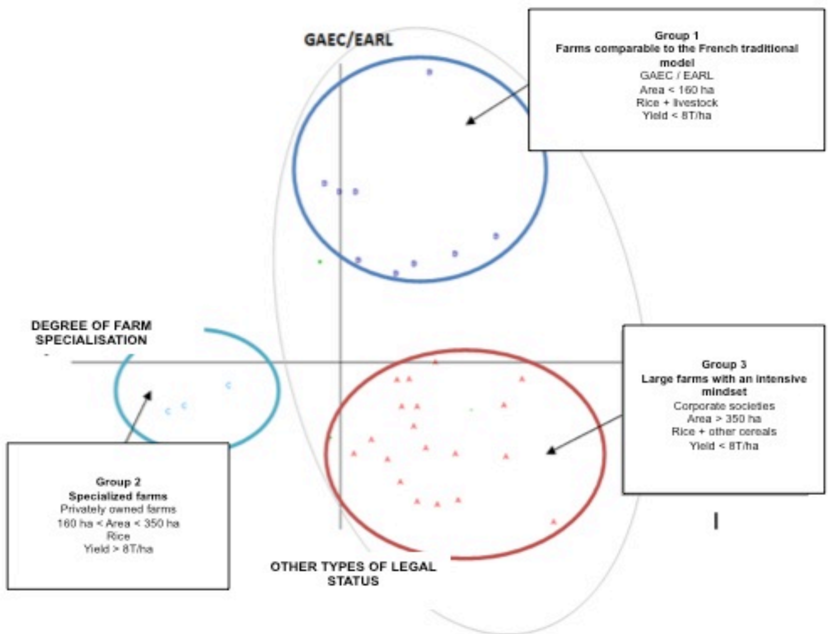
Table 1: Changes to farm structures between 1988-2000 and 2000-2010

Rate of change	Gard department		Bouches du Rhône department	
	1988-2000	2000-2010	1988-2000	2000-2010
All farms	- 35 %	- 25 %	- 36 %	- 16 %
Average utilized agricultural area	+ 40 %	+ 11 %	+ 48 %	+ 8 %
Share of farms > 100 ha	+ 1 pt.	+ 4 pts.	+ 3 pts.	+ 1 pt.
Share of company forms	+ 7 pts.	+ 8 pts.	+ 10 pts.	+ 5 pts.
Independent farmers and joint farm operators	- 33 %	- 22 %	- 40 %	- 15 %
Non-family permanent staff	- 12 %	- 24 %	+ 15 %	- 30 %

Source: General agricultural census data 1988-2000-2010, Agreste.

In a first attempt at classification, the Camargue farms surveyed in 2009 were positioned in a factorial design comprised of two axes: the horizontal axis represented the farms' degree of specialization and the vertical axis represented their legal status. Two groups offer a fairly good representation of the two sided face of French agriculture: on the one side are mixed crop-livestock farms of medium size, which often have company legal status and play a major role in terms of the makeup of the Camargue region's ecosystem; on the other side are large individual farms specialized in rice farming with above-average yields. It is at the core of a third group, however, that we find "non-standard" farms which, beyond their large size, share a few uncommon features: legal status which makes them comparable to corporations, a mindset for farm management close to that of a regular company which favors the profitability of operating capital over the short and medium term rather than intergenerational transfer.

Diagram 1: First typology of farms surveyed in the Camargue region in 2009



When they referred to the “fragmentation” of the family farm model as it was imagined, defended, and sustained by public authorities and French society in general, Hervieu and Purseigle (2011) fissured the consensus. Which are the “non-standard” farms identified in the third group that imply that the family farm model is no longer universal? Do these examples point up stylized figures which would allow us to confirm Hervieu and Purseigle’s analysis (Ibid.)? To construct these new farm figures, we chose to create an analytical framework (Table 2), which is not based on opposing the family farm figure with an “entrepreneurial” or “capitalist-driven” farm figure. Instead, our goal was to show the complexity of these new forms of farms which sit at the junction of family farms (a category defined by rural economics and sociology) and the “corporate” figure (a category defined by industrial economics). The main hypothesis is that of hybridization or, conversely, a shift in some family farms which can also be described as a deviation from a given trajectory over the long term. This process generally occurs at a key moment in the life cycle of a farm: i.e., when the farm operator retires. The farm is or is not taken over by a child or another family member and, in any case, the transition involves a new form of management logic with regard to one or more of the criteria identified in Table 2. By focusing on each of the criteria, which define both categories, we can identify three sub-categories of new types of farms associated with the “corporate” figure and observed in the Camargue region:

(1) what we will call the “in-between” form;
(2) the more developed “corporate” form;
(3) an “intermediary” form that we will use to illustrate the diversity of forms. This third category differs from the first (1) in that the main thrust does not involve a shift from family farm to “corporate-style” farm, but the creation of a new type of farm that combines features from both the family farm and “corporate” farm models.

Table 2: Analytical framework for identifying new types of farms

	“Family Farm” (Rural economics and sociology)		“Corporate” Farm (Industrial economics)
Capital structure and degree of mobility	Family-held capital, fixed structure	(1) (2) (3)	Possibility of outside capital, variable structure depending on inflows and outflows
Governance of capital / risk management strategies	Landowner logic, long-term vision of intergenerational transfer	(1) (2) (3)	Stockholder logic, short- and medium-term vision of profitability
Decision-making process	Centralized, a single decision-making pole (farm operator, associates)	(1) (2) (3)	Board of directors (BOD), possibility of decentralization, multiplicity of actors
Perception of land status	Family property, close relationship between the land and operating capital	(1) (2) (3)	An asset among others, dissociated management of different assets
Farm management	Farm managed by the farm operator, owner of the farm	(1) (2) (3)	Managed by a BOD with the possibility of management being entirely delegated to employees
Characteristics of the workforce	More or less large number of salaried workers, but most often seasonal and low skilled	(1) (2) (3)	Large number of salaried workers, often skilled and specialized in certain duties
Workforce management	Centralized, patriarchal management	(1) (2) (3)	Functional organization tailored to the strategy

Ties to the territory	Quite well rooted (use of local resources)	(1) (2) (3)	Quite well rooted or more nomadic depending on the strategy
Relationship with different players in the chain	Cooperation (relationships regulated with and without contracts), complementarity	(1) (2) (3)	Cooperation (relationships regulated with and without contracts) and/or competition
Relationship with markets	Indirect	(1) (2) (3)	More or less direct

On the co-existence of different forms of farms in the region

Detailed analysis of the Arles and Port Saint Louis municipalities in the PACA region's *SAFER* database provides additional insight into existing types of farms via information on land holdings and legal statuses; this points up certain types of coexistence between the different forms. After analyzing the 2009 property accounts, it appears that 194 of them belonged to company forms which in all evidence appeared to be farms. These 194 "legal entities" owned over 18 500 hectares or 23.5% of land in the two municipalities studied. Thirty-seven percent (37%) were agricultural land groupings (*GFA*s) that owned 34% of the 18 555 ha (Tables 3a-3b-3c). The large number of company forms is a reflection of the trend observed at the national level of farms seeking legal arrangements that can facilitate transmission or transfer to a third party of structures which have become highly capitalist-driven.

Tables 3a–3b–3c: Cross-referencing of data on land holdings and legal statuses for two municipalities of Camargue

3a. Number of property accounts under an agricultural corporate status per class of surface

Surface classes	EARL	GFA	SA	SARL	SAS	SC	SCA	SCI	SICA	**Total**
< 5ha		7	1			17	1	3	1	**30**
5ha – 20ha	1	18	1	2		12	1	3		**38**
20ha – 50ha	1	9				9	1	4		**24**
50ha – 200ha	1	37	6	2	1	39		9		**95**
200ha to 500ha		1	2	2		2				**7**
Total	**3**	**72**	**10**	**6**	**1**	**79**	**3**	**19**	**1**	**194**

3b. Total surfaces of property accounts under an agricultural corporate status (ha)

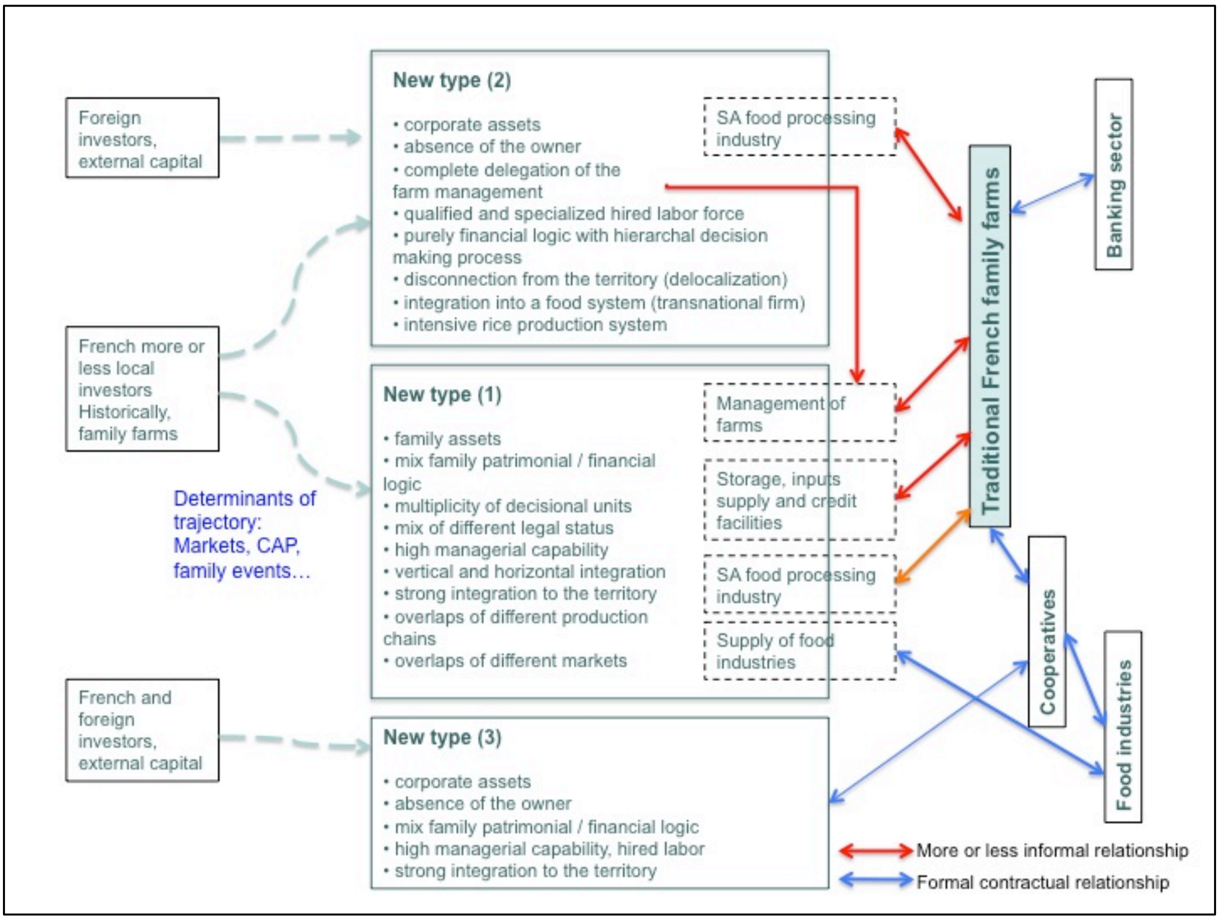
Surface classes	EARL	GFA	SA	SARL	SAS	SC	SCA	SCI	SICA	**Total**
< 5ha		11	1			26	1	1	3	**43**
5ha – 20ha	14	259	6	21		166	13	45		**524**
20ha – 50ha	48	401				345	32	152		**978**
50ha – 200ha	57	5196	1224	331	147	5384		1255		**13593**
200ha to 500ha		587	981	850		999				**3417**
Total	**119**	**6454**	**6454**	**1201**	**147**	**6920**	**46**	**1453**	**1**	**18555**

3c. Total number of property accounts and total surface (ha) for all agricultural statuses (including corporate statuses) and per class of surface		
Surface classes	Number	Total surface (ha)
< 5ha	16299	3910
5ha – 20ha	509	6218
20ha – 50ha	181	6670
50ha – 200ha	242	31242
200ha to 500ha	12	5872
> 500ha	10	24649
Total	**17253**	**78561**

Source: *SAFER*, processing of the data by the authors

Beyond the different land holdings which include farms that range from 5 ha to over 500 ha, the coexistence of forms is also detectable in the nature and type of contractual relationships which are more or less complex and formalized between the "largest" farms and more moderate sized farms. Diagram 2 provides an illustration of each of the three forms identified in Table 2 and describes how they can be interconnected.

Diagram 2: Co-existence of production models on the Camargue territory



Factors driving hybridization and shifts: the uniqueness of the territory and/or the CAP?

Successive reforms to the CAP have been based on the premise that since all forms of European agriculture are forms of family farming, “a common agricultural policy could develop unique tools that applied to all”. This leads us to question the appropriateness of the policy management tools proposed by the CAP in a twenty-seven state Europe and within the global context of very large-scale restructuring in the agricultural field, and to think about the nature and extent of fragmentation that has occurred in European agriculture (Hervieu and Purseigle, 2011). Not limited to changes that are the result of shifts, we are witnessing the emergence of new types of co-existence within the rural territories of Western Europe: co-existence of residence and environmental goods production roles (Nguyen, 2004), co-existence of farmers and farming jobs with other professional spheres (Purseigle, 2011).

Beyond the arrival of new investors in the area, the Camargue case points up the influence of certain public policy measures (whether national or more local) in the emergence of some forms of co-existence between so-called family farmers and new agricultural entrepreneurs. The Camargue region has seen a major increase in new practices and types of organization involving systems for the complete supply of agricultural work (from labor to harvesting) and other related tasks (accounting, business applications, tax planning, etc.). This is a two-way system with, on the one end, increasingly powerful agricultural service-supply agencies and, on the other end, farmers who maintain their status but entrust all work to these sub-contracting companies. Reliance on such sub-contracting companies in the Camargue region like elsewhere is due to the fact that farming families are increasingly unable to keep afloat running the farm business themselves. Farmers abandon their trade but retain their status which notably allows them to take advantage of the Single Payment Scheme (SPS): land is made available in a contractual form which exempts it from tenant farming status; agricultural service-supply entrepreneurs and even brand-owning market corporations then look after not only the technical routing, but also crop sales for their sole benefit. New contractual forms are also appearing which are radically different from those that helped family farms integrate upstream (livestock feed, agro-supplies) and downstream (collection, processing, and marketing) in agribusiness systems (Rémy, 1987, 1991; Lamarche, 1990; Jollivet and Eizner, 1996; Knoebber, 2000; Kephaliacos *et al.*, 2006). Similarly, combined with the constant quest for greater productivity, we believe that environmental factors are likely another important element driving change. Rather than reigning in the development of “large” structures, the environmental constraints imposed by public policies and quality measures such as Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) rice press farms of a certain size to constantly invest in more efficient equipment. The shift towards a new organizational logic becomes an option once a certain investment threshold has been reached: the inflow of foreign capital and the inclusion of new associates strongly affect the way farms are run.

Conclusion: a broader phenomenon at work in the transformation of farming in France?

Although further research is needed, we can draw two main working hypotheses from the initial results of our "Agrifirme" research program:

- "Corporate" figures are shaped not so much by their structural characteristics as by the logic underpinning how they are run and integrated in a territory. Indeed, they maintain strong working ties with traditional family farms by supplying various services. From a dynamic perspective, they are potential forms toward which family farms may move in reaction to different factors in their internal and external environment: vertical integration pushing downstream, creation of "corporate" farm-machine cooperatives, etc.
- As the research[3] accomplished to date in the context of the "Agrifirme" project shows, the emergence of new forms of organization in farming is not at all limited to the Camargue region and can be seen in other French regions as well. The history of the Camargue region's colonization and the development of its agriculture in connection with the conservation of a unique ecosystem made the area fertile grounds for the emergence of "corporate-style" farming, but public policy measures, and particularly the CAP – despite its desire to nurture a type of agriculture based on the family farm model –, have encouraged the emergence of forms which differ from it significantly. New phenomena such as the "financiarization" of farming alongside the context of globalization have contributed to this emergence.

Such results thus solicit researchers to build new analytical frameworks in order to understand changes in the agricultural sphere in a globalized context and call on professionals and public authorities to identify and accompany categories which, up to now, have been unknown and/or unrecognized as they had not yet been named.

[3] In total, 80 surveys of "non-standard" farms have been conducted to date. This paper is focused on those conducted in the Camargue region, but others have been done by two post-doctoral candidates, Guilhem Anzalone and Fanny Lepage, in other regions, with a specific focus on land management and the funding of farms' activities, notably with outside capital. The data from this research is currently being analyzed and will be the focus of research published in forthcoming issues of the *Etudes Rurales* journal devoted to this topic.

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