

Environmental Issues, Rural Societies & Political Concerns some historical elements

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N. B. This text corresponds to some notes I've written for my oral presentation at the congress. It is not a paper and has to be considered just as notes.

Introduction

I first would like to apologise because I've changed the subject of my contribution. I decided to present another paper closer to my actual preoccupation and maybe also closer to this working group common interest. I've chosen to expose some elements of a historical view concerning environment and agriculture, concerning the relations between these two worlds that are today associated at least at an European level.

Before beginning my presentation, I would like to make clear two points :

- First, I want to precise that I don't have at all the ambition to describe one century of agricultural history. My purpose is neither to make a real comparison between the situation of environment and agriculture as it was in the early 20th and as it is now. I rather and more modestly wish to underline some elements that appear in both situations and merit to be taken into account in a more general reflection on the social aspect of the nowadays agri-environmental concerns.
- The second point I wish to insist in has to deal with the ground of my reflection. My reflection is based on the investigation I made during my Ph.D. of Anthropology that I dedicated to the analysis of the revival of chestnuts traditional production in the south of France, in a department called Ardèche. This congress is for me the opportunity to consider again these "old" ethnographic data but with a definitely new perspective in which I recently became involved and that refers s, this time, specially to ecologisation of agriculture.

⇒ So, to sum up

- on the one hand, the analysis and the description I made of chestnut production including historical aspects and its links with environmental concerns ;
- and on the other, what constitutes an emerging problematic turning around European agri-environment policy applied in France.

As for the historical part, it refers to the Third French republic and particularly to its beginning from the end of the 19th century to the first 10 years of the 20th. I will explain and justify this choice in a few minutes :

I'll focus on three points :

To start, I will answer the two questions above. That is a way to introduce the frame of my reflection

Then, I'll show how environmental preoccupation is old even if it was not explicitly linked to agricultural institutions. I underline in which context these environment extensions are made at the 20th century and what is behind this preoccupation.

3) To close my communication, I'll stress some points that seem to me very close between these two periods.

1st : two questions

Why Chestnuts ?

Why did I choose the beginning of the 20th century as a counterpoint to the actual period ?

A) The first question :

Chestnuts production is very peculiar for its historical dimension, for the social and technical system it has build, for the regional economy it used to be associated in the most middle-mountains areas in the South of European countries (Italy, Spain and Portugal for example); it is also peculiar because of the actual technical system. And it is maybe and more over peculiar because it concerns a tree. And I really think that this "detail" changes everything for at least two reasons :

with chestnuts production, we are more or less in an agro-forestry system and it appears very difficult to classify the production (even today) because it has nothing to see with the other kinds of intensive framework fruits production ; but it has nothing to deal neither with the wood production ;`

Trees suppose a special linkage to space and to time and French institutions early showed an deep interest for the forestry development of the country - that can also explain the use of "ecological" arguments about chestnuts production.

For these two reasons, I'm not sure that this example allows a generalisation position. I mean, I don't want at all to put forward general and theoretical conclusions about agriculture and environment. But in spite the remarkable aspects of chestnuts production, I think this example, because it is so unusual, dramatizes the problem and allows maybe a reflection on an anthropological about the relations between nature and human society

B) I come now to the second question : why did I choose the end of the 19th century as a counterpoint for the actual situation ?

This period is marked by many events:

- 1881 is the Creation of the ministry of agriculture but also the beginning of third French republic. Before this date, agricultural has an administrative representation but it was associated with business and “public jobs”. In 1881, the ministry became independent and constituted a proper political force that works out to involve peasant in the republican values.
- This ministry has been inspired by a quiet singular ministry : I mean the Ministry of the Colonies. That gives a good idea of its program referring to peasant society and to space development and makes me think to a beautiful sentence of a French historian who wrote (studying the development of ethnological survey in French rural areas) : “peasants are our inland savages” (Michel de Certeau) referring of course to the savages in the colonies that French wanted to civilise, to integrate to civilisation. The creation of an improvement department and of a specialised agricultural education are to me two points very important to remember.
- Political staff decided at that time to build what some authors called later the “Agricultural republic” that considered peasant as the forces of nation, charged to occupy the space and to contribute to the French reputation. The fact that the drift from the land began and the apogee of peasant society was over explains this orientation.

2sd: what about environmental issues and concerns ?

The preoccupation for the effect of chestnuts production on “environment” is pretty old. It appears in the agronomic literature dating from the 18th (and even certainly more ancient but this century typically focused on hygienic concerns that are then very close to environmental concerns as we’ll see now:

To sum up the argumentation, authors reveal that chestnuts tree

- fights against erosion
- contributes to the forestation development of the country
- stops the violent winds
- it’s good for water regime
- purifies the atmosphere and contributes to public hygiene

“A long time ago, big chestnuts forest used to attract on the French ground healthy clouds, life-giving atmospheric vapours that make the temperature warmer and fertilise the lands. [...] Their wide and beautiful leaves, after having purified and made the atmosphere fresher during summer, fertilise and fatten the land in winter.” Duhamel-Dumonceau 18th century.

These arguments are later still used to emphasize the importance of chestnuts production. And we find wonderful passages describing all the advantages of that tree in several texts dating from the beginning of the 20th.

So we can say that Chestnuts grove is then celebrated for its natural fertility, its important biodiversity (fauna, flora and mushrooms). We could add – but it has nothing more to deal with ecological principles – that the tree gives food to man and animals, that its leaves as well as its wood are exploited. This is ambivalent because some authors saw in chestnuts trees an immoral tree that made live rural communities without any toil and work.

But now, I must say a word about the period in which these discourses take place : a crisis context :

- rural areas as I said begin to be destabilised and French rural economy is seriously disturbed because some of the main productions have to face sanitary problems : this is the case for wine and for silk and also for chestnuts 'production that is confronted to a fearsome disease. That contributes to collapse the regional economies also weakened by the drift from the land that corresponds to the end of the apogee of rural civilisation.

The celebration of this tree seems all the more noticeable than it is not at all demanding on the agronomic level (it has even been described as the "tree of poor and sterile lands"). In that way, we can say that its natural productivity and generosity strengthen its celebration as a species that can fulfil perfectly rural areas' problem on the economic and environmental grounds. And such a celebration refers to the tree more than to the cultural systems it takes place into - and that is, as for us, rather criticised.

Everybody underlines then the fact that, for the academic rules, peasants don't take enough care of the trees, that they just take advantage from them, without dedicating work. The main critic is that they don't fertilise chestnut groves with chemical products as it's done in other fruits farming and as it is beginning to become a standard practice. The natural generosity of the tree (that goes on producing in spite of that) is all the more noticeable than farmers are considered as savages out of modernity, out of society, quiet close to gather-hunters people. They are also often presented as ignorant and lazy because they don't improve their production and modernise it. That's why all the authors attached a lot of importance to the education to give to farmers in order to teach them the good modern methods and that way to integrate them to the republican nation.

After this presentation of the way ecological arguments were used one century ago, I move now in the third point of my speech that is dedicated to the connections we can establish with the nowadays preoccupation and social contexts of chestnut traditional production and of agricultural production.

3rd. Connections with nowadays concerns and situation

It's very dangerous to go one century later and to focus only on some points that at first look seem to refer to the anterior situation

- Agriculture has faced its technical and industrial revolution in the 60ies that refers to the industrial revolution at the end of the 19th.
- At the same time (1971), a ministry of environment & nature protection has been created. It is now called "ministry of ecology & sustainable development". The ministry of agriculture also watches on forest, fish, food and rural affairs

Consequently to the agricultural revolution, the rural spaces weakened on a demographic level and the 1960ies corresponds to the end of the Agricultural republic that became an

"archipelago" (Viard, Hervieu). Farmers are no more in the majority in the rural space. They have now to share it with others social groups.

competition has increased and small mountains agriculture is faced to important economical problems, just like chestnuts production, that is not very high performance on an economical point of view.

This crisis resulting from modern, intensive, industrial production methods is accentuated by some public scandals and the consequences of this "modernity" on environment level. That explains why French society has become misconfident to farmers group who lost their good image.

So that we can consider that :

The CAP evolution plans a better compatibility between agricultural production and requirements of environmental protection. And by that way it also refers to a new kind of relation between society and farmers. Farmers are getting a public recognition for their contribution to environment and landscape preservation as it appears in the agri-environmental program. This could be a way to integrate again this professional group thanks to the rehabilitation of their place and functions. The debate is focused on civic level (no more republican is it used to be one century ago) but the idea of contribution to a common aim is still present.

Also present the importance attached to environmental education in order to make farmers but also tourists aware of the current ecological problems.

Let's see now what's going on with Chestnuts production

- It is based on old trees (2 or 3 centuries old), tired, don't produce a lot, very huge and can't be treated with chemical products, trees still generally established on sloping lands (that means difficulties to mechanize), often associated with cattle breeding,

Producers don't use fertilizer, only manure, nor pestidal, or others chemical treatment

Chestnuts grove - when it is looked after - have a very high landscape value. This description does not mean that chestnuts are savage fruits that farmers gather each year without any intervention.. I can't detail it but it does exist a system of culture even if it does not correspond to intensive and classical framework.

For all these reasons, Traditional Chestnuts production is said not polluting, but also :

- is important in the erosion and also forest fires prevention - and the areas are hardly affected by these two problems ;

- is important too for the biodiversity : the wild biodiversity (flowers, insects, birds, and so on) as well as the domestic one because there are a lot of chestnuts varieties (64 in the only department I know) and several varieties of fruit are necessary on a biological level.

- Does contribute to watch to and to build a specific landscape that has a high cultural and tourist value and

- It does keep agricultural economy and social life in these mountains where it's difficult to produce other things because of the slope.

We can easily understand that faced to the agri-environment program, producers very interested in contracting measures that recognise and legitimate their practises. More over,

they hope that it will bring them a public recognition for their agricultural skills and knowledge, for their contribution to a civic perspective.

This kind of recognition is equivalent to a social rehabilitation because this production still often suffers from what I called an excess of history and at the same time an excess of nature that excluded it from agricultural legitimacy. Because of its history and because of its very peculiar relation to natural environment, the production is often considered as an archaic one that has failed its modernisation in the 1960ies. Its natural aspects are of course appreciated by consumers but these consumers most often don't even realise that chestnuts are a agricultural product. That's why we can say that agri-environmental measures (just like organic farming label) emphasise the cultural, technical, social and economical values.

Conclusion

This historical standpoint [perspective] confirms that nature and agricultural policy have to deal with rural development and country planning as it is explicitly mentioned in the nowadays legal texts but as it was also noticeable in the first years of the 20th century. We can now wonder about the institutionalisation of these policies, and specially questions on the share of skills between respective agricultural and environment worlds , on the new knowledge they each of them mobilise and produce, on the way environmental preservation we'll be financed, and also on the this will contribute to organise the rural areas as a rural areas