Food, Farms, and Solidarity

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On April 29, 1987, the paysan movements of the 1970s and 1980s came together at a meeting in Rennes to form the Confédération Paysanne. While drawing in individuals remaining with the FNSEA, the Confédération Paysanne also brought together members from a range of other paysan organizations. As a new social and political entity, the Confédération Paysanne represented a rare synthesis. This new union emerged as a hybrid entity, one composed of a complex set of histories and discourses of agriculture that over the next decade would become solidified into a coherent agricultural vision that the union calls Agriculture Paysanne (Paysan Agriculture). In an attempt to convey some of the union’s unique flavor and sensibility, I carried out numerous formal and informal interviews with union staff, leaders, and members from 1997 to the present, in person and by phone. In the middle of a conversation, I’d just pop out my little notebook and jot down the words of my interlocutors.
Chapter Three

Marxist and Anarcho-Syndicalist Underpinnings: Decentralization, Autonomy, and Internationalism

The Confédération Paysanne attempts to distinguish its own political approach from that of other agricultural unions—particularly the FNSEA, its primary rival. In particular, union members criticize the FNSEA’s attempt to portray all French farmers as sharing a common class interest. As the Confédération Paysanne saw it, class divisions among FNSEA farmers became increasingly polarized as the glorious thirty wore on—and it ended with a dramatically bifurcated agricultural world. The emergence of the new paysan movements represents what the Confédération Paysanne calls the rise of “union pluralism”: the notion that different agricultural unions express divergent class-based vision and goals (Confédération Paysanne 1997, 45). The myth of class unity was central to the Confédération Paysanne’s decision to abandon attempts to reform the FNSEA from within. No longer necessary were autonomous pressure groups such as Interpaysanne or Paysans-Travailleurs, whose members often attempted to convince FNSEA leadership to attend to the particular concerns of smallholders. When paysan groups finally broke with the FNSEA, they finally committed to building a union that would completely represent their interests. That union was the Confédération Paysanne.

Rejecting the FNSEA’s modernist idea of exploitants (familial entrepreneurs), the founders of Confédération Paysanne created a Marxist-influenced union of workers that posited agriculture as a social project rather than just a profitable rural profession. For the Confédération Paysanne, the paysans’ mission extends beyond the production of food: its mission is to reinvigorate and restore rural zones by repopulating such areas with multiple small farms as well as other modes of rural social and material production. Central to this objective is a Marxist-based discourse on the paysans’ “right to work” that can be traced back to narratives developed among the JAC. The Confédération Paysanne rejects a national and international agricultural form of governance that deprives paysans access to land and other means necessary for farming. By asserting the paysan and the rural world as a dignified and crucial social sector, the union demands for its members adequate social security, insurance, and maternity benefits comparable to workers in other sectors (François Dufour, personal communication, June 12, 1998). In addition, the Confédération Paysanne aims to create a majoritarian union of
worker- and paysan-identified farmers. The union’s ultimate objective is to eliminate the need for agri-business-oriented unions such as the fnsea by changing farm policy in both France and the European Union.

Another ongoing mission at the union is to prepare for elections held every six years at the nation’s chamber of agriculture. During these elections, between forty-five and forty-eight seats are won by various agricultural agencies seeking to control chamber policy that affects three million individuals and fifty thousand professional organizations. There is a local chamber of agriculture in each department (county) in France, totaling ninety-four chambers. When I met the union in 1997, they proudly controlled 20 percent of the seats in the national chamber of agriculture. Their ongoing goal is to step up this percentage, winning the country over to their own model of paysan agriculture.

**THE LEGACY OF ANARCHO-SYNDICALISM: DECENTRALIZATION, AUTONOMY, AND LEADERSHIP STRUCTURE**

Unlike many Marxist-based movements, the Confédération Paysanne is committed to decentralized forms of organization. Power is distributed as equally as possible among both individual members and regional subsets of the union. An interesting caveat: a vast majority of union members do not identify as anarchists. Yet while the union does not explicitly articulate anarchist goals and vision, it dialectically retains anarchist values by implicitly incorporating a sensibility of decentralization and autonomy into its organizational structure. The Confédération Paysanne indeed takes pride in being decentralized, democratic, and less bureaucratic than hierarchical organizations such as communist unions and the fnsea. As a decentralized entity, the Confédération Paysanne has members throughout France. The union expresses its commitment to local autonomy by granting local departmental Confédération Paysanne branches a great deal of freedom in managing their local affairs.

Unlike most unions or organizations of its size, the Confédération Paysanne has no national president per se (an expression of its anarcho-syndicalist roots). Instead, the central governing body of the Confédération Paysanne is the national committee, a group composed of twenty-six representatives from twenty-two regions of the country. To maximize member representation and participation, regions with larger constituencies, such as the Pays Loire or Bretagne, are granted three representatives each, rather
than one or two (François Dufour, personal communication, November 4, 1999). Again, in the spirit of decentralization, the union convenes in different regions each year. Hosted by local members, this annual congress is the forum in which the national committee elects a set of national representatives (secretaries). These national secretaries serve for relatively short periods of time, allowing for broad participation. The national committee consists of between five and nine national secretaries and generally about ten treasurers. At the national congress, the national secretaries elect a general secretary—someone in charge of managing departmental bodies as well as maintaining relationships between the Confédération Paysanne and other unions and associations.

Instead of having an executive director or president, the national secretaries elect a key union spokesperson, called the union speaker (porte parole). The union speaker serves as the public face of the Confédération Paysanne and is empowered to speak on behalf of the union as key press liaison. While the press and public often erroneously refer to the speaker as the union’s “leader” or “president,” the Confédération Paysanne makes it quite clear that the power of the union speaker is limited in scope. The speaker assumes his or her role for a relatively short period (four to six years) and is recallable. The Confédération Paysanne speaker has relatively limited autonomous decision-making power. All union decisions are made in a participatory, democratic, and decentralized fashion, deploying the greatest amount of membership consultation possible. Yet the speaker is generally a charismatic figure; speakers are expected to help shape the union’s overall vision and morale, while presenting a forward-looking face to the public. The speaker’s key responsibility is to increase the union’s public visibility and power. Historically, each speaker brings his or her own distinctive temperament and style to the job.

During the period of 1997 to 2000, in particular, I carried out countless formal and informal interviews with union members. Sometimes interviews occurred spontaneously, over a cup of coffee in a café at lunchtime. Other interviews were scheduled and took place at the union headquarters or in the homes of union paysans.

In nearly all of my interviews, I would ask paysans how they perceived various speakers of the union. When discussing former union speaker Guy Le Fur, for instance, I was struck by how many described him as “shy, modest, yet fierce.” Paysans tended to describe another former union speaker,
François Dufour, in similar terms. Mostly, actors experienced Dufour as “outgoing, engaging, and able to get things done.” In keeping with the Confédération Paysanne’s nonhierarchical sensibility, a good speaker is one who leads by example, skill, and enthusiasm rather than by exerting authority or coercion over others.

The Confédération Paysanne highly values being a good comrade, working hard for the union, and getting along well with others. During their four-year terms, the national secretaries spend two to three days a week at the Confédération Paysanne’s office in Bagnolet, just outside Paris. In order for the union to function effectively, the national secretaries (hailing from across the country) must be able to get along in a convivial way. Representatives perceived as egotistical or shirking duties are often criticized informally for failing to place the needs of the organization before personal priorities. While at the Confédération Paysanne, national representatives share a small dormitory inside the office building. They prepare meals collectively in the Confédération Paysanne’s small but lively kitchen and spend time together in the common living and dining room. Together they celebrate political victories, birthdays, and holidays when they are together in Paris, miles from home, often holding raucous parties filled with good food.

National secretaries have an arduous job that often entails a weekly commute to Paris (up to twelve hours by train). Each Monday or Tuesday, national secretaries leave their families behind for three to four days to work intensively with other national secretaries in Paris. For all of this, they receive a relatively modest stipend, which places degrees of hardship on their families both personally and economically. In order to partially compensate national secretaries during their absence on their farms, they are reimbursed for hiring replacement farmworkers. When examining the workload and commitment of the national secretariat, it becomes clear that union members sign on for this job not out of a desire for money, ease, or power, but out of a deep sense of commitment to the union.

The Confédération Paysanne’s international and humanist orientation makes it a bit of a historical anomaly in French rural history. For almost a century, France has perceived its rural zones as a parochial and romanticized “world apart,” whose constituents share a conservative backward sensibility. Due to its roots in the JAC, the Confédération Paysanne has a dis-
tinctive political vision and orientation. The union holds internationalism and humanism as core values, striving to be tightly integrated into international networks. Even before the Confédération Paysanne was born, members of the new paysan movements recognized the need for international worker solidarity for both philosophical and strategic reasons. Strategically, the need for such unity is clear. This is an age when agricultural policy is shaped by international bodies such as the European Commission, which determines the EU’s Common Agricultural Policy and the WTO. The Confédération Paysanne understands that power does in fact lie in numbers. The union is fiercely committed to working with other groups of smallholders to fight against powerful institutions that make policy about agricultural practice.

In 1986, just a year before the founding of the Confédération Paysanne, the new paysan movements founded a Europe-wide network called the Coordination Paysanne Européenne (European Peasant Coordination), with headquarters in Brussels. To this day, the European Peasant Coordination contains eighteen smallholders in farmer and rural organizations from eleven European countries (e.g., Switzerland, Austria, and Germany). In addition to addressing problems associated with the European Common Agricultural Policy and the WTO, the European Peasant Coordination also addresses such food controversies as GMOs, hormones, and antibiotics used in raising livestock. It was through engagements with the European Farmers Coordination that the Confédération Paysanne broadened its network of international contacts with peasant and indigenous groups in the Global North and South. Early in its history, the union realized that groups around the world shared similar concerns related to trade liberalization, land rights, and problems associated with industrial agriculture. In 1986, unease among these groups peaked when the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (which later became the WTO) decided to include food and agriculture in its treaties on free trade for the first time.

For many members in the Confédération Paysanne, the idea of including policy on food and agriculture in free-trade agreements was devastating. Such a maneuver could mean that agricultural trade and production would be organized around neoliberal lines on an unprecedented international scale (Bové 2001, 92). Most crucial, individual states would lose the power to generate their own food-related trade policies to protect their own markets. Additionally, poorer countries would be obliged to lower their own tariffs.
The Confédération Paysanne

while accepting a large percentage of imports from the United States and the EU. Bringing food and agriculture under free-trade policies meant grave consequences for southern countries at a time when northern countries were responsible for exporting 80 percent of food internationally. The flooding of southern agricultural economies with cheap, government-subsidized foods from the North is referred to as “dumping” (Wise 2004). Such dumping devastates local rural economies of poor countries unable to sell their own food at home and renders it impossible for these countries to compete in a global market.

To address such concerns, the Confédération Paysanne and the European Paysan Coordination joined together to found La Via Campesina (The Peasants’ Way) in 1993. La Via Campesina grew to become an international organization consisting of smallholders, agricultural workers, rural women’s groups, and indigenous organizations (Desmarais 2007). In addition to fighting problems of dumping, La Via Campesina fights other issues associated with free trade and industrial agriculture generally, as well as focusing on the implications of GMOs for smallholders and indigenous groups worldwide. La Via Campesina’s network is vast. It extends into every continent in Europe, North America, Central and South America, Asia, and Africa. Its key organizations include the Confédération Paysanne, the Karnataka State Farmers’ Association from South India (which represents ten million farmers and is responsible for leading militant anti-GMO direct-action campaigns), and the Brazilian Landless Movement. The Brazilian Landless Movement is mainly responsible for supporting landless peasants in occupying and farming dormant farmlands in addition to assisting peasants by creating other social and educational programs.

La Via Campesina’s mission was further clarified and solidified after the historic meeting in Marrakech, Morocco, in 1994, when the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade was formally transformed into the WTO. With the WTO in place, individual states lost even more rights to refuse dumped or other unwanted foodstuff imports from WTO member countries. Under WTO policy, states may only refuse food imports when they are able to scientifically prove risk-based evidence that foodstuffs jeopardize a state’s population or livestock. The cost (and feasibility) of generating such scientific proof is usually beyond the means of poorer countries. Consequently, the WTO remains largely unhindered in maintaining its power to enforce this policy.
Chapter Three

Conf. Culture: Paysans, Salariers, Class, Ethnicity, and Gender

The Confédération Paysanne built its modest headquarters just outside Paris in the small suburb of Bagnolet. The office is housed in an old stone building that the union renovated in the early 1990s, freeing up three good-sized floors that were fashioned into a series of airy and well-lit offices. The feeling of the building is very “1968”: colorful, cheerful, humorous, with brightly colored walls covered with various amusing Confédération Paysanne campaign posters. Everywhere bulletin boards are filled with newspaper articles featuring union activities, agricultural news, and witty political cartoons designed by the Confédération Paysanne’s signature political cartoonist, Samson. While the headquarters is clearly a place where people come to do hard work, the space also communicates a feeling of not taking oneself too seriously. There is an air of light and witty humor that runs through the constant stream of jokes that fill the halls and political art covering the walls. There is a small and bustling kitchen on the building’s main floor where there are almost always a few paysans and staff talking and laughing together, smoking cigarettes or sipping coffee at a wobbly table with a yellow plastic tablecloth. Office doors are generally swung open, creating an informal and welcoming atmosphere at the union, which insiders refer to as “La Conf.”

The headquarters in Bagnolet also houses the Confédération Paysanne’s monthly magazine, Campagne Solidaires. In addition, Bagnolet is home to the team that runs the Association Federal pour la Development de l’Emploi Agricole et Rural (Federal Association for the Development of Rural and Agricultural Employment). Those in and outside the union refer to this project by using the acronym FADEAR. The FADEAR is an education and outreach project by the Confédération Paysanne that develops curriculum on agriculture for paysan youths and for new farmers entering the union. In the yard behind the building stand two small prefabricated structures. These buildings provide spillover space for larger meetings. In the winter, these buildings are chilly and damp, heated with small space heaters. With no extra monies to expand or upgrade the union’s building structure, members and staff tough it out on cold winter days, sipping hot coffee and wearing extra sweaters to keep warm.

It is worth noting that the union faces ongoing economic hardship, and this is apparent in the infrastructure of the union’s national headquarters.
With scarce funds to create a lavish or formal-looking building, the Confédération Paysanne makes do, creating a space that is inviting, cheerful, and down to earth.

Confédération Paysanne constituency: Paysans and Salariers

Confédération Paysanne culture at the Bagnolet headquarters is a hybrid mix of individuals hailing from different classes, ethnicities, sexes, and agricultural backgrounds. At any given moment, the Bagnolet office is overflowing with Parisian organizers raised in urban middle-class families, hippie néos (new farmers), and more conservatively dressed purs porcs (literally pure pigs—farmers perceived as longtime committed farmers), who are descendants of the jac who hail from generational farm families.

The two major sets of actors at Bagnolet are paysan representatives and salariers. Salariers is the Confédération Paysanne’s term for permanent staff; those salary-earning nonpaysans who work at the union. At the center of the staff structure are seven key organizers in charge of coordinating administrative issues with the general secretary. Each key organizer is in charge of directing a particular set of ongoing campaign areas, such as agriculture, livestock, the environment, and society at large. In addition to the seven key organizer positions, there is a staff of fifteen working in the office, including a general office worker and three individuals who publish Campagne Solidaires.

Confédération Paysanne paysans and salariers represent two different institutional subcultures, each with its own set of cultural norms and practices. For instance, paysans tend to wear clothing with a rural feel, such as pullover wool sweaters with worn-looking jeans and work shoes. Salariers tend to dress quite differently. While their attire is informal by Parisian standards, men tend to wear ironed button-down shirts, urban and fashionable jeans, and more formal dress shoes. Women adopt a slightly intello (slang for intellectual) or funky look by wearing urban chic clothing or sporting a dressed-down hippie style. Because many paysans are raised in rural areas, they tend to have strong regional accents. In contrast, salariers tend to have Parisian accents. Differences between paysans and salariers are often class based as well. Many salariers were raised in middle-class families and have the French bachelor’s and master’s degrees in fields such as environmental studies, communications, and agricultural science. While some paysans also have advanced degrees, others chose nonacademic paths (preferring to go
right into farming) for professional or economic reasons. What is significant here is that while salariers may have greater educational and class privilege than many paysans, paysans hold the power in the union. Confédération Paysanne leaders occupy higher status in the organization and are the employers and evaluators of salariers’ work.

Yet the Bagnolet headquarters, like the Confédération Paysanne itself, strives to create a nonhierarchical structure and work atmosphere. Since my first formal and informal encounters with union actors in 1997, I have been continuously impressed by the distinct sensibility of the people who flow in and out of union headquarters. Relations between salariers and paysans are generally informal and congenial, and most salariers describe the work environment as “relaxed, stimulating, and rewarding.” Most salariers report pride in working for a cause they believe in and express an earnest respect for the paysans for whom they work. In general, paysans and salariers tend to *tutoi* each other, using the informal *tu* (you) in both formal and informal conversation—a practice atypical in professional office settings in France. Also atypical, many paysans and salariers will *faire des bises* (offering each other kisses on each cheek) upon greeting or saying good-bye to each other at the beginning or end of the day. Some paysans who hail from the south of France offer four consecutive kisses on alternating cheeks, as is customary in that part of the country.

Despite these informalities, the organizational boundaries between salariers and paysans are extremely clear. Just as salariers always refer to Confédération Paysanne members and representatives as paysans, paysans refer to nonpaysan staff as salariers. As one salarier said to me, in 2005, “Well, in a way, we’re all salariers, we’re all workers [*ouvriers*], we all work here, but the paysans, well, they’re really our employers. It’s their union and we work for them.” Lunchtime is a moment when the distinction between paysans and salariers is most visible. Paysans and salariers, who work side by side all morning, dine at separate tables in the restaurant near the office. One salarier explained to me, “The paysans like their privacy, they like to talk among themselves about issues that they are working on. . . . We have separate interests in the end.” Once, when I asked various paysans why paysans never occupy salarier positions, many said things to the effect of “The boundaries are clearer when salariers are not paysans.” Paysans regard salariers as culturally different. On several occasions I heard paysans bemused about how strange it was that a salarier—so involved in union issues—was raised in an
urban setting. At other times, paysans discussed the agricultural lineages of various salariers, noting how they had parents, grandparents, or uncles who farmed in the recent past. Many paysans often referred to such lineages as a way to explain these salariers’ commitment to the union’s goals and vision. Allusions to salariers’ agricultural roots seemed to be a way to locate salariers within the union’s landscape, providing degrees of fictive kinship within the organization.

However, for some salariers with more dubious agricultural roots, establishing one’s place within the union can be challenging. Anne-Marie B., a salarier who had worked at the union for several years, articulates: “What is strange is that I live in Paris, work in agriculture, and yet no one in my family is from the country. When the paysans ask what region I come from, I’m a bit ashamed to say. I have to say where my grandparents are from. My grandparents are real Brittany stock; they live in the country. You can really have a problem here if you don’t have family that works in agriculture. The paysans think it’s harder for you to understand the paysan situation. They don’t know if you’ll really understand.”

**WHO IS THE CONF.? CLASS, EDUCATION, AND AUTHENTICITY**

The Confédération Paysanne does not keep statistics on the agricultural or social and ethnic backgrounds of its members. However, over the years, I have been able to construct a loose profile of the kinds of individuals who constitute the union’s leadership and membership. In the end, I found that while there was no single “Confédération Paysanne type,” there were a few sets of characteristics shared by many. Most active members in the union are in their mid-thirties to forties. Many of the older members (those over fifty) grew up in the JAC and moved through the various new paysan movements that led to the formation of the Confédération Paysanne. While some younger members do not share this history, they seem to take pride in the union’s self-constructed origin story. The union makes it a priority to document and relate its history to newcomers to the organization. The union has several orientation notebooks that clearly document the union’s history. These three-ring binders are continually added to and brought up-to-date as the union’s story evolves over time.

Usually Confédération Paysanne members constitute part of a farming couple or family. Farming is indeed often regarded as a family activity, one that includes spouses, members of an extended family, and children still
living at home. According to most union members, however, most of their own children do not plan to continue farming for economic reasons. Instead, many children of union members plan careers in other domains that will eventually lead them to a French city relatively far from home. When I asked the children of Confédération Paysanne farmers themselves (during farm visits) why they might choose not continue the farming lifestyle, most replied with an emphatic, “It’s hard work!” Older children (teenagers and older) also often expressed that agricultural life is too uncertain. Rather than resenting their children's choices, Confédération Paysanne members seem to put their energies into drawing upon French youths who contact the union expressing interest in taking up a farming way of life. The union has a rigorous program designed to assist new farmers and dedicates considerable time and resources toward cultivating a new generation of paysans who would otherwise be turned off from farming in a difficult rural economy.

In terms of educational background, most Confédération Paysanne members completed lycée (high school) and passed the final exam (baccalauréat). Unlike most of their parents, many paysans in the Confédération Paysanne continued on to higher education in their late teens and early twenties, sometimes receiving the French equivalent of a bachelor’s degree in agricultural science at local universities or through correspondence courses. Many union members often chose for personal or financial reasons to move directly from lycée into farming.

At times I noticed an uneasiness regarding the relationship between class and educational background among union members, particularly on the leadership level. Pierre T., a former national secretary (and a man quite active in the union during 1997–2001), reported an interesting situation. In his youth, Pierre earned an engineering (ingénieur) degree in agricultural science. In France the term ingénieur has a very different meaning from the purely technical term engineer in U.S. English (Shinn 1978). One earns an engineering diploma from either an independent school of engineering or high-status institutions called grandes écoles. French engineering schools foster academic-industry collaborations where students learn management skills, often central to their future careers. In France, engineer is a title that enjoys similar (or superior) status to doctor in the United States. One can become an engineer in a variety of domains ranging from social to technical science. Once they have become engineers, individuals are granted entry into the elite domains of French society, where they may work in indus-
try, government, or higher education. Pierre T, now in his mid-fifties, hails from a family of smallholders and identifies strongly as a paysan. During an average year, he spends about a third of his time working as an agricultural consultant in Africa, another third teaching courses on agricultural science at his local university, and the last third working on his own homestead with his wife and close family friend on a smallholding of about ten hectares. According to Pierre, “It’s hard sometimes at the union. Sometimes you get the feeling others sort of doubt your commitment to be and act like a real paysan. ‘Is he an ingenieur or a paysan?’ some people ask. For me, though, there is no problem. I know what I am.”

For Pierre, matters became even more problematic when his daughter was selected into the single most elite engineering university in the country, an institution whose graduates are granted entry into the highest echelons of French society. Most graduates of this school become key leaders in domains of industry, science, government, law, and education. When Pierre’s daughter was accepted, Pierre became a main topic of conversation among many paysans at the union who joked and bantered about the paysan status of Pierre and his family. Many wondered aloud whether Pierre was a “real paysan” or if he was a “professor” or an “international expert” instead. When I mentioned the possibility of visiting Pierre’s home for a weekend at a Confédération Paysanne meeting, a national representative turned to me and advised, “If it were me, I’d visit a real paysan. We don’t know quite what Pierre is!” While I did not observe explicit anti-intellectualism among union members, I did observe moments of confusion and slight irritation during discussions surrounding the class and identity status of particular paysans who had greater access to powerful institutions such as international development agencies or prestigious universities. The more members perceived Pierre as enjoying extra monetary or institutional status outside the paysan world, the more they struggled to identify with his class and cultural identity.

Most Confédération Paysanne members identify as working class, having been raised in modest economic milieus. Some were raised in farm families, inheriting family smallholdings of various sizes from parents or relatives. Others hailed from families that rented parcels from large landowners and lived a kind of yeoman farmer existence that may have lasted for generations. From the time they were children, many knew they would follow in their parents’ footsteps to become farmers.
NÉO-RURAUX MEMBERS OF THE CONFÉDÉRATION PAYSANNE

A considerable number of paysans did not descend from farm families. Confédération Paysanne members have a term for individuals who adopt a paysan way of life as adults: néos-ruraux (neorural), or néos for short. Néos constitute a minority at the Confédération Paysanne. Some of the older néos (in their fifties or sixties) had been active in antiwar movements associated with the Larzac in their youth. Other older néos may have had no history with the Larzac, but they may have become disenchanted by urban life after the events of May 1968 and looked to farming as a more meaningful way of life. While néos like José Bové fall into the former category, those such as René Riesel (a key union activist) fall into the latter. According to Riesel, after the events of 1968 came to a close, he saw no other option but to turn to the country to “escape the disaster that had become his capitalist-crazed country” (René Riesel, personal communication, October 2, 1999).

Whenever I inquired into the existence, number, or even the idea of néos among Confédération Paysanne members, I was met with dismissal or slight irritation. Paysans are critical of the idea of unity among farmers at the FNSEA who did not share class interests. Conversely, at the Confédération Paysanne, actors seem to assume that all union members share the same class interests and thus forge another kind of unity—one that downplays differences among the agricultural histories of its members. As François Dufour (a former union speaker) stated quite succinctly during a speech he gave on April 16, 1998, “We are not concerned with paysans’ pasts, but with paysans’ survival.” The kind of union unity suggested by Dufour seems to be both encouraged and largely achieved. Since the first historical coming together between paysans who descended from farm families (often called purs porcs among paysans) and néos in the Larzac movements, there has been a tendency to downplay such differences in the name of union solidarité. Thus even in informal public settings I found little open discourse among Confédération Paysanne members regarding the agricultural backgrounds of particular paysans. Yet in private, actors’ interest in the status of actors like Pierre demonstrates that at least some members of the Confédération Paysanne often hold discussions about individuals’ paysan status. The néo-ruraux I encountered reported feeling well integrated into the union. However, they often described life in the broader agricultural community, beyond the Confédération Paysanne, as being sometimes difficult, particu-
larly at the beginning of their farming careers. Many néos will joke about how it took twenty years to prove to neighboring farmers (farmers outside the Confédération Paysanne) that they were “serious” paysans.

In terms of religion and ethnicity, most Confédération Paysanne members would identify as white and were raised Catholic. During my years of studying the union, I encountered one farmer of Jewish and Arab descent, René Riesel—a man who had been a national secretary. To my knowledge there have been no other (or at least very few) Confédération Paysanne farmers of Arab or African descent (Arabs from Algeria or Morocco and Africans from Cameroon or the Ivory Coast represent the two largest minorities in France). While Riesel reports never feeling openly discriminated against for being Jewish (he was elected into the national committee in the mid-1990s), he said he was continuously conscious “that everyone was aware that [he] was ‘the Jew’ at the Conf.” (personal communication, October 2, 1999).

As with whiteness in such countries as the United States, French Catholicism is a normative, unmarked ethnic and religious identity that renders all non-Catholics (white or of color) “other.” As adults, many Confédération Paysanne members who were raised Catholic are nonobservant, rarely attending church or requiring their children to attend church. Others seem to have blended the JAC sensibilities of their youth with progressive Gandhian nonviolent philosophies, loosely identifying with the liberation theology associated with Latin American social movements.

Another commonality among many Confédération Paysanne members (particularly among those over forty) is that many have spent time in parts of French-speaking Africa. Many in the Confédération Paysanne chose as youths to opt out of military service, performing civil service in agriculture in France’s former colonies. Many speak of these experiences as opening their eyes to the harsh realities of peoples in the Global South. Paysans also report feeling a sense of solidarity with the farmers they met and came to know in Africa. As one Confédération Paysanne farmer put it, “I went to Africa to help these poor farmers. But in the end, it was they who helped me. They taught me how to see the world in a new way entirely.” The decision to perform military civil service in former French colonies is directly linked to many Confédération Paysanne members’ roots in the JAC. These rural youths were following the modernist directive to become worldly by seeing lands beyond France, and they were following a religious mandate to help humanity through service and labor. In turn, Confédération Paysanne mem-

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bers’ international work during their early twenties also represents actors’
desire to assert their international solidarity with agricultural workers from
other countries, a mandate articulated in Marxist teachings associated with
the JAC. But, as many Confédération Paysanne members mentioned to me,
they found their experiences in Africa to be quite humbling; they felt that
they had been enriched by the experience.

**Gender and Heteronormativity at the Conf.**

Gender at the Confédération Paysanne constitutes a complex set of dy-
namics and questions that continue to elude my full understanding. At the
headquarters in Bagnolet, the national leadership of paysans is predomin-
nantly male. Among the salariers, however, there is gender parity, with both
men and women holding powerful positions. On the local level, women in
the Confédération Paysanne play an active role on the family farm. In addition
to taking on a range of arduous agricultural tasks, they often manage
family finances and maintain the daily rhythms associated with caring for
children, overseeing chores, and maintaining family life. In addition, out
of economic necessity, many women work part time off the farm (working
in cafés, driving school buses, or working in offices in nearby villages or
towns).

A common complaint I heard from women in the Confédération Paysanne
was that they felt left out of major decision-making meetings and bodies—
on both the local and national level. Many shared similar anecdotes about
having to watch what they say during local, regional, or national meetings.
Many expressed anxiety about being perceived as too forceful by male com-
rades in the union. Other women reported the problem of facing angry hus-
bands at home after meetings. According to several women in the union,
they feared being reprimanded for being too bold in public, thus shaming
their husbands. Over coffee one morning at a farm visit, the union member,
Agnes P., said to me, “Why even bother saying anything at a meeting? You
know if you disagree with your husband in a public meeting, you’re going to
ger yelled at when you get home.”

Finally, while some women do manage to be active in the union on a
local or regional level, few participate on the highest level of leadership.
The national secretariat is overwhelmingly male. When asked about this dy-
namic, men and women in the Confédération Paysanne reasoned that, be-
cause being a national secretary pulls farmers away from their families for up
to three nights a week for three to four years (to work at the headquarters), the job was simply beyond a woman’s reach. Women are assumed to hold primary responsibility for parenting children at home, so they are thought unable to spend extended or frequent periods away from home. Of the three women who were national representatives (of whom I am aware) since the union’s formation, one was single with no children. The other two were older with adult children who no longer lived at home. For many wives of national representatives, the familial decision for the husband to become a national representative is regarded as both an honor and a significant sacrifice. As Laurence G., the wife of a representative, said to me, “It’s like you just say, ‘Good-bye, see you in four years!’ You never see each other . . . and it’s hard on the kids too.”

Alongside a gendered dynamic at the Confédération Paysanne leadership, there also exists a related heteronormative ambiance. Homosexuality is generally not publicly discussed at the Confédération Paysanne, and I encountered no openly gay or lesbian couples or individuals in the union. This is not uncharacteristic of many Left-leaning (not to mention Right-leaning) organizations in France. While France is generally politically tolerant of homosexuals on a national level (it legalized civil unions in 1998), there remains a palpable awkwardness regarding homosexuality on a cultural level (Copley 1989). While I did not get the impression that Confédération Paysanne leaders would openly ostracize or criticize a gay or lesbian paysan, I could also appreciate the difficulty that a homosexual union member would have in coming out within the organization.

Conclusion

The Confédération Paysanne represents a hybrid entity. The union constitutes a distinctive and heterogeneous set of discourses and actors that have created novel understandings and practices of French agriculture. During the union’s first decade, we see it begin to clarify its vision and objectives, introducing them to the world of French agricultural policy. This is when we see the union develop and present a coherent agricultural program, Agriculture Paysan. By contextualizing the Confédération Paysanne within a broader Marxist and anarcho-syndicalist historical milieu, we can better appreciate the organization’s tendencies toward internationalism and decentralization. In turn, by locating the union within the history of May 1968 in
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France, we can gain a clearer understanding of the union’s special whimsical and witty culture and sensibility. The union represents a special coming together of various sets of actors, each located within fields of power, such as class, gender, and history. Yet despite the diversity of its constituency, the Confédération Paysanne proves capable of maintaining a clear and coherent image of a union with a set of shared solidaire objectives regarding how to reorganize the rural world according to a more solidarity-based logic.