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## Working for the large-scale farm. French Southwestern strawberry and melon farms challenged by foreign labour

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**Rural History 2019 - European Rural History Organization International Conference - EHESS, 10-13 September 2019**

**Panel “Ehtnographying labour in large-scale agriculture. Renewed social histories, between Work, migration and daily lives”**

Title of the proposal: "Working for the large-scale farm. French Southwestern strawberry and melon farms challenged by foreign labour"

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Our proposal questions the dynamics of large-scale farms specializing in delicate crops through the prism of foreign labour. These intensive farming systems strongly rely on seasonal work, which is the keystone of what J.-P. Berlan called the "Californian model" (1980). The diversity of agricultural statuses and the wide variety of contract terms meet the need to adjust the volume of labour according to the hazards of the season (precocity, delay). Foreign agricultural seasonal workers, these "*forgotten men* of rural studies" (Hubscher and Farcy, 1996), are traditionally presented as "birds of passage" (Piore, 1979) in scientific literature. They are sometimes studied from the point of view of their mobility (Morice, 2008), their precariousness (Potot and Morice, 2010) or their invisibility (Mesini, 2013). On the contrary, we propose to highlight the process of foothold by and in agricultural activities, landscapes, and more widely in rural areas. How are the spaces of the large-scale farm, and beyond, the rural areas, transformed by hosting this working force? We will answer that question by considering several scales: that of the large-scale farm (analysed as place of power relations), that of the supply chain (role of the foreign seasonal labour not only in the operation of large-scale farms, but also in the sustainability of the supply chains), and that of rural areas (facing the challenge to host those workers).

Methodology and fieldwork

This proposal belongs to the research program CAMIGRI<sup>1</sup>, which includes French researchers in Geography. This program questions the role of reception and welcoming of the French countryside for the international migrants, from several points of view: residential dynamics, agricultural dynamics, reception policies. The selected fields are located in the French Southwestern countryside, which host a significant number of foreigners.

Our communication is at the crossroads of the agricultural axis and the residential axis in the research program. Our main question is to consider relations between foreigners and farming systems in the countryside through 2 main questions:

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<sup>1</sup> « International migrations in the French countryside »

- how can foreign presence change agricultural systems, by bringing innovation or, on the contrary, precariousness ?
- how can agriculture become a resource activity or a way to anchor international migrants ?

The present study is based on field surveys conducted between 2018 and 2019 with stakeholders in two farm-intensive supply chains in the French Southwestern countryside: the melon sector around Loudun (Vienne district), and the strawberry sector in Pays Vernois (Dordogne district).

We surveyed farmers, foreign workers and farmers, but also organizations that play a role in welcoming this labour force.

Status	Strawberries (Dordogne)	Melons (Loudun)	Total
French farmers	9	6	15
Foreign farmers	18	-	18
Seasonal workers	16	4	20
Local organizations	3	5	8
Accommodation facilities	-	5	5

Both of those agricultural systems rely on the massive use of seasonal foreign labour:

- Portuguese workers in strawberry production : in the 1980s, 3000 Portuguese seasonal workers in the hills of Périgord. 1995: 1500 Portuguese seasonal workers in the district of Vergt (pays Vernois), and 3000 in the Dordogne department. Nowadays : 2000 seasonal workers // 4000 Portuguese people settled in the Dordogne department, which counts for 22% of the foreign people of the Department.
- foreign seasonal workers in the melon production: they are not the major part of the seasonal workers, which are mostly composed by local workers. But farmers and local people tend to exaggerate their presence, because it raises accommodation and work issues. During the 2 quarters 2017 corresponding to the melon season (from April to the end of September), the agricultural social security (MSA) counted 5728 seasonal jobs in melon sector, 13% of whom come from foreign countries - more and more from Bulgaria, Poland, less and less from Southern Europe countries or West Africa countries (students).

What do we call “large scale farm” here ? It depends on the agricultural system and on criterions :

- large scale by the area ?

- > on average, around 50 acres for a strawberry farm in Dordogne

- > in the melon area, farm areas are diversified : we find very big farms (for example, “Rouge-Gorge” company operates around 2470 ac of land + 740 ac in Spain and Southern France around Béziers). Then we find a lot of middle-size producers (around 370 ac), then small-size producers (around 86 ac).

- large scale by the numbers of employees and of seasonal work use: intensive farms by the use of workforce:

-> around 60 employees for a 50 ac farm in Dordogne

-> in melon area, it depends on the size of the farm : 25 seasonal workers (mostly local ones) for the smallest farms, until 200 seasonal workers for a day in the biggest companies. Around 90 seasonal workers per day on the middle-size farms.

For all the farms, seasonal jobs are the first item of expenditure : it equals for example 500 000 € / year for a middle-size company.

- large scale farm by the annual turnover:

-> for example, Rouge-Gorge achieve an annual turnover of 2.5 million euros, for 30 00 tons of melon.

Our results show that the large-scale farm is an entry point for migrant seasonal workers, which can become an anchor point in agricultural activity, and more widely in rural areas. This process results in three dynamics that we propose to highlight.

## **I. Being a foreigner and working on the large scale farm**

Foreign workers bring changes both in the organization of work, and in technical and cultural orientations on the large-scale farm

### *A. Work conditions on the farm : a very hierarchical work organization*

Foreign workers have different positions in the work chain, according to their nationalities.

The work has a hierarchical organization on the farm :

- seasonal workers : foreigners or French

- crop managers : either French, either foreigners. In the strawberry system, this position is the first level of the social climbing for the Portuguese workers. Most of the time, in strawberry farms, this position is occupied by a couple of Portuguese people who used to work on the farm for several years. Becoming crop manager or team manager requires a certain longevity as seasonal worker. This position means to do diversified tasks such as management, recruitment, administrative tasks, while taking care of the crops (treatment, irrigation).

- the boss : always French.

If there is a packaging chain, this organization can become more complex. For example, in the melon system, the complete work chain is so :

- the boss

- the foreman

- the team manager

- the sorter (who packages melons)

- the tractor driver (who connects the field and the melon storage shed)

- the melon picker

Each position is occupied by different nationalities, according the language needed to do the tasks :

- in the melon system for example, foreign seasonal workers mostly occupy picker position. According to one of the farm's boss, "*it's easier to put foreigners to do the picking*" because there is no need to speak or understand French language to do this job.

On the contrary, "*for the calibration and packaging of melons, there is a need to put some French workers, so that they can understand the requirements*".

Yet, to pick melons in the field is much harder and painful than to sort and to package melons in the shed. In the field, workers have to lean because the ground is low, there is no bathroom,

and workers have to deal with the sun, the rain or the heat. On the contrary, the work in the storage shed is less painful because the building protects from heat, even if it's a very repetitive job. Seasonal workers recognize that it is harder to pick melons in the field, but that there is a better working atmosphere here.

That's why it is less prestigious to pick melons in the field; packaging in the field or manage a team are seen as a kind of professional advancement.

But both packaging and picking are also painful because workdays are very long : 10 h per day, included Saturdays and some Sundays. Workers are paid legal minimum wage. It can happen that the team manager doesn't count the right amount of worked hours, so that the worker get less paid...this is a kind of abuse.

Here is a quotation of Mamoutou, seasonal worker in melon fields, coming from Mali: "*it is a very physical work: we have to face the rain or the heat. It made me huge back pains. People often fainted while picking melons. We also work hard: some days, we worked almost 10 hrs/day*".

This hierarchical work organization meets a hierarchy between nationalities : foreign seasonal workers always occupy the lowest and most painful jobs.

\* bosses make teams of pickers and sorters according to nationalities and according to whether they understand French or not. There are teams only composed by foreigners. The ones who speak French or English become team managers. Sometimes, some students can translate, but bosses find it hard to make them understand.

### *B. Being recruited*

Seasonal workers are described by farmers as an issue, a "major headache". It needs a lot of human resources to manage it : for example, the biggest melon company hires 3 people to manage and to recruit seasonal workers.

\* Most of the melon farms work together with local work organizations to facilitate the seasonal workers recruitment :

- farms work with the French employment agency to advertise their employment opportunities.
- they organize jobdating
- they make a guide of the seasonal workers together with a local agricultural agency specialized in training program.

Companies use different way to recruit their seasonal workers :

- job ads
- direct recruitment
- some companies use local employment agencies which pay according to the local wage standards
- some companies use also "middlemen", ie a foreign person who find workers in his country and who make them come to France. This person asks a fee for this service (paid by the workers). Farmers sometimes describe this system as a "mafia".
- biggest companies having other sites of melon production in other countries (Spain, Morocco, Senegal) use posted workers, coming from those other production areas.

\* but most of the recruitment relies on migration chains and by word of mouth:

- in Dordogne, Portuguese workers recruit their friends or family members coming from Portugal.
- in Loudun district, we observed the same process

\* This recruitment method explains that the major nationality remains steady in Dordogne. It is not the case in the Loudun district, where major nationalities changed recently.

- first : workers coming from Southern European countries (Spain, Italy)

- then : African PHD students at Poitiers University, doing the season as a summer job, to meet the needs of their education. They live in Poitiers and drive every day 50 kilometers to reach Loudun, very early in the morning (at 5:00) and after the workday. But the farmers find this system too risky. If the driver is sick, the whole car with 4 or 5 workers doesn't come at work. Car crash can occur as well.

- now : mostly Bulgarian and Polish workers. It is related to the integration of Bulgaria and Poland in the EU, to the poverty and unemployment rates in those countries. Those workers are described by the farmers as violent, alcoholic, but as hard and very regular and trustable workers. They never contest the rules, contrary to the African students.

\* this explains several statuses amongst seasonal workers :

- some of them are student living the whole year in France (Poitiers)

- some of them live abroad and come to France only to work under season. They go back to their country at the end of the season.

- some of them are asylum seeker and are employed on the farm thanks to a partnership between some farms and their Asylum Reception centre.

\* Employing foreigners seems to be a major failure according to the farmers. Quotations from farmers' interviews:

- *"we prefer to recruit local people, at least they speak French and they know better the surroundings"*

- *"we have no other choice than to employ foreign workforce..."*

- *"Workforce became an issue since 3 or 4 years, and now i have to employ foreigners. [...] Now half of my seasonal workers comes from abroad. Half is too much".*

Finally, employing foreign workers is compared to do a social work: *"melon production includes a lot of social work. Students, OK, they work here during one season but they find it too hard, so they don't come back the year after. The ones who work here are all the other ones..."*.

In general, foreign workers have a very negative image amongst farmers and local people, but this is a paradox: most of the farmers would prefer to employ local people, but as agricultural jobs are hard, local people doesn't want to work in the field any more.

Farmers raise the contradiction between the high unemployment rate (2000 unemployed people in the Loudun district) and the lack of people who wants to work as seasonal workers. Several reasons can explain this situation :

- the arduousness of work

- the competition from other seasonal employers such as Center Parcs located North of Loudun.

- the situation in the Eastern European countries

- the generous French system of unemployment benefits that would encourage people to do nothing.

Cf Rouge-Gorge : *« And beside that, there are plenty of unemployed French people who do not want to work. The Poles want to work: for them, 1 month salary at SMIC here equals 3 months salary in Poland. And French unemployment insurance equals one and a half months' salary at home. That's the drifts of the system.»*

Paradox is also that the agricultural system would not continue without this foreign workforce, because the local workforce doesn't want to work on the farms anymore. A person working in a seasonal workers' organization says : *"we often hear about this paradox that 2000 people are unemployed in the Loudun district, but that farmers have problem to find seasonal workforce. When I hear that, I try to explain that work needs don't meet the local unemployed people's wishes. Foreigners don't take French people's jobs! I explain them that seasonal workers make the wheels of the region; when they are here, they spend money, they support campsites..."*

### *C. Changing the organization on the farm to face the workforce issue*

Seasonal work is described as the number 1 issue for the farms. That's why they try to adapt the cultures and the task organization, to try to keep the workforce from a season to another.

2 major changes are related to this adaptation

#### (1) longer seasons

To try to find easily seasonal workers, farmers adapt their crop schedule in order to prolong the work season. The worker is more willing to sign a contract for 6 months than for 3 months. :

- introduction of climbing strawberries which grow from March or April
- crop diversification on melon farms : for example asparagus and strawberries which grow before melons, or apples and pears which grow after melons.

#### (2) innovations in the crop systems

In the strawberry system, development of off-ground cultivation which bring more comfort to the workers. It also allows to increase the yield.

## **II. Living on the large-scale farm**

The presence of seasonal foreign workers reconfigures the landscape and the operation of the large scale farm. It perpetuates or precarious the sector, but it also has consequences on rural areas: dynamics of residential foothold in several forms, from lodgings to final settlement.

The large scale farm can become a place where to live and to learn for the foreign seasonal workers. Residential and agricultural spaces are closely intertwined, with a wide range of housing solutions and differentiated housing access depending on the status of the workforce.

2 specific issues are related to the status of seasonal worker and to the characteristics of isolated rural areas:

- mobility
- accommodation

### *A. Coming to the farm: facing the issue of mobility*

There is the problem of mobility to get to the fields. There is no public transportation in those sparsely populated rural areas. It requires to have its own vehicle.

In the melon system, workers have to change fields during the day, but the trip is not supported by the employer. That's why mobility is a major issue when recruiting workers. To have its own vehicle is a condition to be employed, and it is asked in the form that workers have to fill when they apply for a job.

Several patterns of mobility

(1) no mobility : the case of Portuguese who settled on the farm, or who are hosted by the farmers directly on the farm. But they spend most of their time on the farm and in the tiny village.

(2) Mobility to reach the field from one's permanent place: the case of African students coming daily from Poitiers and carpooling with other workers from Poitiers.

(3) Mobility to reach the field from seasonal workers' temporary place:

- some of the melon companies which have also production areas in Spain or Morocco hire posted workers. In this case, the company supports fees related to accommodation and transportation. For example, Val de Sérigny employs 40 posted workers coming from its Spanish production site. Those workers come from Senegal, Spain and Morocco. All their fees are supported by the company. They do the trip from France in 9-seater vehicles which belong to the company. They keep it then to do the transfer between the fields during the workday. Some come by bus from Spain; if so, the company ensures the transfer between Poitiers bus station and the farm.

- but this case is very rare. Most of the time, seasonal workers have to manage by their own and to carpool with their private vehicle to do the transfer between the campsite or their accommodation, and the field.

Some solutions were set up to face the issue of mobility for seasonal workers, but this is inappropriate and doesn't really meet the needs of workers.

For example in Loudun, an association was set up, Dynamob, to rent mopeds to young seasonal workers. But this kind of vehicles doesn't really suit the trip to get the field.

The issue of mobility raises the question of isolation of seasonal workers in rural areas. Their daylife is often reduced to the field and the campsite or the lodge. They don't see that much of the countryside. The lack of mobility can explain why they don't really know their local environment except the fields and their temporary living place.

- for example, African students coming daily have a very negative perception of Loudun. According to them, "There is nothing interesting over there". Another says : "I went to Loudun once after the job. We visited. I saw a dead city. There was no one. I did not like it very much. It's not very beautiful. And when we work in the fields we do not have time to visit [...] My only contact with Loudun was to refuel, because it was cheaper than in Poitiers."

#### *B. To find a place to live temporarily*

The countryside is questioned by the issue of the accommodation of foreign seasonal workers. It raises the question of their role in the reception of foreigners: the large scale farm can actually be the point of entry in the country, but also become an anchor.

Everything is done to facilitate accommodation in a rural environment where relatively few reception capacities. This is what this person working in the local employment agency says : "The problem here is that we have seasonal jobs, but we have nothing to house them. It's Loudun!"

Several solutions are set up.

(1) accommodation on the farm, supported by the farmers. This solution depends on the regulation, which is different from a Department to another, and which allows or not accommodation directly on the farm.

- this is allowed in Dordogne. Here we can observe a wide range of accommodations on the farm: mobile home, collective housing, single house, small studio reserved for regulars.
- this is forbidden in the Vienne Department. That's why seasonal workers have to find an accommodation by their own. But the biggest melon companies have bought several homes that they hire only to their seasonal workers. For example, Val de Sérigny bought small bungalows where the company hosts some workers when they didn't find any other place to live. Rouge-Gorge, the biggest company, bought a former rehab centre 2016, including 26 rooms for 2 people each, where they hire all the rooms to their foreign workers for 5€/night. The company describes this service as a way to keep the workforce, otherwise they would not come, because it is hard for them to find an accommodation.

(2) seasonal workers' organization to facilitate accommodation in campsites: example of the "house of seasonality".

In Loudun, there is an organization taking care of the issue of accommodation for seasonal workers : the "house of seasonality", run by ADEFA with the MSA. It is a reception and a resource center for seasonal workers. It has been created in order to facilitate accommodation, employment and training. Concretely, the house of seasonality facilitates hiring procedures, books places in the 5 partner campsites (Guesnes, Moncontour, Savigny-sous-Faye, Martaizé) and installs barnums with equipment to promote the well-being of seasonal workers. That is to say that campsites do not accept seasonal if they do not go through the device. It manages billing, records entrances and exits in the place of camp managers. It set capped rates for accommodations (5€/night in a campsite). The house of seasonality has also a deal with social housing agencies and hire 4 apartments with a negotiated rent.

The house of seasonality also ensures a social support work. For this purpose, 2 social workers are recruited during the season to take care of seasonal workers at campsites, and to organize events to try to integrate seasonal workers into rural life: themed evenings, language courses, tournaments sports, seasonal agricultural party, photo competition...

But this service is not for free. Only the seasonal workers working for one of the 10 farms which adhere to the device can enjoy these services. Willing farms pay fees for these services: 95 € / year and by seasonal worker.

But the initiative is a relative failure: campsites are empty, following incidents between seasonal workers and campers. Only few seasonal workers find an accommodation through this system : 75 (2017), 60 (2018).

(3) More and more, accommodation for seasonal workers becomes a private business (Loudun):

- Exceptional homestay: examples of former farmers who have become "foster families" for foreign seasonal workers. They develop caravans outside their home.
- either in furnished lodgings, or in apartments and houses reworked by private people and rented to seasonal workers

=> needs of accommodation make the wheels of local people. It helps renovating property assets.

### **III. Working as seasonal worker and settling in the French countryside**

The setup of formerly seasonal foreigners as farmers is the ultimate stage of anchoring, especially in Dordogne. There, this process changes the structures of farmlands; it leads to split large-scale farms into smaller-scale farms, that are more precarious. In general, the setup of former seasonal workers brings a lot of changes in sparsely areas. Within rural areas in disuse, they contribute to demographic, residential and socio-economic dynamics.

2 ways of anchoring and to stay definitely in the French countryside:

- to set up in agriculture
- to set up in the villages and contribute to countryside's economic and demographic trends.

#### *A. To setup in agriculture*

This process concerns mainly the Portugueses in the strawberry production area (Dordogne).

-> Question of the take-over of farms by former seasonal workers. It leads to reconfigure the large scale farm, which splits into smaller farms.

Since the 1990s, the strawberry system faced a lot of crisis, which led to divide by 2 the number of holdings and a drop in production. The reasons explaining this crisis are multiple : fatigue and soil depletion, European competition, especially from Spain, which led to the fall of the price of strawberries => bankruptcy of many farms that cause:

1) release of a labor force: unemployment of former workers / heads of culture found themselves without anything => they begin to think about an agricultural installation project based on accumulated capital.

2) release of agricultural land that can be fragmented and sold or rented: tenant farming phenomenon between former boss / former worker; case of an old farm that was broken up and sold to former workers who were able to set up a small farm

=> Former seasonal workers become the new actors in the durability of the strawberry industry in a context of crisis. the former Portuguese workers installed in turn in the strawberry production. We see that they are the only ones to settle today.

=> 2 consequences : on the one hand, it maintains the sector. On the other hand, it restructures the sector with new agricultural spaces and new ways of doing agriculture:

- emergence of a new "model": large atomized farm gives way to "Portuguese plots" whose primary characteristics are their small size, between 0.5 hectares and 4 hectares. Then, they combine two functions for the same space: a residential function with the building of a "home" and an agricultural function with the start of the fresh fruit business. It is concentrated in the "Street of Lisbon" in Dordogne, for example.

It works on the model of the small family business: couple are the bosses and provide most of the work. They sometimes employ family labor or neighbor, always Portuguese.

- At the technical level: low initial economic capital condition access to land. Installation is done on small plots that must be densified for profitability. As such, off-ground cultivation is a solution to face the depletion of soil and the lack of opportunity to change its crops in the context of a small plot. It also allows to densify the production and to make an income.

- In addition to the setup, there are also cases of farm transfer by former Portuguese workers when the boss retires and can't pass on his farm to his children.

\* we don't observe the same phenomenon in the melon system, where foreigners appear to be present only under the status of seasonal workforce.

Foreigners nevertheless contribute to the sustainability of the sector because it can't work without foreigners.

=> to set up his own agricultural business leads to anchor former seasonal workers into agricultural system and, more widely, into French countryside.

#### *B. To setup in the countryside*

Process of residential foothold => it contributes to local demographic and socio-economic dynamics.

\* The example of the Portuguese in Dordogne is the most relevant case of local foothold, with a process of residential installation:

1) Active and old network in the Dordogne linked to agricultural areas as a point of entry: labor is recruited on family and village bases. Family presence can cause arrival in the Dordogne and participate in the anchoring / installation => residential dynamics (with the construction of a house, a "home")

2) The process of setup leads to population growth in some villages with positive migratory balances. Cf case of schools in villages that still function thanks to the presence of foreigners

3) other places are boosted by the presence of the Portugueses: bars, shops that are taken over or opened by Portuguese or children of Portuguese. A typical example of village groceries: from April, the appearance of a "Portuguese products" department with products that are a priori traditional for seasonal workers. Idea of a before / during the season: places metamorphose and become symbolic markers of the presence of seasonal workers (products offered, but also proposed activities for seasonal etc.).

\* In the Loudun district, this process of residential foothold is much more timid and difficult to quantify. But Bulgarian and Polish seasonal workers begin to setup:

- "fictitious" rentals of Poles: since they have an address, they can integrate the French system of unemployment benefits - because they worked at least 6 months during the season, enough to open rights to get benefits.

- Bulgarians settle more and more. Some rent furnished apartments in some places that host a lot of foreigners (L'Escale in La Butte de Lauray, or by a couple of former farmers in Les Trois Moutiers). For example, a couple of Bulgarian seasonal workers set up in La Butte de Lauray. The husband wait for the next season working in pruning of trees.

Other Bulgarians bought some cheap houses in Loudun, that they renovated with the help of their family who came especially from Bulgaria. Their children study in local highschools or schools. They still do the agricultural season in melon, but also in tomatoes, asparagus or mushrooms, but they also do some undeclared work such as repair work.

- local policies begin to take their presence into account, by proposing services to help them in their daily life. Especially some organizations (ACLE in Loudun) propose French classes.

- it explains why the Bulgarians and the Poles come back every year to do the season. On the contrary, African students work 2 or 3 seasons, then try to find better paid and less painful jobs in the city (in restaurants, in factories or at Poitiers Airport). They can work all year long while studying.

=> those 2 cases of residential foothold highlight several processes:

- foothold
- empowerment of foreign seasonal workers
- formation of a migration chain / network
- scaling-up, from living spaces to territory/rural areas
- from circulation to installation