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From Village Associations to an Agro-Industrial District: a Mountain Story?

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Introduction

- 1 Farmer co-operatives played a major role in the industrialization of agriculture, especially after the French agricultural orientation laws of 1960 and 1962. These co-operatives contributed to a soft transition towards an industrial-oriented farming (Gaignette and Nieddu, 2000). In Franche-Comté, the co-operation network not only played this role but its specificities helped setting up an original form of network for a milk production industrial system. For three hundred and fifty years, if not seven hundred, the *fruitières* as collective cheese-making enterprises, occupied the Jura mountains involving farmers for producing a marketable cooked pressed cheese. Their “modernization”, that is to say, their assimilation to the new rules of the modern state born in the nineteenth century, enabled the economic survival of the area. The long lasting of this socio-economic object, to be questioned here, suggests the construction of an operational and adaptable socio-economic organization suited to changing contexts.

Chronology: 1264-2000

Invention. 1264-1680

A word: *fruitière*

- 2 When it appears in the archives, the nature of the *fruitière* is however implicit from the word. *Fruitière* is formed from the radical *fructus*, which primarily meant, for Latin authors of the first century BC, the right to use (*usus*) and benefit (*fructus*) from an asset

you do not own. The medieval farming practices fit in this model: the lord owns the property, the peasant uses it and gets the *fructus*, which is partially taxed by the lord. In the Jura mountains, the word *fruitière* is applied to a form of cheese production, with milk produced from roaming herds throughout the village's land (*finage*) or dedicated pastures (common wastelands and moors at the margins of crops; lord's lands). In these mountains, a collective type of *fruitière* was always associated with the collective exploitation of pastures and meadows (commons).

A practice: Cheese making

- 3 Since the fourteenth century, cheese has been the major income of these territories. A gradually increasing demand from remote consumers (urban development) and concomitant technical improvement (hard pressed cheeses; size increase of pieces; longer ripening) made the cheese become more competitive on their markets. The *gruyère* brand (Swiss Cheese), which developed in the seventeenth century, was used in an area far wider than the Swiss region, towards the Northern Alps and Jura mountains. From 1650 onwards, these cheeses were exported to wider market areas, Geneva, Lyon and Mediterranean cities. The rise of the transatlantic trade in the same period greatly benefited this cheese production.

A society: the neighborhood

- 4 The development of this value chain by the socio-economic institution called *fruitière* took place in the European Middle Ages society, characterized by the breeding of many collective initiatives (Ostrom, 1990). In Franche-Comté, the first writing of traditional oral rights approved by the authorities appeared in the thirteenth century in the mountainous areas (Corriol, 2009). It underlines the importance of local communities living in hamlets in newly cleared lands (*Waldhufendörfer*). Such solidarity rules shape the way the community managed collective life: collective and shared farming works, collective bakery (common ovens), or family control (dowry) (Truchis de Varenne, 1900). The *fruitière* was born of these "neighbors associations" that are so fundamental in medieval Europe (Toulgouat, 1981).
- 5 The concept of *fruitière* developed in a rural community system. This self-organization contributed continuously the difficult tradeoff between "population, herd and land" in a sustainable way (Crettaz, 1990). The *fruitière* concretized all aspects of the village society: material (an economic self-regulation, a technological approach to the world), symbolic (power issues in everyday life, the relationship in and out the community) and imaginary (a sense of time, narratives).

"Faire fruitière": milk lending

- 6 Building a community around cheese making used to be a seasonal ritual, renewed each year. In February, the communities' aldermen gathered the heads of families of the parish to launch one or more *fruitières*. A cheese-maker was hired for the season to make and ripen the cheeses. He was also responsible for the quality control of the milks. Farmers started to merge milks in March or April. Milk was brought twice daily by each member, and was carefully recorded to determine the rotation of cheese making amongst producers (*le tour*). One by one, the producers hosted the cheese-making process, and earned the right to get the sale amount of the cheese hereby

produced. In short, each producer "lent" his milk production to his neighbors, who shall "return" it to him in due time. In November, weighing the cheese produced over the season and selling it meant the closure of the *fruitière*. Each producer received his share proportionally to the milk delivered, after deducting overheads and taxes. The *fruitière* was collectively and orally prepared, discussed, adjusted and approved, *i.e.* governed. Written documents only appeared when the however predictable conflict could not be resolved debating among themselves. In this case, the members would ask an external party – the priest, a lawyer, sometimes a king's agent – to sort out the situation.

Developments. 1680-1880

- 7 In the eighteenth century, the *fruitière* concept spread gradually into new territories, including almost all of the Jura and Savoy foreland (Mélo, 1989). At the same time, encyclopedists, agronomists, philanthropists and utopian socialists were interested in this concept, promoting it as a model of economic governance (Gagneur, 1839). From the nineteenth century, they linked the *fruitière* to the myth of the "naturally democratic" mountain people. But they soon vigorously pointed out what they thought were flows, especially the rural characteristics, observed with condescension: orality, permanent conflict, reluctance to modernity, political backwardness, etc. And to them, a "moralization" – actually its integration into the new modern values of capitalism – was an absolute necessity (Munier, 1858; Buchon, 1869).

Mutations. 1880-2000

Integrating modernity: law and practice

- 8 With the birth of nations, people had to conform to practices established by national governments: the triumphant *bourgeoisie*, growing urbanity as a social model, and civilization of the "wild" rural communities (Weber, 1976). Law and science attacked the concept of *fruitière*, with the risk of disintegration. However, the concept resisted. Some written internal rules appeared in the early nineteenth century, focusing on milk quality and governance. Gradually, by means of processes not yet studied, the rotational cheese production system was replaced by a "notebook" system (*petits carnets*). Around the laws on trade unions (1884), the *fruitières* incorporated into "great societies" (*grandes sociétés*) and finally into farming co-operatives with the rigorous application of the 1949 Act. Meanwhile, developments in science and techniques imposed new regulations on *fruitière*'s facilities. Consequently, the number of entities reduce from 1 200 (1880) to 130 (2010).

An agro-industrial district

- 9 To save this kind of organization, threatened in the beginning of the 1970s, the members of some *fruitières* invented a new way of proceeding with their idea of co-operation. This new form can be described as an "agro-industrial district" or "local production system" (*système productif localisé*) (Daumas, 2006; Fumey and Bérion, 2010) with co-operation practices.

- 10 The sector is now structured around the *Appellation d'Origine Protégée* (AOP) *Comté*, which imposes rules that are shared and decided by milk producers associated in cheese making. These rules impact milk production, cheese production and trade. The creation of (1) the Union of *Gruyère de Comté* in 1945, then *Comité Interprofessionnel du Gruyère de Comté* (CIGC) in 1963; (2) the setting up of "campaign production plans" (*plans de campagne*) approved in 1976 to manage the milk and cheese production flows; (3) the "agreements" (*contrats*) between the main partners in the operation chain, raised bargaining as a basis for economic co-operation. For some observers, "the *interprofession* is a model of governance best suited to prepare the future of this industry" (Fumey and Bérion, 2010). The "tandem AOP and co-op" constitutes the fundamental core, and the co-operatives-refiners alliance the form of the economic link (Jeanneaux, 1998). Thus was structured a complex "co-operation network" of multifaceted companies, combining farms, cheesemongers, small or large dairy co-operatives, private dairies or local subsidiaries of international companies, and refiners, to maintain people in its territory.

Analysis

The product of some kind of society

A society of "neighbors": compulsory solidarity

- 11 The concept of *fruitière* was invented by a type of society in which each member shall prove solidarity to the other members. This kind of solidarity was at the very origin of the foundation of the communities and has been then pertained over the ages. It modeled social relationships that next generations appreciated. It spreads to all areas of this society, including the economic activities. Permanent communication, chatting, long discussions, paced the village's and the *fruitière*'s everyday life. They were important means put towards achieving their goals. The *fruitière* allowed farmers to face insecurity that any society has to deal with.
- 12 The existence of this collective institution reveals an active and strategic fight to gain more security, to anticipate events, to escape from fatality. They implemented a collectively supported social policy. It brought economic growth by giving preference to "group solidarity instead of adventurous individualistic affirmation" (Levi, 1989).

The debt link: live together

- 13 To merge milks meant to "lend" it to others who would return it in due time with "interests" (the added value). The small amount of milk produced by two or three cows was turned into a marketable cheese. The product's quality allowed such an "investment" to last if there were not sufficient sales for a while. The *fruitière* is part of the general debt system of the society of the *Ancien Régime* (Fontaine, 2008). It was one manifestation among others. In Franche-Comté, the system long lasted into the nineteenth century.

How to last

A rule: the *fruitière* is a heritage

- 14 Initially, any *fruitière* is a practice people inherits, as well as small family assets. To associate with peers in cheese making for a season or for a life was and is still a legacy between generations. The setting up in legacy of a social and economic practice change the fact in something that is essential in the life of individuals. It is the expression of a specific culture invented in a specific territory, a tradition.

A way: constant innovation

- 15 The adaptation to modernity between 1880 and 1950 shows the vitality of these small cheese-making companies. The gradual integration in a legal system imposed from above reveals a remarkable ability to adapt. Without however not totally annihilating the old practices. The members are flowed into the legal mold while maintaining proven patterns of governance.
- 16 A specific system of trade (*vente à confront*) was one of those adaptations to the evolving relationship between associated stockbreeders (as cheese producers) and merchants. Such form of sales multiplied in the course of the nineteenth century. In the discussion with the cheesemonger early in the season, the price that would be applicable to the delivery of the production was defined by comparison with the selling price granted to other companies. Despite the potentially serious flaws, this principle was also a way to ensure a reasonable price at a time market fluctuations were significant (1880-1940).
- 17 The collective sale of milk to a manufacturer (a cheese-maker) was another solution designed by the associated producers. The practice appears to the late nineteenth century and spread especially in the inter-World-Wars period. This practice was widely criticized by observers at the time (Gide, 1925). But selling milk was basically a way to assign to the manufacturer or the cheese merchant the problem of great and frequent volatility of the cheese price. The downside of this practice was the arrival on the market of small industrial dairies. Some of them became important economic agents in the sector.
- 18 Despite the great social changes of the post World War II period, members of *fruitière* retained the old habits they applied from the earliest times. The daily time of milk delivery (*coulée*) still remained for the stockbreeders in some *fruitières*. It is always a time to meet in the daily construction of the association and it was an important factor of social sustainability: "There is no other region in France where farmers met twice a day for centuries", stressed an old farmer co-operator.

Fruitières: a mountain story?

Of course, in mountain territories

- 19 Around 1690, the *Intendant* of the King of France in Franche-Comté highlighted the significant difference in wealth between high and low countries. Sectors of grain polyculture were hardly recovering after successive crises that marked the seventeenth century. Meanwhile, the highlands, where the milk breeders produced cheese collectively, had already recovered. During the crisis of 1848-1851, the villages with

collective cheese factories better resisted than those which had not opted for collective production. Today, the territories of *fruitières* allow dairy farmers to live satisfactorily from their work, to the contrary of the regions where milk is collected by industrial companies.

- 20 The history of the *fruitière* – heard as collective action for production – was born and developed first in the mountains. Not because of difficult environmental conditions – hard and long snowy winters, cold and short summers, human groups' isolation – but thanks to predisposing social conditions. Or, to be more precise, because of a combination of factors: geography (mountain pioneer front against forest), society (groups of pioneering families) and politics (feudalism). The *fruitière* originated in the Middle Ages in small population groups, inhabitants of hamlets centered on small areas. They received management of pieces of land from their lords as individuals (*abergements*) and as collectives (*usages*). These groups of peers developed independently “mechanical solidarity” (Durkheim, 2007) imposed by social relationships (kinship, neighborhood), technical level (necessary common works) and rational use of specific lands (government of commons – common grazing on fields, in marshes, pastures, forests). These conditions were required to better and continuously manage the difficult balance between the limited available land (also in quality), the population growth and the volume of livestock (Crettaz, 1990) in a focus of sustainability of the group in its territory. Merging the milk to produce a collective cheese was an economical solution that forced the group to think up together this trade off and therefore to think by themselves over the long term.

One of the numerous mountain institutions for collective action

- 21 The specific form of co-operation rooted in the Jura peasant culture has not necessarily taken in other areas, such as Savoy or Auvergne. However, these countries, particularly alpine countries, developed other forms of collective action (Picht, 1987; Arbos, 1922). For example, a similar experience – producers associated in building and governing a collective workshop – set up in the fourteenth century in the high Valtellina (Italian Alps) around a collective iron furnace built and managed by a group of miners from Livigno, “free” citizens of Bormio (Arnoux, 2001).
- 22 Nevertheless, the concept of *fruitière* was transferred to other regions as from the very end of the eighteenth century, but there, the practices evolved over the time. Today, the initial areas and a few places of the Jura only defend the model, after having addressed the crisis of the *Charte du Comté* (1970). The particularly sustainable anthropology of these singular social groups involved in the institution – sociological entities based on certain values: commitment, honor, confidence, inheritance – allow to maintain and continuously adapt to the changing context of the Western society.

A hypothesis

- 23 In the Middle Ages, some mountainous territories were able to play an emancipatory role for the people who lived there. The remoteness from centers of power could enable these peer communities to develop a social morphology based on their own values and practices. Each mountain territory chose a specific way depending on their geographical and historical context. This diversity is highlighted by the many forms of

common management across the European mountains. The advent of territorial States from the late Middle Ages and subsequent controls over populations sometimes hindered the diffusion of socio-economic models that could seem similar, replicable or transferable. Meanwhile it was possible for social groups that had established very early collective production societies such as *fruitières*, to adapt them without changing core values. The history of the *fruitières comtoises* sheds an other light on these geo-historical processes connecting "mountain, feudalism and community" (Viader, 2003).

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ABSTRACTS

The first traces of breeders associated for merging together their milks to make marketable cheese (cooked pressed cheese) appear in the late Middle Ages (13th century). This entrepreneurial model really started to spread in the seventeenth century. But it was not before

the 1880s that the whole production of Gruyère de Comté was organized. Co-operators created in the 1970s a "local production system" (système productif localisé), combining dairy farmers monitoring production through co-operatives, manufacturers and traders. Farmers, cheese co-operatives, traditional companies and businesses built a set of charters (Appellation d'Origine Protégée Comté, "campaign plans", "contracts"). They developed a production system controlled by the stockbreeders in a defined territory which is one of the major components of this cheese-making industry. The mountain, defined as a geographic space, played an essential role in this long-lasting experience. The fruitière, as socio-economic form, emerged from the meeting between mountain (a geography), communities (people and their social rules) and feudalism (kind of power).

Si les premières traces des associations d'éleveurs mettant leur lait en commun pour fabriquer un fromage de garde (à pâte pressée cuite) apparaissent à la fin du Moyen Age, la diffusion d'un modèle entrepreneurial de fabricant s'esquisse véritablement dès le XVII^e siècle. Mais ce n'est qu'à partir des années 1880 que l'ensemble de la production comtoise de gruyère s'organise jusqu'à mettre en place dans les années 1970 ce qui peut apparaître comme un système productif localisé, associant producteurs laitiers contrôlant la fabrication par le moyen de coopératives, industriels et négociants. Agriculteurs, coopératives fromagères, entreprises classiques et établissements commerciaux ont ainsi construit avec des règles établies peu à peu dans le cours de l'histoire (AOC Comté, plans de campagne, contrats) un système de production contrôlé sur un territoire défini qui est une des composantes importante de cette filière active. La montagne comme espace singulier joua un rôle dans cette très longue expérimentation. Du lieu de naissance au XIII^e siècle à la première diffusion vers les hautes « joux » voisines, les populations des territoires montagnards, négociateurs avisés face au pouvoir féodal, surent saisir la valeur socioéconomique de cette auto-organisation de la production fromagère.

INDEX

Mots-clés: histoire, fromagerie, coopérative, district (agro-industriel), montagnes, sociologie

Keywords: history, cheese dairy, co-operative, cooperative, district, mountain areas, sociology

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