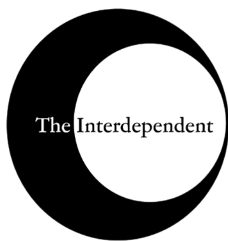
# The Seeds of Farmer Populism: French Food Politics, Productivist Agriculture, and the Shortfalls of Globalization

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*B.A. Global Liberal Studies, 2021 | New York University, New York*

*https://doi.org/10.33682/2pcf-t9a6*

**Abstract**

Over the past decade, populist politics have increasingly enthralled the French farming community, presenting farmers as a silenced, yet indispensable fabric of the French countryside. To assess the phenomenon of French farmer populism, the following questions will be addressed: What are the causes of rising populism among French farmers? What role have both material structures (government, policy, economy) and cultural institutions (French culinary heritage and peasant imaginary) played in promoting widespread rural backlash? Farmer populism in France will be analyzed with particular reference to the notion of gastronationalism, which marries the real expression of nationalist attitudes with the cultural posture of agro-food within a French context. This article argues that farmer frustration caused by structural power imbalances has manifested into (gastro)nationalist populism, characterized by the denouncement of policy-making institutions and the simultaneous reclamation of traditional *paysan* imaginary. Thus, the convergence of material and symbolic grievances, fueled by gastronationalism, is ultimately the distinguishing characteristic of peasant populism in France.

**Keywords**

Populism; Corporatism; Productivism; Agriculture; France; Gastronationalism; Marine LePen; José Bové; Jean-Luc Mélenchon

The once sprawling *paysan* (peasant) landscape of France, characterized by small, artisanal farms and traditional cultivation methods, has been replaced by consolidated, industrialized farming subject to stringent EU policies and manipulated by the primacy of profits. Since the post-war promotion of productivist agriculture, farmers throughout France are increasingly impacted by the power imbalances characterizing both domestic and external institutions. Struggling to maintain a semblance of wellbeing, French farmers have recently taken to the streets—and to the polls—to voice their grievances.

This article explores the principal conflicts that confront France's agricultural industry vis-à-vis the dominant structures within both domestic and international contexts. From globalization and national heritage, modernity and tradition, to the people versus the controlling elite, recent farmer mobilization within the political arena has assumed a complex, yet insightful posture which exposes not only flaws of the contemporary system, but also what is at stake. Farmers are resorting to widespread protests and cultivating vehement anti-EU stances in a community whose suicide rate is 20 percent greater than the national average (Michalopoulos). Furthermore, the Agricultural Mutual Assistance Association (MSA) determined that one-third of French farmers earn a mere €354 ($403) per month, below a third of France's net minimum wage (Wang; Le Parisien). France's political fabric is at risk, as well as the lives of farmers throughout the countryside.

The purpose of this research is to investigate the causes and complexities of struggling farmers and their contribution to the rise of populism within French rural communities. Two main questions are addressed: What are the causes of rising populism among French farmers? What role have both material structures (government, policy, economy) and cultural institutions (French culinary heritage and peasant imaginary) played in promoting widespread rural backlash?

This article argues that farmer frustration caused by structural power imbalances has manifested into (gastro)nationalist populism, characterized by the denouncement of elite policy-making actors and the simultaneous reclamation of traditional *paysan* imaginary. Thus, the convergence of material and symbolic grievances, fueled by gastronationalism, is ultimately the distinguishing characteristic of peasant populism in France.

The body of this research is organized into two main sections. The first section introduces the status of French populism particularly within rural, agrarian communities. This is followed by a discussion on the relationship between gastronomy and nationalism—or gastronationalism—and French agricultural tradition. The following section analyzes the structures at the core of farmers' populist backlash, establishing a direct causal link between the partisan institutional flaws and the political manifestation of farmer neglect. The first subsection explores domestic structures and corporatist theory, framing the rapport between the government and agricultural interest groups. This is followed by an analysis of external forces including the European Union and its Common Agricultural Policy.

## France's Rural Transformation

Since the wake of World War II, France's agricultural industry has undergone rampant transformation. Post-war productivist strategy from 1945 to 1960 accelerated agricultural mechanization, while 22 percent of French employment spread across 5.5 million farms (Coleman and Chiasson 168). Between 1960 and 1980, total agricultural production increased by over 70 percent (175), establishing France as the "third largest agricultural exporting country in the world" (175). The number of individual farmers decreased by 40 percent over this interval, while the farmer population further decreased three-fold by 2004 (Coleman and Chiasson 175; Hervieu and François 233). Overall agricultural output increased as the number of farms and farmers decreased and France's productivist regime became a key contributor to France's economy.[1]

More recently, between 2000 and 2010, the number of farms in France decreased from 600,000 to 490,000, while large-scale farms now comprise 60 percent of France's cultivated area (Labarthe 7). As Labarthe notes, small and medium farms are unable to compete with productivist

1 According to Lowe et al. (qtd. in Wilson), agricultural productivism is understood as "a commitment to an intensive, industrially driven and expansionist agriculture with state support based primarily on output and increased productivity. The concern [of productivism] was for 'modernization' of the 'national farm', as seen through the lens of increased production. By the 'productivist regime' we mean the network of institutions oriented to boosting food production from domestic sources which became the paramount aim of rural policy following World War II. These included not only the Ministry of Agriculture and other state agencies but the assemblage of input suppliers, financial institutions, R&D centres, etc., which facilitated the continued expansion of agricultural production" (78).

models and have been most affected by this shift (7). The transformation of France's agricultural paradigm begs a pertinent question: How did this shift—the consistent rise in farm sizes, decrease in number of farm(er)s, and increasing emphasis on productivist agriculture—occur?

While institutional transformations played a principal role in the industrialization and consolidation of France's agricultural industry, the ideology behind these transformations added fuel to the fire: "[R]ather than viewing farmers as a stratum harboring and preserving the fundamental values of civilization . . . farmers were recast as a profession that would feed the French population at the least cost, while also helping the country's balance of payments" (Coleman and Chiasson 172). As such, the once revered position of farmers within French society deteriorated in the name of efficiency and profit maximization. This shift, at least at the hands of the government and those pioneering industrial agriculture, would pave the way for an ideological impasse and subsequent polemic that persists today.

Meanwhile, the effects of neoliberal globalization—most notably the influence of the European Union—struck France's countryside during the last few decades of the 20th century. Prominent figures such as Jean-Marie Le Pen of France's far-right party le Front National (The National Front), or José Bové of far-left farmers' union la Confédération Paysanne (The Peasant Confederation) ascended the rural totem poles with their anti-globalization rhetoric, albeit on opposing ends of the political spectrum. While not limited to the agricultural industry, populism crept into France's rural fabric hinging on nationalist, anti-elitist politics; the impacts of corporatist decisions in Paris and neoliberal decisions in Brussels further charged rural and agrarian discontent. French farmer populism in particular is rooted not only in political grievance and elitist distrust, but also in France's dwindling socio-cultural adhesion to agricultural and culinary tradition, threatened by the evolving, increasingly productivist agro-alimentary paradigm.

While a first wave of contemporary populism swept France with Jean-Marie Le Pen in the 1980s and Jose Bové in the 1990s, this research concentrates on the more recent populist upsurge, dating roughly to the financial crisis of 2008 and France's 2017 presidential elections, until today. The establishment of this rural nationalist populism is nuanced with reference to gastronationalist

theory, highlighting the cultural framework that serves to both cause and exacerbate populist sentiments and populist rhetorical force. The connection between the reality of populism in France and the theory of gastronationalism underscores the unique stakes of populist proclivities among France's farming communities.

## Populism and French Farmers

In 2017, a Coface Political Risk Index assessing nations' social and political fragility rated France the second most populist country in the European Union, just behind the United Kingdom, based on factors of protectionism, national values, multiculturalism, and law and order (Bourekba; Daudier et al.). That same year, far-right populist leader Marine Le Pen of le Front National, or National Front (FN), won over one-third of the votes in the final round of France's presidential elections against current president Emmanuel Macron. In the first round, when Le Pen acquired 21.3 percent of the votes—compared to Macron's 24.01 percent—the far-left populist Jean-Luc Mélenchon of la France Insoumise (LFI) trailed closely behind at 19.58 percent (Statista). Nevertheless, Le Pen's ability to successfully qualify for the final round of elections demonstrates the electorate's increasing proclivity towards right-wing populist politics.

Saturnino M. Borras defines populism as "the deliberate act of aggregating disparate and even competing and contradictory class and group interests and demands into a relatively homogeneous voice" (3). This definition allows for the inclusion of both left and right populist manifestations, characterized by the construction of a "homogenous *us*" pinned against an "adversarial *them*" (i.e. the urban elite) (Mamonova and Franquesa 712). Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser view the most fundamental characteristic of populism as considering society "to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite'" (543).

Borras posits that the voices amassed under said *us*, or the collective populist body, often harbor myriad opinions. More significantly, Borras' definition targets the intersection between right-wing and agrarian populism, which—despite inherent differences—often end up working

synergistically. Moreover, it is agrarian populism which often coalesces into right-wing populism and ultimately reinforces it, unified under one discourse.

Our understanding of populism can be further nuanced through Dani Rodrik's 2018 article titled "Populism and the Economics of Globalization," in which the delineation between the demand and supply sides of populism is established.[2] For Rodrik, "distributional and other economic fault lines . . . generate potential public support for movements that position themselves outside the political mainstream and oppose established rules of the game" (13). As such, the populist base is cultivated by the cleavages created through institutional failures.

Despite populist rhetoric appearing on all sides of the political spectrum, the fundamental differences between right and left populism within France merit attention. Right-wing populism, embodied in Marine Le Pen and what is currently called the National Rally party, favors authoritarianism, the nation over the cosmopolitan ideal, protectionism over international cooperation, and tradition over progressive values (Mamonova and Franquesa 713). While the RN's nativist approach often assumes a xenophobic posture, Le Pen's economic ideology alludes to a hybrid Keynesian economic populism, combining regulation and redistribution, leftist pro-working-class measures, and certain liberal policies for small businesses and entrepreneurs (Ivaldi 6). Meanwhile, Ivaldi contends that the dominant radical left party, la France Insoumise, led by Jean-Luc Mélenchon, explicitly positions itself as "an alternative to neoliberal hegemony" (4). While the "financial oligarchy" appears more prevalent among LFI's targeted adversaries, although still prominent within RN rhetoric, LFI's proposed solutions hinge more on ecology, egalitarianism, and multiculturalism (Ivaldi 4). For example, the ecological farmers' union la Confédération Paysanne closely aligns with Mélenchon because of his advocacy for agricultural sustainability. Despite their starkly opposed ideologies, the RN and LFI ultimately battle the same institutions, assembling the *people* against political, economic, and financial urban elites. In which case, the "adversarial them" are predominantly the very same people or institutions: France's Paris-centric, Jacobin ruling body; neoliberal globalization; and the European Union.

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2 Rodrik, an economist, employs the terms demand and supply to refer to the populist base and populist leaders and discourses respectively; this analysis will simply reference the base and the leaders.

In 2017, a CEVIPOF (Sciences Po's Political Research Center) poll determined that 35 percent of farmers voted for Le Pen, compared to 26 percent of the total population; a mere 2 percent of self-identified socialist farmers leaned towards leftist Mélenchon (Cotton; Bourke). For farmers already subject to costly regulations, the shift towards Mélenchon's sustainable agriculture appears unviable given the financial crisis at play. Meanwhile, the CEVIPOF survey found that 51 percent of farmers involved would not vote at all. This is particularly shocking, as François Purseigle notes, since farmers historically voted the most of any group in France, showing up to the polls "like they went to mass" (Cotton). With an increasing influence of the EU on agricultural policy, coupled with recent trade deals like the heavily-protested CETA (EU-Canada Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement), farmers are desperately seeking recourse, or losing hope entirely (Allemandou).

By many individuals within agriculture, these institutions have failed in their duty to support and protect rural farming communities. Both Le Pen and Mélenchon have effectively upheld the anti-establishment position of rural communities within their respective rhetoric, vowing to counteract the policies and institutions which have afflicted farmers of all ranks. However, the leaders are categorically opposed on most issues, including sustainability. Mélenchon's agricultural propositions are outlined in his plan titled "Pour Une Agriculture Écologique Et Paysanne" ("For an Ecological and Peasant Agriculture") which declares that "productivist agriculture destroys everything: the ecosystem, the health of consumers and that of peasants" (Levard and Seymard 6). The document posits that "submission to free-market and free-trade, ultra-specialization, agricultural gigantism, and chemical pesticides" is the principal fault of the current paradigm, contributing to climate change and wreaking havoc on the health of the land and those who cultivate it (6). While international and domestic policies are antagonized by Mélenchon, Marine Le Pen appears to focus her agricultural politics more emphatically on vilifying structural failures. The RN concentrates on appealing to the plight of farmers and the injustices begotten from European policies, increased (and cheaper) imports, and the increasing capitalist penetration of the agricultural industry in France. As a result, Le Pen appears to garner far more support than Mélenchon within

farming communities; farmers turning to Le Pen, even from traditionally socialist and communist voters, is a generally accepted stylized fact (Chazan; Vinocur). One explanation for farmers' right-leaning inclination is rooted in the discourse of agribashing, a key term employed by farmers and farmers' unions in recent years.

Agribashing designates the phenomenon of unfairly targeting the agricultural industry for issues of climate change, animal welfare, and human health; agribashing is seen as a systemic denigration that, instead of simply targeting big industry, has been extended to the entire agricultural community (Chambres d'Agriculture). Agribashing is a key rhetorical tool that works to engage farmer pathos, particularly for the dominant farmers' union Fédération Nationale des Syndicats d'Exploitants Agricoles (National Federation of Farmers Unions, or FNSEA). For FNSEA, agribashing is employed as an umbrella term, amassing each unique perceived attack—environmental policies, animal welfare, unjust remuneration, et cetera—into one "generalized problem" (Van Der Ploeg 602). Following Macron's political and ecological reforms in 2019, farmers throughout France drove their tractors into Paris to protest the unfair impact of such reforms on agriculture. Close to one-thousand tractors arrived with posters reading "Macron, réponds ! #sauvetonpaysan" (Respond, Macron! #saveyourpeasant), and "je produis, je nourris, je meurs" (I'm producing, I'm feeding, I'm dying) (Chiarello and Libert).

Yet, as Van Der Ploeg asserts, the agribashing generalization inadequately addresses, or even distracts from, the actual problem at hand; it lumps together farmers across all politico-economic backgrounds and ignores the very power struggles and injustices that exist within the agricultural community. Compounding a collection of issues and farmer interests under one primary discourse, agribashing "draws on, and further galvanizes, generalized feelings of grievance and neglect," which is exploited by leaders like Marine Le Pen as a successful strategy in acquiring farmer support (Van Der Ploeg 598). Ultimately, in the wake of agricultural industrialization and increasing regulation by governmental institutions, the emotional appeal of agribashing embodies and further engenders farmer discontent and proclivities towards populist politics.

## Gastronationalism

Nationalism is a core tenet of French populism, which—despite assuming different forms—is indispensable to platforms on both the right and left. While nativist and jingoist ideologies form the backbone of Le Pen's politics, demonstrated in 'France First' economic policies and a fierce aversion toward immigration, pro-France ideology has also become increasingly prevalent among the far-left (Ivaldi 7). According to nationalist leaders, France's ideology, culture, and citizens must be prioritized against a backdrop of external threats (i.e. globalization). While Mélenchon continuously referenced the "homeland" during his 2017 presidential campaign, Marine Le Pen explicitly stated, "this presidential election features two opposite projects—the 'globalist' choice represented by all my opponents . . . and the 'patriotic' choice which I personify" (Ivaldi 7; FN).

Populism is on the rise as a result of "pessimism and feelings of despair and helplessness [which] negatively affect the propensity for collective action in the countryside" (Mamonova and Franquesa 721). Populist leaders present the farmers and rural dwellers as a silenced, yet indispensable fabric of the French countryside. As a result, disenfranchised farmer populations have increasingly turned to populist politicians who vocalize the very pessimism spreading throughout agrarian landscapes.

Although farmers appear to be most concerned with politico-economic instability and inequality, the cultural posture of French agriculture and the symbolic acclaim of the *paysan* imaginary are salient features of farmer mentality. The cultural facet of farmer ideology can be conceptualized through gastronationalism, which "buttresses national identity against perceived threats from outsiders who wish to eliminate certain objects or practices'' relating to the agro-alimentary arena (DeSoucey, "Gastronationalism" 448). This buttressing is not done simply through populist rhetoric or policy; food becomes an axis around which nationalist discourse is both projected and reflected. Gastronationalism appears to be in direct opposition to the globalized world order, perceived as a threat that undermines the unique culinary history and identity of *La Grande Nation*. Similar to the rise of xenophobic nationalism, gastronationalism is driven by mechanisms of both tangible and symbolic displacements of French society, culture, and, for our

purposes, traditional agriculture (DeSoucey, "Gastronationalism" 449).

Gastronationalism is fundamental for national identity and pride, as French cuisine has long been leveraged as a political tool on a domestic and transnational scale. This very dynamic—garnering domestic pride through food and exporting said culinary prowess for international eminence—remains the principal pillar of gastronationalism within France's political context. As of 2010, French cuisine has been recognized under UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage list, while French chefs Alain Ducasse and Joël Robuchon boast the greatest number of Michelin stars obtained worldwide (Samuel; McCarthy). Gastronomy à *la Française* has been exported internationally and French products such as wine, cheese, and foie gras are held in high esteem by food-lovers across the globe. The French government has intentionally protected and continues to encourage the distinction of French cuisine and agricultural products. Take, for example, the French appellation labels, a prominent gastronationalist convention. Through assigning origin qualifications to producers of selected agricultural products (like the *appellation d'origine contrôlée*), the French government seeks to protect the reputational superiority of certain products and producers from equivalents elsewhere.

Nonetheless, the culinary and agricultural arenas are equally susceptible to transformation in an increasingly globalized world. Furthermore, "gastronationalism . . . reflects and refracts social conditions under which market-based identities engage with national boundaries, the public recognition of difference, and the importance of community. Its myriad consequences for consumers, interest groups, and policymakers, however, remains to be seen" (DeSoucey, "Gastronationalism" 449).

This quote is fundamental in understanding gastronationalism and its rapport with the French agricultural community's political climate. DeSoucey demonstrates both the causes of and responses to the current market-driven, socio-political status quo. Under the larger scope of French social conditions, market-based identities—whether those of small farms or large agricultural firms—find themselves either combatting or reinforcing the productivist and globalized paradigm.

Gastronationalism tangibly defends the agro-alimentary arena from competitive and

cultural threats, while also more passively reflecting the social and cultural dimensions braced with these threats. Therefore, gastronationalism claims a dual purpose, assuming an explicit, tangible form (e.g. origin labels) while also reflecting, or refracting, how social, political, and economic identities react and interact with food on a symbolic level. DeSoucey states that "by using food as a material vehicle of national identity, gastronationalism meshes the power and resources of cultural, political, and economic identities as they shape and are shaped by institutional protections" ("Gastronationalism" 448).

In tandem with cuisine, *paysan* imaginary has been historically utilized in French history to symbolize national ideals. Sarah Waters asserts that the rhetorical power of peasant farming has often arisen in moments of societal tension and transformation, or even crisis (10). Furthermore, she argues that "where globalization was seen to destroy all social bonds, peasant farming offered an ideal community rooted in rural life. It became an antidote to all the evils of a malevolent globalizing world, one in which identity was reaffirmed, tradition preserved, and social bonds restored" (114).

As peasant farming appears to protect the nation under threat, and consuming traditional food is "a means to participate in the idea of a nation," the symbolism of the *paysan* and food's nationalist posture demonstrates a principle tenet of French farmer populism (DeSoucey, *Contested Tastes* 71). Assigning farmers with symbolic power further engenders tensions among agrarian communities when their apparent exaltation is met with institutional neglect, abandoned by the very structures that are meant to protect them.

Sarah Waters highlights that globalization is often viewed as "a wholesale assault on [...] the essence of Frenchness itself" (97). Embodied in and reflected by gastronationalist theory, French farmers tangibly and symbolically nourish the nation, promoting unity and pride through the *paysan* imaginary and products like foie gras. While the *paysan* is often called upon in times of crises, the *paysan* is also experiencing its very own crisis. French farmers are materially threatened by globalization itself, embodied in free trade, economic integration, and capitalist corporate governance. The neglect of these institutions fuel gastronationalist reactions among the farming

community and are indispensable to our analysis of farmer populism as a whole.

**Institutional Actors and Agricultural Interest Groups**

As agriculture has faced transformations in technology and scale, the institutions that influence food production have too evolved over the past few decades. This section conducts a two-tiered analysis of both domestic and international institutions at the core of the populist farmer polemic. The first subsection outlines the evolution of France's agricultural policy-making structures, examining the influence of corporatism as a causal factor of farmer discontent. Then, the gaze will shift outwards in order to assess how international agents like the European Union are implicated in French agricultural policy and the subsequent rise of populism within the farming community.

## Domestic Interest Groups

While the agricultural industry has long been significant for the French economy, contemporary policies have increasingly emphasized productivism, working closely with interest groups such as large farmers' unions and corporate associations to consolidate this goal. William Coleman and Christine Chiasson provide a useful synthesis of the evolution of these interest groups and their rapport with the French government over the past fifty years, discussing the government's ability to effectively adapt to the transforming, globalized world. In this process, France constructed a corporatist system—from an exclusive relationship with the FNSEA to a multipartite interest group structure—establishing the trajectory of state-sector relations until today.

The history of French agricultural transformation and policy-making can be divided into three distinct periods. The first comprises the shift towards industrialized and productivist agriculture following World War II, with the emergence of a corporatist regime alongside the FNSEA. The second period, beginning in the 1990s, is characterized by a transition to neoliberalism, involving greater diversity of interest groups such as la Confédération Paysanne. The final period,

under full-scale neoliberal globalization and the rise of large corporations, is distinguished by the contemporary neo-corporatist structure in which the respective roles of interest and advisory groups are contractualized, delegated, and highly fragmented.

As agriculture transformed after World War II, the French government understood that an effective transition to productivism required a close relationship with extra-governmental agents, including sectoral interest groups and bureaucratic agencies (Coleman and Chiasson 171). Meanwhile, farmers' organizations and unions were beginning to develop throughout the country. One such union, the FNSEA, was keen on abandoning the small farming model, adopting a pro-modernization approach to agriculture (173). In the 1960s, Agriculture Minister Jacques Chirac established a system of *co-gestion* (co-management) with the FNSEA, deemed "the state's privileged partner" (173). This rapport is the primary contemporary instance of state-sectoral relationships within agro-food, "where representatives of the state and of farmers collaborate to define agricultural policy and to implement the policies agreed upon to realize those goals'' (173). The co-management structure between the government and the FNSEA kickstarted the corporatist system which facilitated the rise of agricultural modernization and productivism.

Meanwhile, publicly funded banks like Crédit Agricole were in charge of financing the modernization initiatives, as the state created programs to help "less viable" farmers exit the field. In other words, the government promoted industrialized farmers while encouraging small farmers to retreat (Coleman and Chiasson 173). Furthermore, the prerequisites for state-issued financial support were tightened, as the government thwarted small farms from acquiring loans by establishing a minimum qualifying farm size (174). In 1987, Crédit Agricole was privatized, established as an autonomous entity in respect to the state. With financial interests dominating the bank's business model, Crédit Agricole transformed into a profit-generating, commercial enterprise favoring larger, industrial agriculture which promised greater financial gains than smaller farms (179). To apply for a government loan, farmers were required to provide a comprehensive business plan as well as adhere to the stringent conditions already in place (179). Thus, large, industrialized farmers came to benefit from the FNSEA-dominated government as small farmers were systematically

disincentivized and left unsupported from the government that once exalted them.

Meanwhile, la Confédération Paysanne (CP) began to acquire traction throughout many farming communities. The CP, situated on the political left, "took a more social and environmentalist perspective," adopting a vehement anti-globalization and anti-market liberalization approach to both agricultural and political life (Coleman and Chiasson 179). By 1996, the government broke its exclusive ties with the FNSEA and established a bi-partite structure with the two opposing unions (179). This event marks the transition from strict corporatist governance to a more diverse structure under which nascent neoliberal ideologies came to dominate. Under the newfound paradigm, the government necessitated an organizational reorientation, more inclusive of diverse interests and advising services, thus paving the way for the neo-corporatist structure to emerge

Before drawing our attention back to the contemporary status of state-interest group relations, it is necessary to outline corporatist theory as a lens through which these dynamics can be further nuanced and understood. According to Philippe Schmitter, corporatism is "a concrete, observable general system of interest representation which is "compatible" with several regime-types" (92). Schmitter's adapted definition is useful in that it is orientated around the praxis of corporatism. The author alleviates the discussion from being pinned to any specific political regime or ideology and broadens its reach to be more widely applied to, in this case, the group-state mechanisms at play within France's agricultural industry. The corporatist model resurged during the 1970s, particularly in Europe, as "a new way to represent sectoral interest" within a capitalist context (Saurugger 1). Considered to be a "path to modernity," neo-corporatism can be an inherent and necessary perpetuator of capitalism. As stated by Schmitter:

> The more the modern state comes to serves as the indispensable and authoritative guarantor of capitalism by expanding its regulative and integrative tasks, the more it finds that it needs the professional expertise, specialized information, prior aggregation of opinion, contractual capability and deferred participatory legitimacy which only singular, hierarchically ordered, consensually led representative monopolies can provide. (Schmitter 111).

France's corporatism is aggregated by sector, as opposed to being concentrated on a national or

social level (Schmitter 91).[3] Joseph Szarka cites the FNSEA as a primary example of French corporatism, an "archetype," highlighting its exclusive relationship with "a specialized segment of the administration," while excluding "other social actors and arms of government," and thus "posing an underlying political problem" (Dard 91). While traditional corporatism seeks hierarchical harmony between class structures, France's sector-based corporatist model fails to recognize that no one interest, or group of interests, can effectively speak for each respective sectoral hierarchy. The predominant implication of France's agricultural corporatist model is that the dominant interest groups involved in corporatist policy-making enforce the interests of productivist, profit-driven actors that consolidate France as an agricultural powerhouse within the context of neoliberal capitalism.

The National Association for Agricultural Development (ANDA), responsible for fostering the FNSEA's authority, was dissolved in 2006 due to a lack of diversity and attention to public interest. As a result, France's Ministry of Agriculture was left responsible solely for allocating government funds, essentially leaving advising institutions to their own devices. The role of sectoral actors was reoriented, departing from strict corporatist governance to a neo-corporatist system of delegation and contractualization.

Consequently, the decentralization of the FNSEA-dominated corporatist model has endowed individual advisory groups with increased policy influence within their respective cause. This poses a problem given the complexity of France's contemporary agricultural advisory network, consisting of Chambers of Agriculture on regional and departmental levels, two state-funded university research institutions, non-profit organizations, interest group associations, and private sector consulting services. Among these advisory institutions, the Ministry of Agriculture spends about €5 billion per year (Labarthe 11).

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3 Saurugger claims that France is "categorized as a weak corporatist state in some policy areas, in particular agriculture" (3). However, she notes that it is often considered "corporatist in a classical sense" (Saurugger 4). Joseph Szarka's article *Environmental Policy and Neo-Corporatism in France* places France within the spectrum of meso- and neocorporatism, leaning more towards a meso-corporatist qualification. With this being said, it is important to reiterate that this research does not seek to answer the question: is France a corporatist state? And if so, what form of corporatism? Instead, this research employs corporatism as a framework through which France's group-state structure can be understood and theorized, while underscoring certain implications.

Many of these organizations existed prior to the neo-corporatist restructuring, but the resulting interest group fragmentation has posed new challenges. During the FNSEA's corporatist monopoly, there was greater cooperation, or at least "little competition," between advisory actors and agricultural institutions, all performing their distinguished tasks (Labarthe 30). However, within the decentralized, neo-corporatist structure, each actor performs their task independently, therefore restricting the distribution of information on certain issues to each actor's respective constituency. Overlap in research and advice has obstructed the government's ability to unify and implement their advisors' information on a policy level. With less regulatory control and information equity among farming groups, private sector interests have successfully intervened in the research, advising, and implementation of agricultural knowledge.

The case of pesticides—particularly glyphosate—is useful in understanding the neo-corporatist dynamic within French agriculture (Luneau 27-28). Given the well-studied ecological and health implications of glyphosate and pesticides in general, France has a complex, often ambivalent relationship with their utilization. The CP, for example, vehemently opposes the use of glyphosate, and current president Emmanuel Macron pledged to phase out glyphosate on most farms by 2021 (Connexion France). However, many influential proponents of pesticides circumvent glyphosate's risks to emphasize its positive and profit-maximizing effects on agriculture. In the case of glyphosate, the economy is favored over human health and biodiversity—all so that industrialized agriculture can continue on with its current processes.

The advisory and interest group structure within agriculture, despite its attempt to ameliorate small farm support, systematically benefits the largest actors the most. As stated by Labarthe, "even though the number of farms is decreasing, . . . there is no evidence to suggest [farmers] have better access to services than 10 years ago" (31). Without more "collective organizations [in] farming," sidelined groups, such as small farmers or migrant workers, find themselves further marginalized and struggling to acquire sufficient support (Labarthe 31). As neo-corporatism is generally understood to favor big business, the case of France demonstrates how political domination and financial gains take precedence over effective and equitable management of the

farming community as a whole.

Authors Anna Van Der Vleuten and Gerry Alons argue, however, that agricultural groups within the French corporatist structure have less legislative power than often believed. Recent agricultural policy has been orientated around France's self-identification as *La Grande Nation*; while France aims to appear inclusive within the realm of agricultural advising and legislation, policy-makers' main goal is to maintain the country's politico-economic status. Van der Vleuten and Alons dismiss the very real symbolic and political influence of leading interest groups, yet one important concession is established: interest groups in France only assert influence over domestic policy. As France is under strict regulation from the European Union and international trade agreements, the role of international policy-makers and interest groups limits the influence of even dominant French bodies.

## Globalization and Its Backlash

While France's domestic policy and interest group relations contribute to farmer marginalization, neoliberal globalization—embodied in the European Union and the productivist, free-trade paradigm—has notably impacted both agricultural policy and farmer upheaval. While certain farming groups, such as the CP, have assumed an anti-globalization stance since the late 1980s, the anti-globalization rhetoric upheld by the RN and LFI has amplified significantly during the 21st century. The aim of this section is to demonstrate how the European Union's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and the implications of neoliberalism have influenced the farming population and their respective outburst against globalization.

The Common Agricultural Policy was enacted by the EU in 1962. Although the goals of the CAP have varied over time, its current focus is seemingly oriented around protecting the environment and supporting farmers' livelihoods—while also improving agricultural productivity (Mamonova and Franquesa 723). From 2014-2020, the CAP's priorities were "promoting greater competitiveness, efficient use of public goods, food security, respect of the environment and action against climate change, and social and territorial equilibrium" (Nazarro and Marotta 1). The two

pillars of CAP policy are "direct payments and market measures," e.g. income support, as well as "rural development" ("Common Agricultural Policy"). These goals comprise the European Union's aim to encourage greater rural inclusion in light of globalization and greater diversity of agricultural production due to EU expansion.

In addition to policy-making, the CAP provides EU member countries with agricultural subsidies. In 2021, the CAP represented 33.1 percent of the European Union's total budget, at €55.71 billion (Nègre). Within this budget, approximately 93.5 percent is directed towards the first pillar—direct payments and market measures—with the remainder falling into the hands of regional actors to control rural development. France has long been the greatest beneficiary of the CAP, acquiring 16.9 percent of the annual budget in 2018. A European Commission report, "Financing of the CAP," highlights how France's high percentage of large farms and agricultural firms grants the country greater funding relative to member states with lower concentrations of scaled, productivist agriculture. CAP subsidies are distributed primarily on the basis of farm size, resulting in the largest, and often most financially viable farms acquiring a disproportionate amount of aid. This funding scheme results in a disparity between large and small farms and arguably undermines the EU's push towards rural development and greater inclusion of diverse production methods.

In an article by Aurélie Catallo for the Agricultural and Rural Convention 2020, "a platform for organizations working together for good food, good farming and better rural policies in the EU," the weaknesses of the CAP in France are brought to light (ARC2020). With funding distribution based on size, many farms have intentionally expanded, causing "unwarranted earnings and an incentive to enlarge business" (Catallo). Against the goals of the CAP, France has done little to address ecological concerns, often undermining sustainable endeavors, such as allowing maize monocrop and pesticide use in ecologically-protected areas (Catallo). As Catallo posits, administrative mismanagement by the French government and the European Union has "contributed to the damaging of the image of the CAP in the eyes of its beneficiaries and those of citizens." The Common Agricultural Policy has also led to waste of both goods and funding; in

France, ineffective distribution of CAP funds alone depletes around 6.7 percent of the country's total allocation (Debating Europe).

As the neoliberal model of productivity is implemented on a macro-level, the complex network of arrangements between interest groups, national governments, corporatism, and the European Union acts in effect to halt competition, often neglecting economic indicators. For example, the "wine lake" of 2005-2007 saw the overproduction and devaluation of wine caused by CAP subsidies, particularly in France's Languedoc-Roussillon region (Wyatt). However, following the wine surplus legislatively geared for exportation, the CAP overhauled many vineyard subsidies, leaving the majority of small vineyards without proper funding. Winemaker Bernard Richard of Château Fourton La Garenne stated: "It's a catastrophe. What's happening now is that those in charge want to get rid of us, the smaller producers, so that France will be left only with the big wine producers, who can compete with the Americans or the Australians" (Wyatt). Richard, the voice of many farmers throughout France, was forced to sell his family home in order to maintain his business.

While a wine surplus plagued French viticulture in the early 2000s, the butter shortage in 2017 demonstrates another set of problems that arises in moments of limited supply. As noted by Buyi Wang, the EU rescinded its milk quota which aimed to limit the overproduction of dairy products in 2015. In removing the quota to promote greater production in light of increased global demand, the prices of butter began to tumble. As prices fell, many farmers exited the market, thus creating a chute in overall production. In response, France contracted a fixed butter price annually; while market prices tripled from 2016 to 2017, the amount farmers were paid remained stagnant regardless of market trends. Meanwhile, large supermarket chains continued to charge consumers at market prices and refused to increase their own purchasing prices from farmers. Monopolistic supermarket chains saw healthy profit margins as farmers struggled to keep up (Wang).

The mixed system of market forces, government regulations, and various actors like corporatist groups and supermarket chains creates a conflict between industry interests and governmental policies in which the farmers are overlooked. In the case of the butter shortage,

French and European policy—faced with competing interests—failed to protect farmers and big industry reaped all the benefits.

While promoting productivity is necessary in order for the EU to maintain its position as the world's leading agro-food exporter, with exports valued at €138 billion in 2018, increased imports have caused another crucial tension among farmers (Rosario and Robin). A July 2019 INRA (National Institute of Agronomic Research) report found that France's agricultural import value actually exceeded that of its European neighbors (Ledsom). Whereas Macron vied for increasing prices on French products, Christiane Lambert, president of the FNSEA, highlighted in *The Times* that "[Macron] told us to go upmarket but in the first six months of [2019] we imported a lot more poultry from Poland and Germany because it's cheaper" (Ledsom). Because of the discrepancy between French-grown and imported food prices, Ledsom underscores how French people are struggling to purchase domestic products. Unable to compete with prices from Eastern Europe and international markets, farmers cannot make sufficient returns on their production, and simultaneously lack income support from CAP funds. Ultimately, the rise of globalized trade—promoting productivism for export markets while undermining the domestic market with imports—along with general distrust in the European Union, is further exacerbating farmer malaise and the shift towards protectionist populist tendencies.

The upsurge in populist politics can be traced to the fact that economic integration and globalized trade only benefit the few. Rodrik argues that "trade generally produces losers" (3). In theory, the gains from trade could be used in part to compensate for the losses of negatively affected actors, although this often fails in reality (Rodrik 4). In this sense, neoliberal laissez-faire economics do not actually work; trade agreements are founded on political and business agendas, "shifting the bargaining power" from farmers and agro-food workers to monopolistic firms and dominant political bodies (Rodrik 7, 16). Thus, Rodrik establishes a direct correlation between the rise in globalized trade and the decline of political influence of labor groups. In the case of European and French agriculture, farmers not only lack a political say, but are left unequipped to deal with the consequences that globalized trade has imposed on them. Even though inequality

is widely understood to be inevitable, Rodrik asserts that it is the lack of fairness that engenders political and emotional backlash (7). It is this very rhetoric of unfairness that is harnessed by French populist leaders in their anti-neoliberal globalization stances.

In the case of France, there are both tangible and symbolic connections between the rise of globalization and the subsequent rise of nationalism among populist groups. It is irresponsible and inexpedient to negate the causation between European neoliberalism and globalized trade with the rise in populism. Economic integration and globalization historically and continuously detriment farmers throughout France. While globalization may be a convenient scapegoat, the tenable impacts of and reactions to globalization demonstrate that it is far more than a rhetorical doormat. In the case of French agriculture, globalization—embodied in and promoted by the European Union and the productivist, free-trade paradigm of the French government—leaves many farmers throughout France without the proper resources or infrastructure to meet the needs of an increasingly capitalist, productivist, trade-oriented economy. Thus, globalization is not just a discursive tool for populist leaders like Le Pen; it is also a tangible cause of reactionary nationalist and populist sentiments resulting from economic, political, and symbolic detriment.

Breton pig farmer Bertrand Hourdel represents the many farmers demonstrating vehement support for Le Pen's plan to exit the European Union and establish France's own system of subsidies and quotas (Chazan). Hourdel, who receives €40,000 per year from the CAP, recognizes that his aid is inadequate given the rise in regulatory expenses and increasing competition from European neighbors. In fact, France's emphasis on ecological reform and social welfare, combined with stricter EU regulation, renders French agricultural production costs relatively higher than those of its CAP competitors like Spain and Eastern Europe that are less affected by costly regulations on both domestic and European scales. Meanwhile, farmers throughout France supply the European Union with CAP funds through taxes; for farmers themselves, the system has proven unsustainable and unfair. As Hourdel expressed: "The EU has tied us up in a straitjacket of regulations so we can't compete . . . The only candidate who's talking about confronting the situation head-on, really changing it, is Marine Le Pen" (Chazan).

## Conclusion

French farmers are casualties of globalized trade, marginalized through economic integration, the process of globalization, and the dominance of productivist interest groups within France's domestic context. Faced with financial distress, policy burden, and social exclusion—as their imaginary is exploited for the agricultural industry at large—many French farmers desperately seek recourse, or have disengaged entirely.

The case of populism among farmers is particularly charged as French cultural heritage and traditional ideals are projected onto the agricultural industry, with the French peasant as a symbolic bastion of national pride. Productivist agriculture and neoliberal globalization are perceived to undermine this peasant imaginary and traditional French ideology; it is precisely this anti-globalization discourse championed by populist leaders like Marine Le Pen. However, the threat to French agriculture is not strictly symbolic. Institutional factors, like France's corporate interest-group structure and the EU's Common Agricultural Policy, are essential contributors to the spread of populist sympathies. It is the very convergence of symbolic and politico-economic factors that distinguishes farmer populism in France.

The rise of populism is not unique to France, nor its farming community. With Eurosceptic, populist movements sweeping Europe, this article offers a comprehensive methodological approach—albeit on a micro scale—that may provide insight to future research on nationalist and populist outbreaks. We are experiencing a larger pattern of reactionary politics driven by the impacts of economic integration and the globalized neoliberal paradigm. While farmer populism is a response to the concurrent effects of gastronationalist symbolism and institutional neglect, the combination of ideological and tangible causes appears ubiquitous for the populist cause. The comprehensive socio-political, economic, and symbolic approach adopted for the analysis of farmer populism may be extended as a framework to understand other distinct cases.

Reactionary politics and discontentment of the neoliberal world order are not sparked overnight, but are exacerbated through long-standing institutional faults and the compounding impacts of globalization. The case of burgeoning populism among France's agricultural community

demonstrates that the levers driving this political upheaval have been in motion for decades. The consequent reactions are just now disrupting France's political fabric.

Champions of the globalized, capitalist paradigm seek to dismiss Le Pen's populism. This article does not actively side with France's populist leaders, but it emphatically argues that it is the very globalized, productivist paradigm enacted by the French government that planted the seeds for farmer populism decades ago, as a pathway to agricultural hegemony. For the agricultural community, gastronationalism may orient itself towards protectionist, populist politics, but it is also inherent to farmer identity. Ultimately, for interest groups and institutional entities, gastronationalist maneuvers should be oriented towards protecting not only the *paysan* imaginary and economic superiority, but the *paysans* themselves. Populism is not the principal problem, but a reaction to the myriad problems created and fostered by the globalized, productivist, and neoliberal status quo. Thus, the first step in remedying farmer populism should be to identify and rectify its very seeds.

**Acknowledgments**

This is a revised excerpt of my senior thesis. I would first like to thank my thesis advisor, Professor Johann Jaeckel, for his unwavering guidance and support, and all of my NYU instructors for their exemplary instruction, inspiration, and encouragement, without whom this thesis would not have been possible. Lastly, I would like to acknowledge *The Interdependent* staff for their thoughtful edits and comments.

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