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BEYOND "CONNECTIONS IN BRUSSELS": THE MULTI-LEVEL REPRESENTATION OF AGRICULTURE IN TWO FRENCH REGIONS

Andy Smith
CERVL-Institut d'études politiques de Bordeaux
a.smith@iep.u-bordeaux.fr

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INSTITUT D'ETUDES POLITIQUES
Domaine Universitaire B.P. 101
F-33405 Talence cedex
Tél: 05 56 84 42 81
Fax: 05 56 84 43 29
cervl@iep.u-bordeaux.fr

INTRODUCTION

Most specialists of European integration studies now accept not only that "domestic politics" *matters* to the formation of national government strategies, but that this politics can no longer be understood without grasping the transnational linkages that have emerged since the 1950s between intra-national and non-governmental actors, their counterparts from other member states and institutions of the European Union (EU). In this respect, the involvement in European integration of regional and sectoral actors has rightly been highlighted.

Although still largely excluded from formal involvement in EU institutions, regional (ie. sub-national) actors have been shown to play key roles not only in policy implementation, but also in its conception¹. As for intergovernmentalists, "domestic politics" is seen by specialists of sub-national politics to be an important part of the dynamics of European integration. However, for these authors the basic tension is not between the institutions of the EU and fifteen political systems within which regions may be an important factor. Instead, in a system often described as "multi-level governance"², there is now one European-wide set of rules and source of resources into which a plethora of actors from within the member states interlock in different ways and with varying degrees of success. In short, as a political system the EU may be decidedly incomplete, but as a decision-making structure it is omnipresent even in the most distant corners of the fifteen member states.

Similarly, national modes of regulating economic sectors has convincingly been shown to be increasingly intermeshed with the processes of setting and controlling European-wide norms and legislation. In particular, empirical studies have shown that representatives of economic interests are not only highly present in Brussels but in many sectors they have even developed institutionalised access to official EU advisory groups³.

Given the conclusions reached in both these fields of study, the challenge for research in political science can no longer simply be to show that regions or sectors are important parts of the "domestic politics" input into European integration. Instead, its goal must now be to try to explain how different sets of actors within regions and sectors have simultaneously come to integrate the effects of European integration into their own practices and, in so doing, participated directly or by default in shaping this very dynamic. Put bluntly, two questions need to be addressed:

¹ Keating M. & Loughlin J., eds, *The political economy of regionalism*, London, Frank Cass 1997; C. Jeffrey, ed., *The regional dimension of the European Union*, London, Frank Cass, 1997.

² For Gary Marks this term describes a system "characterised by co-decision-making across several nested tiers of government, ill-defined and shifting spheres of competence (creating a consequential potential for conflicts about competences), and an ongoing search for principles of decisional distribution that might be applied to this emerging polity". "Structural policy and multilevel governance in the EC", in A. Cafruny and G. Rosenthal, eds., *The State of the European Community* (vol. 2), Boulder, Lynne Rienner, 1993, pg 407.

³ A plethora of research exists on this subject. See in particular Mazey S., Richardson J., eds, *Lobbying in the European Community*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1992.

- why do certain sets of regional or sectoral actors "fit" more comfortably than others into a European-wide polity?
- what are the normative and analytical consequences of this variable geometry?

The empirical part of this paper attempts to tackle these questions by analyzing the representational activity of agricultural interest groups in two French regions, Languedoc-Roussillon and Pays de la Loire (section 2). Given the case study material at my disposal, one way to answer this question could have been through detailed description. In endeavouring to avoid the classical empiricist trap of "all study, no case", however, and convinced that the most important challenge for researchers in this field is not just to accumulate sociological, economic and political data about regional and sectoral actors, this paper first sets out to build an approach to what we call "multi-level interest representation" in the EU. Rather than theorize in abstract terms about multi-level governance⁴, the focus of our research has been upon change in the patterns of interest representation that has accompanied both European integration and French decentralisation (section 1).

The general argument of both sections is that the strength and political impact of "connections in Brussels" cannot be evaluated solely on the basis of transactions observed in that city between interest groups and EU institutional actors⁵. Instead interest representation at this level needs to be seen both as an integral part of the repertoire of intra-national and sectoral actors, and as a potential threat to more traditional, and in many cases more legitimate, forms of politics.

1. MULTI-LEVEL REPRESENTATION. WHAT IS BEING STUDIED AND WHY?

Thus far, demonstrations of the interlocking nature of regional, sectoral and European politics have tended to use "synthetic" terms which, although useful for general arguments and broad comparisons, do not encourage research to delve deeper into explaining the causes and effects of variable geometry in interest representation. For all his in-depth knowledge of sub-national politics, Michael Keating's approach to political economy, for example, continues to use terms such "political capacity" which sum up the strengths and weaknesses of each region as a political entity but does not propose a coherent set of variables with which to analyse its

⁴Unfortunately this useful term has often inspired publications of this nature. For a critique see Smith A., "Studying multi-level governance", *Public Administration*, Winter, 1997.

⁵Such reasoning is present in much of the literature on lobbying in the EC. For a critique see Smith A., "Au-delà d'une 'Europe de lobbying'. L'exemple des rapports entre régions et la Commission", in P. Claeys et al., eds, *Lobbyisme, pluralisme et intégration européenne*. Bruxelles, Presses interuniversitaires européennes, 1998.

component parts. Similarly, the approach of Philippe Schmitter to differences between sectors is general and based upon intuition rather than genuine research⁶. In both cases, the opinion of internationally renowned scholars remains interesting, but their "aerial photography" way of working has provided few analytical concepts with which to structure empirical research⁷.

Fortunately more useful approaches and concepts do exist and can usefully be adapted to the research question of this paper. In putting together an approach to the relationship between interest representation and European integration, this section sets out a (generally positive) critique of those developed by new institutionalist specialists of European integration. Tools and questions from French versions of political science are used to take such analysis further towards a genuine sociology of Europe as a space of public and collective action.

FROM PREFERENCES TO SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS

Through demonstrating the complexity of the EU's institutionalisation, neo-institutionalist approaches to European integration have made three major contributions to its academic study and debate.

First, it has shed light on the processes which have contributed to the emergence and consolidation of public "problems" to be tackled at the level of the European Union. National governments are clearly involved in this process, but neo-institutionalists such as Paul Pierson argue convincingly that their influence can only be understood through studying the conflicts and instances of co-operation which have given rise to actor preferences for supranational regulation of public problems, ie. problems that have come to be seen (at least partially) as "European"⁸.

The second major contribution of neo-institutionalist analysis is its treatment of European law. In developing a dynamic approach to the relationship between law and public policy, authors such as Simon Bulmer⁹, have shown how EU law codifies not only legal decisions, but also defines the "institutional capacity" of the actors involved. Contrary to the formalism of "old" institutionalism, this approach encourages us to see EU law as not only a system of sanctions and constraints, but also as a mechanism for defining "appropriate" actor behaviour.

⁶ Schmitter Philippe, "Imagining the future of the Euro-polity with the help of new concepts", in Marks G., Scharpf F., Schmitter Ph., Streeck W., eds., *Governance in the European Union*, London, Sage, 1996.

⁷ For a general critique of this sort of approach to European integration see Smith A., "L'espace public européen: une vue (trop) aérienne", *Critique internationale*, n° 2, 1998.

⁸ Pierson P., "The path to European integration. A historical institutionalist analysis", *Comparative political studies*, 29 (2), April 1996.

⁹ Bulmer S., "Institutions and policy change in the European Communities: the case of merger control", *Public Administration*, vol 72, Autumn, 1994.

Finally, neo-institutionalist analysis of European integration is also a step forward because it encourages careful analysis of the institutionalized resources of two little understood organisations: the European Commission¹⁰ and the European Court of Justice¹¹. Put briefly, the analytical proposition convincingly made by the authors concerned is that the institutions of the EU "*subject member governments to the actions of supranational agents whose behaviour they can control only imperfectly*"¹².

In summary, to paraphrase Wayne Sandholtz, these three strands of the neo-institutionalist project act as a timely reminder that "*membership matters*", and this for two reasons. First, EU institutions are not just places where meetings are held. They are run by actors with collective goals and standard operating procedures which even the most critical national governments respect most of the time. Second, the EU functions because these governments cannot just walk away from decisions and legislation they do not like¹³. European integration generates, and is generated by, institutionalized constraints which cause actors to modify their preferences and behaviour.

Notwithstanding the many positive aspects of applying neo-institutionalist theory to the study of European integration, such an approach harbours two major weaknesses.

The first handicap is its one-dimensional treatment of the role of ideas in politics. As we shall argue below, the cognitive dimension of politics is essentially reduced to consciously formulated actor strategies and priorities.

The second analytical difficulty with such an approach is its conceptualisation of institutions. Paradoxically, the neo-institutionalist project uses a weak definition of institutions that ignores their importance for political legitimacy. As a consequence, the research strategies and methods of neo-institutionalist authors refuses to connect analysis of the process of European integration on the one hand, and that of its difficult legitimation on the other. This is a serious omission because, as Mark Pollack himself admits, "*the literature on European integration is still far more successful at explaining and describing the process of EU governance than the ultimate causes of European integration (...) we still have a far better picture of how the top spins than we do of the forces that drive it across the table*"¹⁴.

¹⁰Paul Pierson, for example, underlines the capacity of Commission civil servants to play a role of process manager, role linked to their responsibility for much of the timing of negotiations on EU legislation. *Op.cit.*, pg. 133.

¹¹For example, A. Stone Sweet and J. Caporaso analyse in detail how the Court's jurisprudence often gives rise to a "self-sustaining dynamic" within a policy domain, dynamic that can then spill over onto others. The authors identify how a variety of actors within the member states (firms, business representatives, ministries, etc.) attempt to use the Court as a means of securing both deregulation at national level and EU-wide reregulation. "La cour de justice et l'intégration européenne", *Revue française de science politique*, Vol 48 (2), April 1998.

¹²"The new institutionalism and EC Governance: the promise and limits of institutional analysis, *Governance*, vol 9 (4), 1996, pg. 445.

¹³*op. cit.*, pgs. 407, 411.

¹⁴M. Pollack, *op. cit.*, pg. 454.

In seeking to offer an antidote to these inter-related problems, the approach to European integration outlined below places legitimisation alongside institutionalisation, rather than as two separate issues.

Public problems and "rationality"

Neo-institutionalists study how public problems have come to be tackled at the level of the European Union. In so doing, they give attention to the ideas put forward by the actors involved and the strategies adopted to defend and promote them. The key term used to unveil these processes is that of actor "preferences": preferred outcomes which the authors unveil through using documentary and interview evidence centred upon the gradual development of specific pieces of EU legislation. Despite the clarity of its presentation and the scientific-nature of the language used (independent and dependent variables, transaction costs...), the concept of preferences is at the root of a major theoretical flaw.

This flaw originates in the refusal of neo-institutionalist to place the preferences of actors in the social and cultural context of their emergence and development. Instead, the term preference is used to set out the goals of each institution and then to see what they become when interacting with the goals of other bodies. The implicit paradigm for this research is that of rational choice. For certain questions regarding European integration, rational choice theory no doubt has its uses. However, it tends to lead researchers to ignore processes that take place prior to the establishment of preferences: perception (or *decoding*) and the importance of interpretation for structuring actor behaviour and discourse (*recoding*)¹⁵. As J. Checkel underlines, limiting research to the analysis of preferences reveals the "*rationalist foundation*" of neo-institutionalism which "*which leads these scholars, like intergovernmentalists, to conceptualize institutions in very thin terms. Indeed, EU institutions are (seen as being) constructed by the most powerful member states -in an instrumental fashion- to promote their interests. Over time, these bodies will at most coordinate the behaviour and expectations of member states*"¹⁶.

As Checkel proceeds to explain, a more constructivist approach to the role of ideas "*reminds us that the study of politics -or integration- is not just about actors with fixed preferences who interact via a process of strategic exchange. Rather, they seek to explain theoretically both the content of actor identities/preferences and the modes of social interaction -so evident in everyday life- where something else aside from strategic exchange is taking place*"¹⁷.

¹⁵ Amongst a wealth of literature devoted to the cognitive dimension of politics, see Jobert B. & Muller P., *L'Etat en action*, Paris, PUF, 1987; Majone G., *Evidence, argument and persuasion in the policy process*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1989.

¹⁶ Checkel J., "Social construction, institutional analysis and the study of European integration", paper presented to a workshop of the Warwick ECPR sessions, March 1998, pgs. 4-5.

¹⁷ Op. cit., pg. 8.

Interests, ideas and institutions

In order to get a handle on this "something else", it is simply insufficient to note the "interests" of actors as if they were simply mechanical calculators. Instead "interests" must be conceptualised as syntheses defined by constraints, resources and motivations which reveal as much about the socialisation of the actors as they do about their strategies at any precise moment. In order to translate this epistemological position into empirical research, recourse must be made to more sociological approaches to politics.

In beginning this quest, two connected concepts need to be clarified from the outset. The first concerns the social meaning of political ideas. As Stuart Hall reminds us, political arguments and positions do not emerge and take effect because they are "good" or "bad", "rational" or "irrational". Rather they take form from and give shape to political arenas through their inscription in what Hall calls *discursive spaces of meaning*¹⁸. The second conceptual clarification concerns the term institution. Here Mary Douglas's definition will be used:

*"the entrenching of an institution is essentially an intellectual process as much as an economic and a political one. A focus on the most elementary forms of society brings to light the source of legitimacy that will never appear in the balancing of individual interests. To acquire legitimacy, every kind of institution needs a formula that founds its rightness in reason and in nature. Half of our task is to demonstrate this cognitive process at the foundation of the social order. The other half of our task is to demonstrate that the individual's most elementary cognitive process depends on social institutions"*¹⁹.

From this general theoretical position it is necessary to define more precisely the academic question, the problematics, that our research attempts to address. A French public policy specialist, Pierre Muller, offers a way forward here. In developing his approach to the framing of problems in public policy-making, this author focuses upon four types of idea involved in this process²⁰:

- values which are *"the most fundamental representations of what is good or bad, desirable or to be rejected"* ;
- norms which *"define the gap between reality as it is currently perceived and the reality one hopes to bring about. Norms are often expressed as action principales"*;

¹⁸ Hall S., "Introduction" in S. Hall & J. Donald, dirs: *Politics and ideology*, Milton Keynes, Open University Press, 1988.

¹⁹ Douglas M, *How institutions think*, New York, Syracuse University Press, 1986, p. 45.

²⁰ Muller P., "Les politiques publiques comme construction d'un rapport au monde", in A. Faure, G. Pollet & Ph. Warin, eds.: *La construction du sens dans les politiques publiques*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1995, pp. 158-159.

- algorithms which are "*causal relationships often expressed as action theories in the form of equations 'if... then'*";
- images are "*vectors of implicit values, norms or even algorithms. They possess and transmit meaning immediately without the need for long discursive explanation*".

As we have shown elsewhere²¹, this analytical grid is particularly useful for teasing out the underlying points of difference and/or conflict which lie behind apparently consensual policy areas or issues. In the second part of this paper we will apply the grid in order to compare the definitions of agriculture formulated and defended in the regions under study. In short, our objective is to go beyond analysis of preferences to understand perceptions and institutional logics of action which lie behind, and give meaning to, the representation of interests in the European Union²².

INTEREST REPRESENTATION AND INSTITUTIONAL CONFIGURATION

Our focus upon the perception of problems and institutionalized social representations takes on additional importance because a-sociological interpretations of actor preferences nourish a theoretical standpoint which completely overlooks the role of history in creating the relationship between politics and societies. It is precisely this relationship (and the manner through which the growth of the European Union contributes to its destabilisation), which provides a means of understanding the difficulties of legitimating European integration. Given that their prime focus is on explaining the making of decisions, neo-institutionalist approaches tend strongly to study institutions as isolated entities. This is clearly a necessary stage in any piece of research. However, the configuration of relationships which exist *between* institutions are rarely treated in any depth. Indeed, as Checkel sums up succinctly, applied to European integration, neo-institutionalist analysis goes no further than the central question of intergovernmentalists: "*which institutions matter?*"²³. Worse still, by refusing to take into consideration the social fit of Community institutions, neo-institutionalist analysis can rapidly condemn itself to purely academic modeling of European integration, a posture that is both limited and limiting.

²¹Berthet T. & Smith A., "Dynamique des acteurs et effets emplois. Le Fonds social européen en Aquitaine 1994-96", Bordeaux, CERVL. Dom Bédu A. & Smith A., "Enlarging or deepening? The framing of a European 'problem'", ECPR working paper, Mannheim, 26-31 March 1999.

²²As Donald Searing puts it, "what is needed is a new conception of roles that is sensitive to the interplay between institutional frameworks and individual preferences - and to the fact that this balance between framework and preference varies greatly from one role to another". "Roles, rules and rationality in the new institutionalism", *American Political Science Review*, vol 85 (4), December 1991, pg. 1243.

²³Op. cit, pg. 5.

In order to save European integration studies from the excesses of those who see Europe as just a "fascinating" case with which to theorize, fundamental lessons from political sociology provide a foundation from which to build. From this perspective, Jacques Lagroye's conceptualisation of "institutional orders" provides some solid bedrock:

"Institutional orders tie the conduct and the roles of actors in a net of constraints. These nets in turn provide individuals and groups with models of action which they are strongly advised to follow and structure what they can expect from their partners. In both cases, most of the time actors do not even conceive of going against these orientations"²⁴.

As simple as this definition may seem, it has yet to be systematically applied to the study of European integration. As a result, political science has rarely studied the deepening of European interdependence as a dynamic which raises challenges for political legitimacy through destabilising the equilibria of institutional orders and the models of action they engender. As historical institutionalists have been at pains to underline in other contexts, the durability of institutional configurations depends upon the social and political legitimation of these "patterned disorders"²⁵.

In order to develop research questions and hypotheses from this theoretical starting point, it is useful to return to the works of Lagroye for a distinction between legitimate and consensus-based institutional orders. Orders based on consensus involve utilitarian evaluations of the advantages and costs of a regime and its actors. Legitimacy, however, "involves belief in the social value of institutions"²⁶. As an emerging or "would-be" polity, the European Union is currently more consensus based than a fully legitimate space of politics²⁷. For this reason, when undertaking empirical research it is necessary to give considerable attention to two related points.

Firstly, it is important to unpack each institution under study in order to grasp not only what the different actors do, or are formally authorised to do, but also the behaviour that is expected of them both by those they are supposed to represent and by outsiders to their organisation. From this perspective, Jacques Lagroye provides us with another useful distinction between the *position* and the *role* of public or collective actors. "*Approached in terms of rank within an*

²⁴Lagroye J., *Sociologie politique*, Paris, Dalloz, 1997., pp 165-181.

²⁵Working in a quite different field, two "historical institutionalists", K. Orren and S. Skowronek, employ the term of "patterned disorders" in an approach centred upon "layers rather than systems; dissonance rather than consonance; conjunctures rather than regularities". "Order and time in institutional study", in J. Farr, J. Dryzek, S. Leonard, eds., *Political science in history. Research programs and political traditions*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 317.

²⁶Lagroye J., "La légitimation", in M. Grawitz & J. Leca, dirs., *Traité de science politique*, pp. 399-402.

²⁷The aim of a recent book edited by T. Banchoff and M. Smith is thus to be welcomed: "to conceptualize the legitimacy issue in terms that better fit the reality of the EU as a contested and evolving polity". *Legitimacy and the European Union. The contested polity*, London, Routledge, 1999, pg. 3.

institution", the *position* of an actor can be studied through clarifying their resources and constraints. An actors *role*, however, resumes a set of behaviour which is not only linked to the position they hold, but which "*brings this position to life, consolidates it and, above all, renders it meaningful to others*"²⁸. In the case of contemporary interest representation in Europe, a focus on roles thus encourages us to go beyond the positional focus of neo-institutionalist (and policy network) analysis to study how interest group actors attempt to legitimate new practices (such as their work in Brussels) in the eyes of their members²⁹.

The second area of study that stems from seeing the EU as an incomplete institutional order concerns the discursive and symbolic dimension of the political representation of interests within this space. If European integration has undoubtedly led to change in the activities of politicians, most research on this question has been centred upon their modes of *interaction* (ways of negotiating, the need to consult, the obligation to evaluate, etc.) However, their activities of "evocation" (speeches, ceremonies,) have yet to be studied in detail, and this despite the fact that interest group leaders are constantly obliged to define and redefine the identity of the profession they are elected to represent. Has this discursive dimension changed as much as its transactional counterpart? Given that interest group representatives still tend to begin and make their careers at the level of nation state and/or intra-national units, it is thus also necessary to study the difficulties they face in giving social meaning to their acts on a European stage that as yet is only partially "lit"³⁰.

In summary, this detour via the theories of institutions, public policy-making and political sociology has attempted to set our research on the contemporary nature of French interest representation in a perspective which:

- tackles the role of culture in the formation of actor strategies;
- places the question of change at the level of institutional configurations rather than that of modes of interaction;
- considers that the legitimacy of interest representation can only be understood by studying both its transactional and discursive dimensions.

²⁸ Lagroye J., "On ne subit pas son rôle", *Politix*, n° 38, 1997, pg. 8.

²⁹ To return to Banchoff and Smith's analysis, "the multi-level approach highlights the existence of new patterns of contestation at the European level", op. cit. pg. 12.

³⁰ For recent examples of discourse analysis see in Banchoff & Smith, op. cit., 1999 Gaffney J., "Political rhetoric and the legitimation of the European Union"; Le Bart C., *Le discours politique*, Paris, PUF, 1998.

2. AGRICULTURAL INTERESTS AND EUROPEAN INTEGRATION: SOCIAL AND POLITICAL REPRESENTATION(S)

Before applying this approach to a comparison of the way agricultural interests have been, and are today, represented in two French regions³¹, it is important to note how descriptions of market and public policy change have thus far tended to dominate analysis devoted to this subject.

In the case of Languedoc-Roussillon, it is indisputable that a monocultural approach to wine production geared to mass consumption of an undifferentiated product had by the end of the 1970s led many of this region's farmers to a situation of economic and social crisis. Reform of the European wine policy brought this crisis to a head and has undoubtedly contributed to the renaissance of this sector in the Midi over the past ten years³². Over this period, farming interest groups have not surprisingly experienced considerable upheaval and patterns of representation have undergone considerable renewal. However, most of the studies that deal with this subject tend to concentrate either upon market developments or upon changes within the co-operative movement³³. More diverse than that of Languedoc-Roussillon, the agriculture of Pays de la Loire has not experienced the same intensity of change³⁴. At least until recently, the mixed farming that dominates its rural areas has been a major beneficiary of the Common Agricultural Policy's (CAP) push to "modernize" European farming using price support and grants to individual farmers³⁵.

In both regional cases, social science has paid little attention to the processes through which regional and/or sub-sectoral interests have been constructed by farming groups, state officials and, in some cases, local politicians. All interest groups set out to defend the economic conditions and social status of their members. This can be done either defensively (through

³¹This section synthesizes conclusions from a series of research projects into the relationship between EU policies and French decentralization carried out with colleagues over the past four years. In each of the regions studied, between 20 and thirty interviews have been carried out, official documents scrutinized and budgets analyzed. In addition, interviews have also been conducted with relevant actors at national and EU levels. This research has given rise to the following publications, each of which provides more detailed information and analysis than can be given in this paper. Le Pape Y. & Smith A., "Décentralisations et agricultures: analyse comparée de deux régions françaises", *Politiques et management public*, vol 16 (4), December, 1998; Berriet M., Faure A., Genieys W., Smith A., *Le Languedoc-Roussillon et les politiques communautaires agricoles et rurales*, FAIR research report, December, 1998; Smith A., "L'Europe, le Midi et le vin", *Pôle sud*, n° 9, November, 1998.

³²In this region, wine accounts for 60% of agricultural production. Since 1986 the production of "vins de table" has been reduced by 75%. Over this same period, the amount of wine which has attained the privileged status of "Appellation contrôlée" (patented wine) has doubled, a key factor in the transformation of the Languedoc-Roussillon into a major source of exported wine in the 1990s.

³³Touzard J.-M., La Porte J.-Ph., "Deux décennies de transition viticole en Languedoc-Roussillon: de la production de masse à une viticulture plurielle", *Pôle sud*, n°9, November 1998; Martin J.-Ph., "Viticulture du Languedoc: une tradition syndicale en mouvement", *Pôle sud*, n°9, November 1998.

³⁴Evaluated in terms of gross agricultural production, the Pays de la Loire is France's second most important region. In 1997 agriculture accounted for 5.4% of the region's GDP.

³⁵To my knowledge, recent agricultural change in the Pays de la Loire has thus far only been analyzed by economists. See for example Délorne H., Guglielmi M., Perraud D., "Politique agricole et budget des régions: quelques données sur l'intervention en Pays de la Loire et en Rhône-Alpes", *Economie rurale*, forthcoming 1999.

refusing change proposed by public authorities and resisting the effects of evolving markets) and/or offensively (by proposing new directions for the group and means to move towards this ideal). The two monographies set out below deal with the construction of interests over time and how these definitions structure political interaction and positioning analyzed in terms of configurations of actors and interest group legitimacy. Throughout this section it will become apparent that, like French decentralization, European integration is not an exogenous variable with which interest groups seek to come to terms. Rather the deepening of a European-wide space for collective and public action is now a constant ingredient of contemporary interest representation in the regions under study. More precisely, given the impact of the norms and subsidies set by the CAP, European policy in this field has not surprisingly been part and parcel to these debates. What is less often recognized is that beyond the rhetoric of national government and interest groups reported by the media at the time of Council meetings, lies a myriad of regional and sub-sectoral debates which not only inform intergovernmental bargaining but fundamentally structure the representation of farming throughout France.

LANGUEDOC-ROUSSILLON: CONFLICTUAL EMERGENCE OF MULTI-LEVEL INTEREST REPRESENTATION

From this perspective, the viticulture of Languedoc-Roussillon provides the most clearcut case of cognitive and symbolic displacement. Using the grid formalized by Pierre Muller (see section 1), the political dimension of the transformation of the "Midi rouge" can be summarized as a four-stage shift in perceptions of professional interests and public problems.

STAGE 1: THE RED WINE OF THE *MIDI ROUGE* (1880-1970)

This first stage was structured by a cognitive framework which largely dominated the regional wine sector for nearly a century. The core values were those of hard work, love of the land (*la terre*) and leftist political commitment to the co-operative syndicalist movement. These values structured *algorithms* through two sets of "equations":

- 'if we produce more intensively, then we will earn more'; 'if the EC restricts imports of "treated" wine (notably from Algeria) then the Midi will dominate competition from Italian and even Spanish competitors'.

- 'if we stick together as a movement and resist market liberalisation, then public authorities will back down and leave us in peace'.

Through formulating and defending this definition of regional viticultural interests and prospects, the co-operative movement (in particular through its *département*-level *Fédérations des Caves Cooperatives*) called for *public policies* and *norms* which did not "interfere" with the quality of the wine produced but provided a safety net of guaranteed prices for years of oversupply and falling prices. Finally, this approach to viticulture can only fully be understood if one grasps the force of the *images* of the grape grower (*le vigneron*), of his co-operative and of the *Midi*, all seen as fighting a rearguard action against the city-dwelling bureaucrat and the Paris-dominated state.

During this period, the definition of the interests local wine-producers essentially took place at local (communal) and *département* levels. These definitions were then communicated to the national government through the state's deconcentrated administration (the *préfet* but also the Direction départementale de l'agriculture: DDA) and through networks of notables, in particular those members of parliament who had built their careers in large part around this intermediary role: *les députés du vin*³⁶. One should note that at this time there was little regional representation of the wine sector given that at this time French regionalisation was purely administrative and that viticultural interest groups were more apt to associate themselves with a sociological territory that extended beyond the formal limits of Languedoc-Roussillon: the *Midi*. In short, the configuration of actors involved in the representation of wine at this time was not only fragmented on the ground, it had few direct links to national decision-making arenas and virtually none at the level of the European Community.

³⁶ For analysis of a *député du vin* "in action" see Dédieu O., "Raoul Bayou, député du vin", *Pôle Sud*, n° 9, November 1998.

STAGE 2: CRISIS, CONFLICT AND DISCRETE REPOSITIONING (1970-84)

The initial conceptual framework outlined above is obviously highly present in the second stage of this narrative, one of often violent struggle between representatives of Languedoc-Roussillon's viticulture (now mobilized through local and regional *Comités d'action viticole*) and the French state, on the one hand, and of gradual recomposition of sectoral interest representation on the other. From 1974 to 1984, the very modes of production, collective organisation and commercialisation were fundamentally challenged. Using the terms developed in this paper, the cognitive framework came under direct attack from "external" sources such as the European Community, whilst being sapped from within by "modernizing" professional elites³⁷. Indeed, it is important to note that during this period the themes used to mobilize wine producers changed from a demand for more protectionist policies from the French state to a struggle against an "alien", but now unavoidable, European sectoral policy. The latter was seen as basing its action on an *algorithme* of neo-classical economics: 'if we bring the wine market back into equilibria, then regional wine production will become profitable once again'. On the basis of this simple but effective slogan, *actions and norms*, such as subsidies for grubbing out vines and compulsory distilling of unsold wine, were put into place. More profoundly, these ideas and policy proposals revealed values ('we produce only what we can sell') and positive images of the market ('the winemaker as entrepreneur', wine as a product without any particular social or political meaning).

During this period, then, the configuration of interest representation began to change. The *Comités d'action viticole* challenged traditional modes of negotiation and dependence upon the *députés du vin*. They were also pioneers for a regionalisation of interest group organisation which in turn pushed the French state to regroup some of its own services at this level³⁸. At this stage, however, the external dimension of this configuration remains the central administration of the French state. 'Europe' was recognized as an essential part of the sector's present and future, but direct linkages had yet to be established.

STAGE 3: "DUBLIN" AND ITS AFTERMATH (1984-1990)

³⁷ More precisely, many of those leading the demonstrations against policy change were simultaneously preparing themselves for a major shift in the nature of their profession. As one union leader recalled in an interview in 1998, "*it was a period of mental acrobatics. In the morning we experimented new methods on our farms, in the afternoon we demonstrated against any change outside the prefecture, and in the evening we debated the pros and cons of both actions*".

³⁸ The clearest example being the opening in 1976 of regional offices of the *Office nationale interprofessionnelle des vins de table* (ONIVIT).

With the benefit of hindsight, it can be seen that at this stage neither those defending traditional wine-production nor the administrators demanding radical change really had a fully worked out project for the wine sector in the Languedoc-Roussillon region. Such a project was only to emerge during the third stage of our narrative which begins after the European Council meeting of December 1984 that finalized the CAP's wine reform. Known in Languedoc-Roussillon as "*les accords de Dublin*", this decision put into practice subsidies for grubbing out vines and compulsory distillation, both of which were to have a major impact upon not only the region's wine sector, but its entire rural economy and social fabric³⁹. Paradoxically, however, once on the statute books this radical piece of legislation at last allowed the modernizing elites within the co-operative movement, the state administration and the emerging local authorities to publicly voice and debate new visions for the region's viticulture. In general terms these took the form of an *algorithme* which now embraced a "qualitative change" in economic and social conditions and concluded that only wholesale modification of the region's wine-producing methods could save it in the long term. Traditional *cépages* (vine-plants) were to be abandoned, stricter controls were to be imposed on the quality of grapes accepted by cooperatives and marketing practices completely rethought. As a consequence, the norms and action principles of public policy in this field had to be reshaped to encourage these three goals, a change certain sections of the co-operative movement set out zestfully to achieve. However, this change and its growing acceptance by the very winegrowers who had served as frontline "troops" in the demonstrations of the previous decade, can only be understood by grasping the shift in values and images which allowed it to happen. Instead of denouncing foreign influences (the Parisian, the Italians, the Spanish, "Brussels"...), the rest of Europe began to be depicted positively as a potential market for better quality production. More generally still, the omnipresent adjective "quality" came to be used as a symbol for opening up to a new approach to viticulture and relating this profession to shifts in global French and European society.

During this period the regionalization of the configuration of interest representation was progressively institutionalized, partly due to change in the strategies of co-operatives and partly to coincide with the post-decentralization emergence of the *Conseil Régional* as an autonomous political entity⁴⁰. Over this period, interest groups developed their own sources of technical and economic expertise. Consequently they were better equipped to negotiate not only with local and regional administrations, but also at national (through direct participation in ONIVIT in Paris) and European levels (through the nomination of key local members to sit in EC advisory

³⁹ Between 1984 and 1994 some 120.000 hectares of vines were grubbed out in this region (nearly 30% of its vineyards). For its part, distillation not only had an impact on short and medium term market equilibria, more fundamentally it stigmatized traditional table wine as an inferior product.

⁴⁰ The first regional elections in France took place in 1986. From this time on, *Conseils régionaux* have developed administrations, decision-making structures and public policies. In addition, it should be noted that *département-level Conseils Généraux* have also developed similar traits. This is particularly relevant to the evolution of the wine sector in the *département* of Aude (one of five *départements* in the Languedoc-Roussillon region).

committees and the the European Confederation d'organisations professionnelles agricoles (COPA). This change also reflects a rapprochement between representatives of the wine sector and those of agriculture in general in this region, thereby attenuating the specific properties that had hitherto always been associated with viticulture.

STAGE 4: "QUALITY EMBRACED" (1990 >)

The fourth and final stage of this narrative is one of widespread adoption of the modernizer's conceptual framework by grape-growers and local co-operatives on the one hand, and an alignment with local, national and European structural policies, on the other. In the case of the former, adoption has been encouraged by the economic success of a considerable number of co-operatives and individual producers who have embraced the new "recipe" for successful wine production. It should also be stressed that positive social representations of the modernizing project have been stimulated by favorable international market conditions (increase in north European and American wine consumption, transfer of higher quality French wines - notably those from Bordeaux- to more lucrative Far East markets, etc.). As for change in public policies, these can be resumed as a basic switch from welfare-type price support subsidies to grants for improving micro-economic conditions of production (research, renovating buildings and machinery, etc) and marketing (aids for promotion, wine fairs, market research, etc.).

In configurational terms, today the underlying tension is between a co-operative movement that has adopted many of the practices of private operators but does not want to completely forsake its founding leftist ideology, and private operators who have no such qualms and largely ignore calls for solidarity amongst all types of wine-growers. This tension, however, rarely weakens a regional stance on wine policy which can be summarized as striving at both national and European levels to ensure that wine-makers in the region do not lose out against those of other regions such as the Bordelais⁴¹. From this perspective, the interventions in the wine sector of the *Conseil régional's* president, Jacques Blanc, particularly when president of the EU's Committee of the regions from 1994 to 1996, merit more detailed study⁴².

To sum up, over the last twenty-five years there is no doubt that the very self-definition of wine production in Languedoc-Roussillon has undergone a major transformation⁴³. The EU as

⁴¹ An objective crystallized around the distribution of "rights to replant": producers from Bordeaux argue that these rights should be given to regions which earn the most from exports. Producers from the Languedoc-Roussillon argue that rights should be "returned" to them as they suffered the most in the 1980s and have since shown enterprising skill in adapting to new market conditions.

⁴² For this protagonist's own version of events see the interview published in the journal *Pôle sud* (n° 2, spring 1995).

⁴³ Genieys W., "La 'grande transformation' du Midi rouge?", *Pôle sud*, n° 9, November, 1998.

a source of policies and norms, but also geographical and cultural Europe as a space of markets and ideas, have played an important, all be it fluctuating, part in this trend. However, as we have seen, these effects of European integration have not just been produced as if by magic through economic determinism. Instead they have been progressively received, interpreted, debated and endogenized by the actors of the region. It is precisely these processes which constitute multi-level interest representation.

PAYS DE LA LOIRE: MULTI-LEVEL NEO-CORPORATISM

The recent history of agriculture in the Pays de la Loire bears fewer marks of a radical break with the past. In part this is because this region's farming is more heterogenous and thus less vulnerable to change in one particular sub-sector. More fundamentally, this is because radical change for agriculture in this type of French region took place as long ago as the 1950s. Current definitions of this agriculture's prospects and problems nevertheless can only be fully explained by tracing this definitional process back through three stages, all of which are to different degrees still present today in the minds of farmers and their representatives.

STAGE 1: FROM PEASANTS INTO COMPETITIVE FARMERS (1944-60)

The first stage began after the *Libération* in 1944 and came to a head in the late 1950s and early 1960s. As specialists of this question such as Henri Mendras and Pierre Muller have underlined⁴⁴, at the end of the war, agriculture in regions like the Pays de la Loire was still dominated by a form of low intensity polyculture whose objective and guiding principal was to feed the farmer's family and produce a small surplus with which to buy the few consumer goods it required. High manning levels, low rates of mechanisation and small holdings were major characteristics of this model. The underlying *values* were those of hard work, preservation of the family and profound mistrust of "the town". Portraying the latter as a source of anonymity or even vice, the positive *image* of the peasant (*paysan*) was defended as the cornerstone of more "authentic" rural communities. From this discursive base, politicians and administrators were expected to reinstate the protectionist *norms and policies* of the Third Republic and thereby respect a global *algorithm* which in summary was 'if France is to retain its specificity, then steps must be taken to preserve its peasantry'.

⁴⁴ Mendras H., *La fin des paysans?*, Avignon, Actes Sud, 1984; Muller P., *Le technocrate et le paysan*, Paris, Editions Economie et Humanisme, 1984. See also passages from Jobert & Muller, op. cit., 1987.

The challenges of Reconstruction in a more interdependent world immediately put great pressure on this definition of agriculture and its place in society. Sons and daughters left the countryside in droves to take up paid employment and better housing in urban areas. Meanwhile, the French government came under pressure from international sources to end its protectionism and from actors within France itself to envisage agriculture no longer as a brake on social change, but as a source of exports and the basis for a profitable food processing industry⁴⁵. What this political economy line of reasoning cannot explain, however, is why despite these powerful trends, the dominant social and political representation of agriculture only really changed some 15 to 20 years after World War II? The answer to this question unmistakably lies in the processes of defining the farming profession, its prospects and its problems. The passage of time was necessary for institutionalized values and images to be reshaped through debate to allow the invention of new algorithms and action principles. Time was also necessary for a new generation of agricultural leaders to emerge and act as "mediators" between traditional and "modern" definitions of agriculture⁴⁶.

The interest groups involved were largely inspired by a more general movement that had its roots in western regions such as the Pays de la Loire: the *Jeunesse de l'action catholique* (JAC). Organized first around the young farmers organisation the *Comité national des jeunes agriculteurs* (CNJA) and subsequently the group representing farmers of all ages, the *Fédération nationale de syndicats d'exploitants agricoles* (FNSEA), the actors involved argued for a new forward-looking and national agricultural policy. In configurational terms, this period saw the beginnings of close interdependence between the Ministry of Agriculture and the FNSEA-CNJA, a relationship labelled *co-gestion* (co-management) by the actors themselves and analyzed (some years later) in terms of neo-corporatism by political scientists⁴⁷.

STAGE 2: THE TRIUMPH OF 'MODERNIZATION' (1960-85)

Lasting until the end of the 1980s, the second stage of post-war agricultural history in Pays de la Loire can be resumed as the victory of the modernisers and management of that victory. Institutionalized by the *Loi d'orientation agricole* of 1960, a definition of agriculture resolutely turned towards intensification, larger holdings and the quest for export markets consecrated the vision of a new agricultural elite. The image of the *chef d'entreprise* took the place of the *paysan* just as the *entreprise agricole* took the place of *l'exploitation familiale*. Instead of just valuing hard work, farming had to embrace technological progress and become resolutely

⁴⁵ Kuisel R., *Le capitalisme et l'Etat en France*, Paris, Gallimard, 1984.

⁴⁶ Muller P., op. cit., 1984.

⁴⁷ Keeler J., *The politics of neo-corporatism in France*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1987; Jobert B., Muller P., op. cit., 1987.

commercial in its outlook. As a consequence, the State, and the Ministry of Agriculture in particular, was called upon to invest heavily in agronomic research and training on the one hand, whilst providing price support mechanisms and grants for farm modernisation on the other.

Although barely mentioned in the early debates between traditionalists and modernizers, the European Economic Community rapidly became not only a source of subsidies to complete (and often replace) those of national government, but also a powerful argument for those claiming that insularity was no longer politically or economically tenable. As is well known, from its establishment in 1964 until its crises in the 1980s, the CAP provided a strongly institutionalized set of priorities and rules for agriculture throughout the member states. In this respect, Pays de la Loire is one of the regions that economically benefited most from this policy. More importantly still, the CAP provided a conceptual framework for the region's farmers and their representatives that has only recently begun to be challenged.

In analytical terms, this period saw a deepening of *cogestion* at national level with the administrative elites of the 5th Republic developing seemingly ever closer links with the FNSEA and the CNJA, a trend which incidentally enabled them to place members of parliament and local politicians firmly on the sidelines of agricultural politics. At least in regions such as the Pays de la Loire, these ties were further strengthened at the level of the *département* and the *canton* where the representatives of the leading farming unions established an institutionalized right to interpret European and national legislation and thus in a way formulate local "policy". Indeed, this is also the period when the FNSEA in general, and regions such as the Pays de la Loire in particular, placed their men in key positions within the COPA and on official EU advisory groups in Brussels. As of the late 1960s, it can be argued that in this region European policies were not only relayed by local farm representatives, but that a European agenda for the agricultural sector had already become part and parcel of its dominant conceptual framework.

STAGE 3: THE CHALLENGES OF CAP REFORM AND DECENTRALISATION (1986 >)

Given the European-wide context of CAP reform, not surprisingly the third stage of this narrative on the representation of agriculture in the Pays de la Loire is centred upon regionalized interpretations of a much wider debate⁴⁸. For our purposes this confrontation can be brutally resumed as opposing three camps.

The intensifiers

⁴⁸ Fouilleux E., *Idées, institutions et dynamiques du changement de politique publique. Les transformations de la Politique Agricole Commune*, Phd. thesis, Institut d'études politiques de Grenoble, 1999.

Dominated by large cereal growers and cereal-substitute importers (pig and poultry producers), the first position considers the EU must continue to subsidize intensive agriculture in order to safeguard its contribution to GNP and exports. For these actors, aid to smaller, "less efficient", farmers ought to be phased out of agricultural budgets. Should European, national or local governments wish to continue to support small holdings for reasons of rural development or environmental protection, then these policy objectives should be financed through regional development funds and direct social payments. The strategic dimension of this actor preference is essentially to put Europe's competitive agriculture in line with international agreements on trade (GATT and now WTO). Behind this strategy lies a conceptual framework which no longer values farming as "a way of life" or sees farmers as one single profession. On the contrary, agriculture is depicted by these protagonists as more akin to industry than to the peasantry of yesteryear (for these farmers the term *paysan* is a stigma). Consequently, moves to liberalize the CAP are supported in general terms whilst sustained pressure is applied to obtain privileged status for reform of the cereals "regime" and provisions relating to cereal substitutes. On the first front, a low public profile tends to be adopted by actors in this region because of the open conflict this can generate within bodies such as the regional and *département*-level Chambers of Agriculture and units of the FNSEA. These organizations are essentially left to mount their traditional forms of representation at local, regional and European levels. Instead, this first group of actors has sought to gain more direct access to EU policy-making through the *Association des producteurs de blé* (AGPB) . A member of the FNSEA, traditionally the AGPB worked within and through the trans-sectoral organisation in order to press its claims. Since the beginning of the 1990s, however, it has increasingly sought to develop its own strategies and represent itself directly both at national and European levels. Although not as openly as many corn producers in Brittany, some intensifiers from the Pays de la Loire have also sought to put forward their policy priorities using consultants to conduct discrete forms of lobbying of the European Commission and, to a lesser extent, the Parliament.

Rural developers

Radically opposed to the model pruned by the intensifiers, a second category of farmers in the Pays de la Loire has at the basis of their argumentation a critique of intensive agriculture as an unbalanced mode of production and reductionist vision of the place of agriculture in society. The first dimension of this critique is environmental: intensive agriculture is attacked for its negative effects on water tables, soil, wildlife and landscape. More precisely, the tendency for intensive agriculture to pollute its environment is decried not only for the negative externalities that the rest of society has to pay for, but because it undermines the very qualities of the countryside that could provide the basis for economically viable rural development and farm diversification (tourism, leisure, tele-working, etc.). The second criticism of intensive

agriculture is that it produces standard foodstuffs, often of low quality, which squeeze out traditional territory-linked products of higher nutritional value. Images of "uniformization" or even "Americanization" are used to argue that intensive agriculture is not only the trojan horse of international capital, but also the vehicle of cultural homogenisation. This criticism spills over onto a third concerning the lack of connection between large-scale intensive farmers and local communities. If, as mentioned earlier, the modernizing project of the 1950s and 60s had already begun this trend by making Paris and Brussels the *loci* of agricultural policy-making, rural developers fear that a victory for the intensifier project will completely bring to an end any local or regional influence on farming practices and priorities. Ultimately, opposition from this source to the intensifiers project is crystallized in a more global depiction of its effect on the definition of farming as a profession. In considering themselves as (agri)businessmen and small farmers as peasants, the intensifiers are seen as bringing to an end a centuries-old link between those who work the land and the rest of French society.

To this interpretation of the intensifier project, rural developers oppose a conceptual framework which possesses the following traits. Polyvalent, pluriactive and mixed-farming is reinvented as a (post) modern approach which is not only economically viable, but consistent with *values* that include respect for the earth, culinary traditions and reflexive use of technological "progress". Instead of demanding the "decoupling" of EU price support from the objective of supporting family farming, rural developers tend to prone across the board reductions in production-related subsidies in favour of aids to individual farmers and co-operatives which encourage reconversion to more extensive and diversified ways of working. In summary, based on the presumption that the internationalization of markets is not simply inevitable, the dominant algorithm for this category of farmers is 'if we are to maintain farming as an integral part of the rural economy, then governments at all levels have to be prepared to radically change the instruments of their public policies'. Consequently, the representatives mobilized by this conceptual framework (essentially the *Confédération Paysanne* but also some more 'alternative' farming groups) call for European norms which respect inter-regional difference (standards for cheese-making, farm accommodation, etc.) and measures which encourage reconversion (training, research, marketing aids, etc).

Over and above the classical political difficulty of campaigning on the basis of relatively complex, and above all new, arguments, the groups representing this interest in the Pays de la Loire continue to experience the difficulties of obtaining access to decision-makers known by their homologues throughout most of Europe. Although the *Confédération Paysanne*, has obtained some success in elections for the Chambers of Agriculture in this region (it even controls that of the *Loire Atlantique département*), it finds itself outnumbered at regional and especially national levels. At the European level, this is even more the case given that the FNSEA still dominates French representation within the European farming confederation:

COPA. If COPA has undoubtedly lost influence with the European Commission since the mid 1980s, it still enjoys privileged access. More precisely, through fighting for its ideas at every possible occasion, the representatives of the rural development project in the Pays de la Loire have begrudgingly earned for themselves institutionalized access to formal policy-making arenas and the label that symbolizes legitimacy in France: the adjective of "*sérieux*". However, this access is rarely transformed into influence because, other than ideas which are often "stolen" and diluted by more powerful organisations, ultimately its representatives have little to offer public actors in exchange for adoption of its preferred outcomes.

La troisième voie (the middle way)

Although shaken by the moves towards CAP reform since the mid 1980s, the most powerful agricultural interest group in the Pays de la Loire remains the FNSEA-CNJA axis. Elected farmers and full-time officials from these organisations dominate decision-making arenas at local, *département* and regional levels. In all three cases, these actors enjoy privileged access to local politicians, local authorities and deconcentrated offices of the state. Moreover, both the FNSEA and the CNJA have been able to bolster their local and regional power base through "accumulating mandates" at national and regional levels. In the case of the FNSEA, Luc Guyau from the Vendée *département* has not only been president of the national federation since 1991, he has also been president of the COPA since 1996. As for the CNJA, its current national president is also from the region. As one local official put it to us, this access to external centres of decision-making not only gives the FNSEA-CNJA in the Pays de la Loire, early information on likely policy change, but also the leaders involved use their multipositionality to act as "*locomotives*" within the region itself. In particular, the presence of these actors at national and European levels has been used adroitly by the FNSEA to reinforce and legitimize the regional level of interest representation through the regional chamber of agriculture (CRJA). Not only do the FNSEA and CNJA dominate this body through the electoral process, but through concentrating the technical expertise of this movement at this level, it has come to be seen as a key means of getting views across to public authority at a time of growing regionalisation and changing European policies. On the first of these trends, in contrast to that of Languedoc Roussillon, the *Conseil régional* of Pays de la Loire has consistently sought to treat agriculture like any other economic sector rather than as a special case⁴⁹. Contrary to appearances, however, this policy orientation has been adopted with the complete agreement of the FNSEA and the CNJA. The latter prefer the *Conseil régional* to concentrate on aiding research and rural

⁴⁹ Le Pape, Smith, op. cit., 1998.

development, safe in the knowledge that they have the power to obtain agricultural subsidies for their members through European, national and *département*-level sources⁵⁰.

This said, it is important not to see the FNSEA and the CNJA as just dominant opportunists without any guiding ideology. In many respects actors representing these bodies continue to manage and update the modernizing project which their forefathers largely invented in the late 1950s. Intensive farming is still seen in a positive light whilst, unlike the intensifiers analyzed above, these organisations remain wedded to protecting that mythical image of European agriculture: the family farm. In short, the values of the agri-businessman are largely embraced but the term *paysan* has not become perjorative. Indeed, quite the reverse is true since these groups use this term to highlight their representation of all sectors and types of farming. In response to the concerns of environmentalists and rural developers within farming itself, this interest group again tries to steer a middle course between accepting greater restrictions on fertilizer and pesticide use, but defending the right of farmers to manage their farms as they see fit. The *algorithme* of their position is 'if modern agricultural production methods can sometimes cause pollution, then it is up to public authorities to help farmers to find (and fund) alternative methods which do not interfere with competitiveness'. On this basis, institutionalized norms and subsidies are fought for and often obtained. Finally, the FNSEA and the CNJA place great emphasis on the symbolics of interest representation by continuing to downplay the possible significance of diversification, pluriactivity and non-agricultural rural development. Such trends are considered "dangerous" because they threaten to dilute the image and institutionalized definition of agriculture as a distinct profession. Offensive, and usually effective, forms of defence of traditional definitions of 'a farmer' are thus consistently led by the FNSEA-CNJA, in particular around issues pertaining to the management of the separate farming social security and pension fund (*la Mutualité sociale agricole*: MSA)⁵¹.

Ultimately, one could ask the question whether the interest defined and defended by the FNSEA-CNJA is really a *troisième voie* at all. In many respects, their project for the region's (and France's and Europe's) agriculture is much closer to that of the intensifiers than that of the rural developers. Nevertheless, the approach to public subsidy is not the same, neither in discursive terms, nor in the ways this project is carried forward using the resources developed over the years at national and European levels.

To sum up this rapid history of half a century of agricultural interest representation in the Pays de la Loire, we have seen that the hegemony of the FNSEA-CNJA axis has not been achieved without its leaders engaging in intra-regional and inter sub-sectoral conflict. Indeed,

⁵⁰ A clearcut example of this influence occurred in 1995-96 at the time of the beef crisis engendered by the "mad cow disease" food scare. Claiming that their region was a "special case", farm leaders such as Luc Guyau ensured that the region's beef farmers swiftly received compensation for their losses.

⁵¹ Faure A., Gerbaux F., Muller P. , *Les entrepreneurs ruraux*, Paris, l'Harmattan, 1989.

this conflict has often been on the point of provoking damaging cleavages within these two farming unions. In order to avoid such splits, the unions' leaders have been engaged in more or less constant rounds of discursive and transactional exchange with sections of their own membership as well as with public institutions. In this respect, a multi-level configurational approach to the strength and legitimacy of interest representatives has proved essential to the findings of our research. The density and quality of the FNSEA-CNJA leadership's connections with their respective national hierarchies, but also that of the French Ministry of Agriculture, COPA and the DG VI in Brussels, has been of decisive importance not only to the maintenance of union cohesion within the region, but also to the protection of its underlying conceptual framework.

CONCLUSION

It will come as no surprise to any political scientist that interest group representation in the European Union does not take place on a 'level playing field'. The (para)phrase 'some groups are more equal than others', certainly holds true in the case of agriculture in both Languedoc-Roussillon and Pays de la Loire. The comparison presented here could (and probably should) be pushed further if one were seeking to unveil the precise reasons for inequality between groups in these regions. Given the more general focus of this paper, I have nevertheless shown that the respective influence of contemporary agricultural interest groups in France can only be fully analyzed by building into research strategies:

- the constructivist premise that interests are defined and redefined during representation and that such definitions are central to political interaction, be it conflictual or co-operative;
- that definitional processes are not random. They are shaped by embedded perceptions of collective values, goals and priorities;
- that the multi-level nature of the EU is not exogenous to interest representation, rather it is an integral part of interest group activity and their chances of political success. In short, European arenas are very much part of the multipolar strategies agricultural groups have been pushed to develop since the 1960s.

More widely still, an approach to multi-level representation which draws on concepts and methods from neo-institutionalist theories, cognitive analysis of public policy and detailed study of political elites offers a way towards a more sociological approach to the "contested polity" that is, and has been for some time, the European Union. From this perspective, Thomas Banchoff and Mitchell Smith are right to advise against accepting the conventional wisdom of a European "legitimacy crisis" and to study instead how the EU as a polity faces particular

difficulties in legitimating its practices and priorities⁵². To use their term, and in the light of the analysis presented in this paper, however, greater attention needs paying to the poor level of "recognition", both for the general public and social scientists, of traits such as multi-interest representation which mark this polity. From the point of view of "successful" actors, such as those representing dominant forms of agriculture in the Pays de la Loire and Languedoc-Roussillon, there is little need to discuss this characteristic of the EU's polity. However, both from the point of view of groups that tend to lose out from this system's "authorized" forms of contestation and that of the disinterested citizen, the issue of visibility reveals a number of deep-seated normative issues for future European integration. Analysis proffered by theoretically informed empirical political science obviously cannot solve these problems. It can nonetheless help to shape them and thereby set the stage for more fundamental public debate about legitimation of the EU than is currently the case.

⁵² Op. cit., 1999, pg. 3 and 218.