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Is organic farming more liveable? A survey of dairy farmers in the East of France

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Abstract: *As we observed it in the Eastern France, organic dairy breeders usually say that they are “more at ease with themselves” than their conventional colleagues. They feel that their farms are more liveable. In this article, we try to understand the different meanings of such an assertion. As it was repeated in different circumstances, we analysed it at a social construction, which informs us about professional identity of French organic farmers. Our aim is to assess if these farmers form a different social group than the conventional producers, and if they are able to change the frontiers and the culture of the agricultural profession. This article is based on a sociological study led in the Vosges on dairy breeders who convert to organic over the past twenty-five years. In this meadowland area, organic farmers are all heirs of the family farm, which has been largely shaped by the agricultural modernization policies. Biographic interviews have been made with eleven farmers. A discourse analysis has been realized, in order to identify social representations and values of these producers. We have built two ideal-typical life-stories, which give a different place to conversion to organic in the farmer’s professional carrier. If these breeders have different practices than conventional ones, they still belong to the same social and professional world. But they are taken part in creating a new professional model.*

Keywords: *organic farming, dairy cattle, sociology of professions, life stories.*

Introduction

In France, organic farming (OF) is increasing slowly. Ambitious objectives for OF have been fixed by the Grenelle environment forum, a political forum led by the government in 2007 to deal with ecological issues¹. Therefore, farmers who convert to OF are given financial support from the French State, like in other developed countries. At the same time, agro-food companies are trying to increase production - particularly in the dairy sector - in order to meet the growing consumption of organic products.

Many observers judge that the development of organic farming goes together with a weakening of its political message and its ability to change the social order. Indeed, organic agriculture has been created as opposed to the industrialization of agriculture, and more specifically to the use of chemicals fertilizers. The founders of OF wanted to build an idealistic society, based on nature respect, small communities, close relationships between producers and consumers and farmers’ autonomy (Besson, 2009). But now, for some researchers, organic farming seems to go off these ethical principles.

At present time, there is a scientific debate on “conventionalisation” of the organic farming sector (Darnhofer et al., 2009). This evolution has been first observed in California, where agro-food industries and supermarkets dominate the organic sector and impose production standards and delays to farmers. Consequently, organic producers, who run big farms and are dependent on large amount of inputs, become similar to conventional ones. Others researches studying farmers’ motivations to convert to OF lead to the same conclusions (Lund, 2002; Darnhofer et al., 2005). In these approaches, which consider farmers as rationale decision maker, a distinction is made between

¹ The objectives stated in the conclusions of the Grenelle environment forum were to convert 6 % of the French agricultural area to organic farming by 2010, 15% by 2013 and 20% by 2020. The areas converted to organic farming should preferably be located within drinking water harnessing zones.

ethical convictions and economic benefits, and also between convinced persons and opportunists (Lamine and Bellon, 2009). So growing financial supports for conversion may further opportunistic behaviours, who are less attached at the OF founding values.

An interactionist approach, studying how people's relationships influence their representations (Mead, 1934), is another way to characterize present organic farmers. Our aim is to assess if these farmers make up a social group different from the conventional producers, or even a *segment* (Bucher and Strauss, 1961) amongst agricultural profession, that mean a protest group that could change the frontiers and the culture of this profession. This article is based on a sociological study led in France on dairy breeders who convert to organic over the past twenty-five years. Many of the people we met assert that organic farmers are "at ease with themselves" or even "more comfortable with their ideas". Such an assertion has to be analysed as a social construction (Berger and Luckman, 1967) which informs about organic breeders professional identity. The conversion period deserve also special attention. Indeed, the use of the ambiguous notion of *conversion* means that becoming organic is an important transformation for the farmer, which can lead to a different relation with its social and natural environment, and also with himself. So, a specific attention must be paid to the farmers' experience of converting to and practising organic agriculture, in order to assess how important such a change is for them.

The first part of the article describes the scope of the survey and the profile of the farmers involved. In the second part, we present two "stories-type" of conversion to organic, which has to be understood as "ideal-types", according to the meaning of Max Weber (1965). These stories have been formed from an analysis of biographic interviews and tell us about the different social and technical changes needed to become an organic breeder. In each of these stories, conversion to organic farming takes up a different place within the farmer's professional *career* (Hughes, 1996). In the third part, we will show in what way and to what extent organic farmers are taking part in creating a new professional model.

Methodology

Life-stories (Bertaux, 2006) of eleven dairy farmers have been collected in the Vosges, which is a region located in the east of France. These farmers are geographically close to each other and their farms have been certified as organic over the past fifteen years. The results of the interviews were recorded and analysed via a discourse analysis (Demazière and Dubar, 1997). At the same time, we carried out a survey on the local context of organic farming. We met different people working in the organic farming sector (technicians, technical sales people, organic farming organisations managers...) and took part at some training courses for new converters.

A survey on organic dairy farmers

Compared with the rest of the Lorraine region, the development of organic farming in the Vosges is only recent, but the number of organic farms is higher. The number of certified organic farms in the Vosges was 117 in 2008, representing almost half of those in the Lorraine region (238 in total) but only 6.5% of the whole vosgian farms. Types of production are similar as those in conventional farming; the majority of production is dairy cattle. Our survey area is situated in the south-western Vosges. This is a hilly area with a number of meadowlands. We find essentially a mixed crop-livestock farming, mainly dairy cows and milking cows, as well as herds of sheep. There were 24 organic dairy farms in the area in 2008, which accounts for 40% of the vosgian organic dairy farms.

A recent development of organic farming in the Vosges

The first organic farms appeared at the start of the 1980s in our survey area. All of them were working with a technical salesman from Lemaire-Boucher² who encouraged them to adopt the organic farming label created by this company. Ten years later, in the same place, other farmers took an interest in organic farming. The first training course in organic farming has been organized in 1991 by the technician from the Chamber of Agriculture appointed to this area. This training course ended just when the French government officially recognised the “AB” label (organic farming), and decided to support financially conversion to organic. So, from the start of the 1990s, the number of certified organic farms made steady progress. In 1999, Territorial Farm Contracts (CTE in french) were set up by the European Union to support environmental friendly practices in agriculture. In these contracts, very attractive subsidies were given to farmers who chose to become organic. It led to a large number of conversions and also to a break-up of organic milk sector. Several organic breeders were then forced to sell their production in the conventional sector, and some of them chose to reconvert to conventional farming. Then, negotiations have been held by vosgian organic farmers with local industries to restructure the organic dairy sector. In 2006, a mutual fund was set up so that the same gain could be allocated to all organic dairy farmers (Touret et al., 2008). When the CTE were ended, conversions to organic farming stopped. At the present time, conversions to organic farming are increasing slowly thanks to incentives by the government following the Grenelle environment forum and support from industrial sectors.

Our survey area includes also the catch basin of Vittel mineral water, harnessed by the multinational company Nestlé Waters. Contracts have been stroken with many farmers in order to preserve the water resource quality. Three of the farmers we met (B2, B8 and B9) are located in this area and signed the contracts. So they have to observe specifications – different from organic agriculture ones, while remaining compatible – in exchange for access to specific services and financial support.

A double heritage

Our survey has been limited to dairy farmers because we wanted to understand the technical sides of conversion to organic. Moreover, we assume that different types of agricultural production form different *social worlds* (Strauss, 1992) making up distinct groups with their own ideas and values. This hypothesis will not be demonstrated in this article because it is not its aim.

The social profiles of the farmers we interviewed present many similarities. They all are sons of farmers who have inherited the family enterprise. After studying in an agricultural school, they immediately started working on the farm, apart from B2 and B10. These two breeders worked outside the family farm for around ten years while waiting for their father’s retirement: the first (B2) because of a disagreement with his father, and the second (B10) because the family farm was too small and there was no extension opportunity.

The average age of those surveyed is 48. None of the farmers works along on the farm: 5 are part of a GAEC (a joint farming arrangement under French law), while the others were individual farmers. Among the latter, 2 have an employee; one has an apprentice; three work as a couple. The farms became organic at two different periods: B1 and B5 switched before the mid 1990s, and the others switched later (when public financial assistance was provided). B8 is the exception: his father converted in 1980, but his certification was suspended in 1990, and he got it back in 1998³.

² Lemaire-Boucher was a commercial company, created in the sixties, which sold organic fertilisers like seaweed (lithothamnium) to farmers. The technical-salesmen were also advisors and explained the “Lemaire-Boucher” method for maintaining soil fertility to producers. This company had its own OF commercial label for the cereals, which it bought at its costumers.

³ In 1980, the father of B8 decided to comply with UNIA regulations which were stricter than current organic farming specifications (total ban on antibiotics). In 1990, B8 and his father decided to halt organic certification for two reasons: their milk was no longer collected via the organic channel and they were confronted with sanitary problems for the herd. Except

All the breeders run farms specialising in dairy production, but four of them (B1, B2, B5, and B7) also include a small amount of beef cattle production. The average size of the farms is 141 hectares. Two of them, B4 and B10, run less than 100 hectares. B2 stands apart from the rest of the sample with 300 hectares. These farms' structures then reflect those of conventional farms; they result from the "modernisation" agricultural policies introduced from the 1960s onwards in France.

These farms all include a significant amount of meadowland (over 70% of the farm area). The size of the dairy herds varies from 35 (B10) to 85 (B7) cows with an average of 58 cows. This is related to the attributed milk quota: B10 receives the smallest quota (130,000 litres) and B7 the largest (490,000 litres), where the average quota in our sample is 313,000 litres. Four farmers (B1, B5, B6 and B7) do not produce the full amount of their quota. The main breeds are Holstein and Montbéliard.

Only three farms had other types of production: suckling cows for B2, pig farming for B5, sheep farming and market gardening for B10. One single farm - B11 – transforms and sells milk directly; all the other farms deliver their production to a dairy industry.

So, we met no neo-rural farmers, which can be explained by the choice of our survey area. The population density is low on the Vosges plain and the tourism industry is small. Consequently, direct farm selling remains insignificant. So it appears difficult to live from farming on small holdings and it is also harder to set up business for those who do not inherit a farm. The organic farmers we met, who are not neo-rural, are therefore not representative of all French organic farmers. But they represent a significant part of them, encouraged by the government to develop by conversion subsidies. That's why this group deserves special attention.

Converting to organic farming: a stage in one's professional career

Conversion to organic farming is currently defined as the whole changes implemented by the farmer to obtain organic certification. This certification gives him access to financial gains from the sale of his production. The official conversion period is two years for dairy farms; during this period, breeders can receive subsidies from the state. To understand the technical changes required to convert to organic, we felt it necessary to state exactly which techniques are specific to organic dairy farming in the Vosges. Then we will describe the two conversion stories that we have rebuilt from the biographic interviews.

Which technical changes take place?

Organic farmers have to respect specifications regarding different technical practices such as the crop management (ban on using phytosanitary products and fertilisers of mineral origin), the feed given to the herd and veterinary care (limits to allopathic treatment). These regulatory obligations connected with organic certification are based on general principles such as a connection with the earth, and respect for the well-being of the animals. The specifications forbid some rearing and farming practices, but say nothing about what the farmer must do to achieve a satisfactory level of production. In the Vosges, we observed that there is a local organic dairy farming model which has features in common with an extensive grazing system. The main characteristics of this model are:

- long crop rotation periods, comprising two to three years of temporary meadowland and two to three years of cereals;
- cultivation of a mix of cereals, and mixes of cereals and pulse plants;
- composting of organic matter;
- use of phytotherapy and homeopathy (in the form of mixtures);
- absence of fodder maize;
- grass-based feed for the cattle (hay or bale silage).

for the use of antibiotics, they did not change their working methods. They therefore chose to convert back to organic farming with the CTE subsidies.

Today, these technical standards are shared by organic dairy farmers and by technicians and advisers who work for them. However – and we must stress this point – these standards are not defined in the organic farming specifications. As in all standards, they offer a safe framework, especially for farmers who convert to organic, but they leave aside a whole range of technical possibilities that has yet not been explored. Some farmers have tried out unsuccessfully to cultivate organic fodder plants: B3 and his brother tried growing maize; B1 experimented with various techniques to produce beetroot. So, as well as adhering to specifications, converting to organic farming means adopting technical standards that are locally worthwhile. These standards are implemented more or less quickly from one case to another; it depends on the farmer's practices before converting to organic farming (Lamine and Perrot, 2007).

We are now going to take a look at farmers' experience of conversion to organic farming. Based on biographical interviews, we put together two different conversion story examples. These stories constitute two "ideal-types" (Weber, *op.cit.*) and not categories. They must be considered as borderline cases. The farmers we met are generally situated between these two extremes but are closer to one of them. Conversion to organic farming occupied a different place in the farmer's career in each case: in the first case, it is a simple continuation of the farmer's career; in the second case, conversion means a real change in the professional career.

"I was already practising organic farming"

In this first story-type, conversion to organic farming is not seen as a major change. The farmer feels that he was already using similar methods to those of organic farming before converting. He underlies the importance of the meadowlands on his farm compared to cultivated land, the fact that he has never used mineral fertilisers on these meadowlands, that he did not use many phytosanitary treatments on the cereals (just for weeding), that he grew little or no maize, that he had always been thrifty and did not buy many products for the animals or to grow the crops. From the farmer's point of view, organic farming means traditional farming or even autarkic farming. He feels that he is keeping alive the practices of previous generations, like his father and his grandfather, who "farmed organically [even if] he wasn't actually an organic farmer himself". He also states that "organic farming has always been my thing", thereby expressing a link between his personal inclinations and the *spirit* of organic farming.

Consequently, why didn't the farmer take an interest in organic farming earlier? Because in the agricultural world, organic farming remains connected with the May 1968 protest movements, and the farmer do not feel part of that movement. After meeting vosgian organic farmers, he changed his mind about this production method. But the real *trigger* for the decision to switch to organic farming (Lamine and Perrot, *ibid*) was new forms of financial support for conversion.

The conversion to organic farming does not influence family life. The proportion of subsistence farming remains high (vegetable gardens, small family farms). Farmers do not become involved in associations linked with ecological or organic movements. They may, however, try to sell their vegetables or meat from the farm, as a supplementary source of income. Finally, conversion to organic farming may be a way to keep traditional farming methods going, and to ensure that the family farm has a future. The farmer thinks that he was running more or less on organic principles before converting. Anyway, during conversion, he may come up against some difficulties as he has to alter some practices, regarding animal care for example.

"I was between two systems"

In this second story-type, conversion to organic farming is a *turning point* (Hughes, 1996) in the farmer's career. The period before conversion, which includes the settling in, is characterised by dairy intensification. The farmer explains that he takes the dominant technical and economical norms without question. He crops fodder maize, makes phytosanitary treatments according to the

cooperative advices; in some cases, he also breeds bull-calves. However, the share of meadowlands remains high on the farm. The farmer is “between two systems”: he feels that he is not engaged in the most intensive farming. During this period, production increases, and the farm grows. The farmer invests significantly in the farm in order to have more functional buildings.

Then there is a period of questioning. The farmer feels a lack of motivation for his work. He needs a new professional project. Various reasons can explain this need: the children’s departure from the family home, a feeling of weariness from work that has become routine; or the father retiring.

So the farmer takes a fresh look at his farming system. He makes an economic assessment of it and realizes that “intensive” practices are not necessarily more profitable, but they need high purchasing levels and a high work load. Moreover, they are not relevant in the pedoclimatic conditions prevailing in the region, which are favourable to meadowlands: “here, grass grows well” and is a natural resource that can be easily exploited. On the contrary, maize needs a lot of work and phytosanitary treatments although the yield is limited. Discussions with organic farmers help him to take another look at the dominant technical and economic norms. Sometimes, the farmer had a brain wave while these discussions: while visiting an organic farm and discovering organic practices, he feels like he is really “into it” without being able to say exactly why.

Financial support for conversion, often combined with an opportunity to expand the farm, play an important role in the decision to convert to organic farming. Sometimes, recurrent sanitary problems on the farm also help to bring about the choice more quickly: either because the farmer cannot find a solution and begin to question conventional care methods, or because he is worried about the suffering caused by the large number of injections he gives to its animals. Furthermore, the farmer underlies that the risk he was taking was limited. Indeed, he could come back to conventional farming after five years if he was not satisfied with organic farming. Finally, he has been convinced by the agronomic, environmental and sanitary advantages of organic farming while practising it and observing changes in his fields and his herds.

Further changes come into play after conversion, having an effect on farmer’s life-style and consumption patterns (purchasing of organic food products and ecological building materials), as well as on his level of civic engagement (taking part in local ecological battles, against the setting up of a rubbish dump for example) and in some cases, on the way he sells its products (direct sale of small part of their production). Indeed, farming organically leads him to reconsider other aspects of his life and his profession.

If conversion to organic farming is a turning point in the farmer’s career, it is also described as an “inward journey”. The farmer establishes links between the period before and after the conversion. The choice of farming organically is related to his personality and his tastes – he has never liked competition; he has always been “close to nature” – as well as to his ancestors’ practices – a father who used “TMCE” (a product based on minerals, used to increase the soil’s fertility), a grandfather who sought financial autonomy. The family cultural heritage is thereby reinterpreted and re-appropriated during conversion to organic farming. That’s why the farmer feels being more “in tune” with himself.

In both of the stories-type we described, conversion to organic is always based on a large number of reasons, personal and family reasons as well as external factors. So, such a choice is influenced by meeting organic farmers and by financial support for the conversion, but these factors are not enough to prompt the decision. In the first story-type, farmers want to keep on farming like their father and grand-father did. Then conversion to organic is like a social and economical recognition for these breeders who have never been in line with the dominant production model. In the second story, farmers question this technical and economical model after having practising it. Becoming organic lead them to re-examine their family cultural heritage. Barrès et al. (1985) had already arrived at two categories of farmers converting to organic farming: *traditionalists* and *repentants* of

modernisation⁴. We will now turn back to the tensions that cross through both of these stories and assess in what way they help to define a new professional identity.

Do organic dairy breeders constitute a social group?

As the life-stories show it, farmers who choose to convert to organic farming underline the distance between themselves and conventional farming, or at least with some forms of intensive farming. Nevertheless, these breeders' social profile is similar to the conventional dairy farmers' social profile (regarding their social origin and their farming system). So what is the difference ultimately between them and conventional farmers? What is their vision of farming? Do they constitute a protest force against conventional farming? In this part, we will deal with these issues from two angles: from the angle of their technical practices; and from the angle of their relationship with others working in the agricultural sector. To do this, we are relying on all the fieldwork carried out in the Vosges, and not just on biographical interviews.

More pragmatism, less ideology

Conventional farmers who decide to convert to organic farming can be accused of opportunism, both by their pairs and by those running organic farming organisations. In fact, their career path is quite different from the neo-rural farmers' one, who choose to leave their job to set up as organic farmers. Such a decision usually follows deep questions about the meaning of life (Van Dam, 2005). As we have shown through the stories-type, the farmers we met did not describe such a radical and abrupt change in their career. In the second story, the farmer certainly makes a distinction between before and after the conversion, but he makes connections between these two periods of his life. He also carries on with the same profession in the same place.

Moreover, the interviewed farmers keep their distance from the common image of organic farming. They caricature the militants who chose to return to the land in the seventies. B9 don't want to be associated with this type of farmer: "I make sure that I don't have the organic farmer look. I have never had the organic farmer look. The organic farmer look means corduroy trousers, hand-knitted jumper and beard." B5 refers to the first vosgian organic farmers: "Organic farming was in the realms of folklore back then. They were shambolic chaps, just dreamers. They were taken for dreamers." The idealistic aspirations of these pioneering organic farmers are criticised. The breeders we met consider that they must be able to live from organic farming. We stressed the importance of technical and economic criteria in the decision to convert to organic farming. The professionalism of the farmers is evaluated through such criteria. The current president of the Vosges Organic Farmer Group (GAB in french) is appreciated because he gives a positive image of organic farming – "chaps that keep to the right track" – while his predecessor, who has two jobs (farmer and wood-cutter), was more controversial "because he was not all representative of farming you can make a living from".

The organic farmers want to make a decent living from their work. They do not hesitate in deviating from some general principles of organic farming. For example, the quality of the fodder required to produce sufficient milk is obtained either from drying in the barn, which is costly in terms of fossil fuels, or using bale wrapping, which is based on the use of non-degradable plastics. Regarding the animals' litter, the farmers are allowed to buy straw from conventional farms because there is not enough organic straw on the market. The only condition is that the manure has to be composted before being spread on the crops. Along to the farmers, these compromises with organic principles are necessary. In fact, pragmatism prevails over ideology. That makes the difference with some of the pioneering organic farmers, who respect more closely some "ethical" principles of organic farming. So, amongst those we met in the Vosges, two refuse to use antibiotics even if it is allowed

⁴ The terms used are our own.

by organic specifications. They are sometimes described like people “who have their head in the clouds” by other organic farmers.

If the breeders we met are critical of a certain part of organic farmers regarded as too idealistic, they also criticize the constant race in conventional farming – a race for yield and expansion which brings about an increase in investment and purchases, as well as a greater workload. This constant race seems all the more absurd to them because it does not guarantee sufficient income for the farmer. B3 looked back at the period when he was rearing bull-calves:

“Well, the system was working well. But we had too much work on.” (later) “We could have carried on like that, or even had some more bull-calves, and then... Well, it was getting too much... I don’t know. It was too exhausting. Intensive farming is, you know, when it’s really intensive, well it’s tiring.” B10 sums up in a few simple words how organic farmers can be compared with conventional farmers: “I don’t spend anything. They are always in the fields doing something.”

Environmental impacts of conventional farming are not much mentioned by organic breeders, which may appear surprising. Some of the farmers of course denounced the harmful effects of pesticides, but they do not condemn their fellow farmers directly. In their point of view, they are caught up in a system that is beyond their control, and pollution of the environment is just one of the harmful consequences. In fact, organic farmers are trying to break free of this system, as we are about to show by referring back to their relations with consumers and with others working in the agricultural sector.

Distance between agricultural professional organisations

If the image of organic farming remains quite negative in the agricultural world, organic farmers we met are not cut off locally from conventional farmers. They maintain relations with their neighbours through mutual assistance or membership of associations such as equipment exchange groups. The contact is of course less frequent as they do not take part in certain work gangs such as silage making. Communication is sometimes limited. Indeed, organic farmers feel that they no longer share the same concerns as conventional farmers. However, keeping up links with other farmers is important for them, especially to show others how they work. They often had to raise the scepticism of their neighbours when they decided to go organic, but now they feel that they are recognised by them (except for B5, a pioneer farmer).

Relations between organic and conventional farmers however seem more difficult in agricultural organisations. B3 is a member of the FDSEA, the majority agricultural union, and is a member of the local committee of the Chamber of Agriculture. He’s thinking about leaving the union because of its managers’ hostility towards organic farming. More generally, several farmers feel that the main agricultural organisations – the Chamber of Agriculture, agricultural teaching establishments or cooperatives – are spreading the single model of increasingly intensive farming. Alternative solutions such as farming on organic principles are quite simply ignored, and are therefore never proposed to farmers⁵. These views reflect what is said by advisors who teach farmers converting to organic farming about new rearing and cultivation practices. These trainers hardly criticize the main advisory organisations and in particular the Chamber of Agriculture and the phytosanitary industries, expressing ideas not far from the “organised plot theory”. Without necessarily adopting such a radical point of view, the farmers we met think that going organic has enabled them to gain more autonomy in how they run their farm.

The training courses proposed to organic farmers and those who are converting to organic farming are great opportunities for people to get together and discuss matters. All the farmers interested in organic farming meet up at this kind of training course, always organised by the GAB. As well as learning about actual technical matters, the farmers are able to chat among themselves. They are not

⁵ Things are changing in this area. The programmes of agricultural schools must include teaching on organic farming techniques since 2009.

only critical of the dominant intensive farming model, but of the sweeping conformism of farmers and the difficulty in “facing up to what others think” when they choose an alternative path. So, the organic farmers’ group is building up with the support of the GAB, and forms to a certain extent an opposition to the technical advisory structures that took place to “modernize” agriculture since fifty years. This group is supported by technicians, advisors and veterinary surgeons who occupy a marginal position in the agricultural advice sector.

In the same way as organic farmers distance themselves from the technical advisory structure, some of them would like to be less dependent on industrial operators. They are now trying to develop direct sales of organic farming products. At the moment, two different types of projects can be seen: individual direct sales projects of meat in small boxes (B1, B5) or vegetables directly from the fields (B4, B10), a group scheme to build a dairy processing unit for their own production (which B1 and B6 are involved in). Only individual projects are being set up at the moment, but they entail small volumes of products, which provide business in addition to the dairy production. The group scheme remains difficult to set up due to the significant quantities of milk that have to be processed. That indeed requires considerable investment in facilities. More generally, the issue of selling production is a subject of debate between farmers. While considering that this type of business is not strictly their job, they would like to contribute to setting up local industries. This point of view matches with the principles announced by the founders of organic farming who advocated bringing producers and consumers closer together (Besson, *op. cit.*). At the moment, however, most organic milk produced in the Vosges is transformed and sold outside of the region.

Contact with consumers remains limited, and only concerns a few farmers who sell their produce directly or practice host-farming, or those who are involved in organisations connected with organic farming such as B1, B3 and B9 (Biocoop, consumer association, anti-GMO groups). Coming face to face with the consumers is not always easy. Farmers indeed have to justify their practices to citizens who are looking for a return to “nature” and may for example be shocked to see calves separated so early from their mothers⁶. Pioneering farmers referred to above appear to have a greater desire to seek contact with people outside of their profession. One of them said that he now prefers spending time with people who do another job, as farmers in his opinion are too inward looking. Another type of commitment outside of the agricultural world must be stressed. Several farmers whom we met (B1, B3, B6) have been taking part for a long time in a rural religious association called “Christians in the rural world” which campaigns for education and local development.

We can therefore see how the structure of professional relationships of the farmers we met changed after their conversion to organic farming: they move away from neighbouring conventional farmers and from technicians and advisors in conventional agricultural organisations; they become involved via training courses provided by GAB in the Vosges’ organic farmers group; they may become closer to those working outside the agricultural sector such as consumers or environmental campaigners. Organic farmers make up a group in their own right within the farming profession. Nonetheless, they remain connected with it, except the pioneers who seem to have broken away.

Conclusion

In this article, we have tried to understand in what extent organic farmers are different from conventional producers. We observed that they are more satisfied professionally – “more at ease with themselves” as they say. The economic and social recognition they enjoy today has to be taken into account, but it does not explain everything. Such an assertion has a social meaning, which has to be precisely understood. In fact, converting to organic farming represents more than complying with certain specifications. It enables the dairy farmers to re-appropriate their profession.

Farmers we met are sons of farmers and at the head of farming system that have been shaped by the agricultural modernization policies. So they must juggle with an important family and professional

⁶ This comment was made during an organic trade fair organised in a village in the southern Vosges.

heritage. Converting to organic farming may be seen by them as an emancipation process; first of all from the father - the farmer develops a project of his own and which corresponds to his aspirations while linking it up with some aspects of family culture that were passed on to him; then from his peers – choosing organic farming enables him to be less influenced by the professional environment and its production standards without breaking away from the conventional farmers.

Organic farmers are nowadays often described like “post-modern” people (Kaltoft, 2001). They seem to be more autonomous, more respectful of nature and more introspective regarding their professional practices. Our survey shows however that new comers are quite more pragmatic than the pioneers. But do they really represent a protest force within the agricultural world? One part of the organic breeders we met, the traditional ones, don't come into the political scene. They have always felt themselves in the margin, and now they just want to keep on running their farm quietly. The farmers who had practised a more intensive agriculture before converting to organic are more concerned by professional collective stakes – technical and economic as well as environmental stakes. Some of them take part to civil associations or agricultural unions. But they still represent a small number of persons and that makes it difficult to change the dominant professional model. It would therefore be appropriate, for the rest of our work, to study militant organic farmers and their relationships with other social groups, in order to observe their political actions.

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