



Farmer autonomy as a bridging concept. Reflections from an interdisciplinary engaged research project in France

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- GEODE (with a tree icon)
- LABYSS (with a square icon)
- bagap (with a leaf icon)
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- AGRICULTURES & TERRITOIRES CHAMPE D'AVANCEMENT HAUTE-GARONNE (with a leaf icon)
- HG (with a blue square icon)
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- EAU GRAND SUD-OUEST (with a blue square icon)
- EPLEFPA Pyrénées-Comminges (with a green triangle icon)
- Fondation de France (with a blue square icon)

10/06/2024



Are farmers 'anti-nature'?



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Where and what is ecology in political ecology?

- A long-standing and still on-going debate: e.g. Vayda and Walters, 1999; Walker, 2005; Turner, 2015, Zimmerer, 2015; Srinivasan and Kasturirangan, 2016...
- Different ways to relate to ecology within political ecology; from studies of environmental degradation, to the influence of ecological knowledge and its construction, and the study of non-human agency
- Raises ontological and epistemological questions on the 'nature-culture' divide, non-human agency and how to 'integrate ecology'



The case of an transdisciplinary research project on agriculture in France



Where do I speak from?

- Enjoy being at the interface
- Draw on critical realism
- Concerned with the 'political' in a landscape ecology lab
- Working in 'banal landscapes' in a LTSER long term social-ecological research site



Starting from soil erosion

Accueil / France - Monde / Météo

Storm impacts were aggravated by agricultural soil erosion



Le 16 juillet 2018, la terre descendue des champs avec l'eau a inondé le lotissement de Gardouch. / Photo DDM archives Michel Labonne

La Dépêche, 21/01/2019

« To avoid soil erosion, farmers implement all manner of possible techniques »



Christian Mazas , président de la FDSEA 31 et Jean-Marc Moumin, Président des Entrepreneurs des Territoires de Haute-Garonne Ariège. / Photo DDM, Thierry Bordas

La Dépêche, 18/02/2019

Reframing the problem and shifting concepts

Project COTERRA I 2019-2020

Reducing soil
erosion

Agroecology

Collaborative
governance



Project COTERRA II 2022-2025

Enhancing soil
fertility and
reducing soil
erosion

Maintaining crop-
livestock farming

Farmer autonomy

Farmers'
cooperation

Public policies



Farmer autonomy

- Multiple definitions

- « Making sense of the individual within a confluence of economic, environmental and interpersonal relations » (Stock and Forney, 2014);
- «The ability to make and act on informed decisions » (Stone, 2022);
- « (...) the struggle for autonomy (...) aims at the creation and development of a self-controlled and self-managed resource base » (van der Ploeg, 2008)

- Multiple scales

- Relational approach



Different types of autonomy

Real and neoliberal autonomy (van der Ploeg, 2008, Stock et al., 2014).

	Principle	Freedom to	Freedom from
Neoliberal autonomy	Individualism	Produce according to market Compete with other farmers 'on a level playing field'	State control Regulation Reliance on others
Actual autonomy	Collectivism	Organise one's own work Work with others to realize collective interests	Dependences and inequalities caused by the structures of neoliberal accumulation Neoliberal ideology
Autonomy viewed by farmers in Nord Comminges	Rather individualist on a first thought but based on social relations	Decide technical and economic choices on the farm Make a living Live well	Input markets Cooperatives Banks The CAP



Autonomy and ecology

- Nonhuman as **enabling farmers** to **reduce their dependency on external inputs** either through ecological processes that replace chemical inputs (PPP), **reduce the use of purchased natural resources** (energy, water) or **through the production of a natural resource base** (fodder, seeds...) on the farm, organise their work on their farm...
- Nonhuman as **constraining farmers**: type of soil, climate, breeds...
- Relations with nonhuman and human intertwined and require tradeoffs, need to choose your dependency relations
- Some authors (Stock et al. 2014, Kolinjivadi et al., 2019) defend that actual autonomy is more likely to generate environmental benefits



Some concluding thoughts

- Co-framing the problem
- A transdisciplinary research involving farmers may significantly shape how ecology is 'integrated' by scientists
- Integrating ecology in political ecology research on agriculture may be done through a political concept that acknowledges dependency relationships with human and nonhuman
- Importance of flexibility and ambiguity



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Research project website in french: www.projet-coterra.fr



What is ecology in political ecology?

- Environment as a **resource** that can be overused, degraded and generate undesirable externalities (Blaikie, 1985, Watts, 1985, Blaikie and Brookfield, 1987) – that can be grabbed / re-categorised and classified / struggled for (environmental conflicts)
- Environment as a **risk/natural hazard**
- Environmental **discourses** legitimise specific institutions, power relations and knowledge systems
- **Knowing** nature (Goldman, Nadasdy and Turner, 2011)
- Environmental **subjectivities** and care (Singh, 2013)
- **Non-human** with agency

See also: Vayda and Walters 1999; Walker 2005; Turner 2015, Basset and Peimer 2015

