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Three Moments in the Plérin Pig Market: Proroguing a Regime of Regulation after a Crisis

In this paper, we describe and interpret the Pig Crisis in the Plérin Clock Market (the MPB) in the Summer 2015. This paper is based on a participant observation in central Brittany, during and after the crisis. We provide only the descriptive part to fit in the format of publication of the SFER conference. The rest of the paper provides information on the defensive strategy of productivist actors, in the face of a growing wave of protests. Three main arguments against the MBP and the neo-Fordist regulation (Allaire and Boyer, 1995) of agro-industries it exemplifies are silenced in the scenes we describe, two years after the crisis, as the market has (temporarily) stabilised : the constitutive diversity of the sector (Nieddu, 1998), the alternative of quality agriculture (Allaire, 2005) and the new mediatic regime of agriculture (Allaire and Daviron, 2017) with the influence of both sanitary scandals and enriched goods via heritage (Boltanski and Esquerre, 2017). For all these reasons, if no real change can be observed in the aftermath of the 2015 crisis, it might be that the dominant actors in the MPB invest in impression management to stage their (less and less) central role as a pivot of the institutional frame (Allaire and Daviron, 2006) of a (less and less) unified pig market.

Revisiting Moments in the Pig Crisis

The image of angry farmers dumping dead animals, junk and liquid manure in front of prefectures, blocking highways and attacking institutions such as local prefectures is associated with such recurrent events as “crises”. The media tend to contrast two worlds as opposed: *rus* and *urbs* (Mendras, 2012). The pig crisis was pictured in the media as a signal of the deterioration of the farmers’ condition, a tragic moment when even the main union representing farmers, the FNSEA, was under attack. The union did not manage to get hold of angry farmers as they usually did. On August 14, 2015, when the quotation of the MPB was suspended, violence was in the air, and it seemed to picture the end of the rural world as we knew it. Visits to local breeders in farms and villages, confirmed this impression.

Less than two years later, we visited the MPB on April 14, 2017, this was very difficult to imagine. We reflect on this difference in representations by presenting the MPB building in its direct environment (1), the auction and meeting rooms where the sales take place (2) and finally the coffee room and office where the main actors in the MPB interact (3).

1. Entering the market place

Pictures taken inside farms showing breeders with their animals in the barns and in the fields often displays the farm as a fragile shelter, a home for families of men and animals from generation to generation. For one being brought in a small town in central Brittany, paying visits to the markets and the local farms, farmers had aged in 30 years, many farms had disappeared, poverty was more and more visible when walking the roads of the countryside. Such a nostalgic picture of this world is presented in Raymond Depardon's popular documentaries on the rural world, and echoed in many occasions when an event such as a crisis occurs. The organic solidarity of the farms in crisis contrasts with "modern society", the family world of the breeder in the countryside with the official roundtables in Paris or Brussels.

In the summer 2015, during the pig crisis, the imagery of this frontal opposition became a classic in the media: angry farmers were interviewed in their farm, or in front of the MPB in Plérin, as they demonstrated. They were pictured in the alleys of the Leclerc supermarket (leader of "low prices") and in slaughterhouses and dealers, checking the origin of the meat. In parallel, public and private decision-makers and union representatives' meetings were mentioned as they "issued statements". The opposition between various parties took a more frontal form as the head of the FNSEA union in Calvados (Normandy) declared in July, after an extraordinary meeting had ruled on labels: "*We are not interested by fruitless Parisian roundtables, we just want our minister in the field with us.*" and later in early September when the FNSEA organized a large demonstration in the centre of Paris. At the same time, the FNSEA was reported to have lost its grip on union members as farmers went into sporadic spontaneous actions. In a report on February 20, 2016, *Mediapart* reports on a worsening situation with even less control than during the pig crisis: "*No one manages anyone anymore. (...) people feel betrayed by their union representatives, and some were seen tearing down and burning their union card*". In Finistère and Trégor, Xavier Merret's FNSEA method (four actions framing the revolt to get results) is not longer working and farmers attack officials and fortresses such as the Even cooperative, disobeying orders. Only the local head of the Confederation Paysanne (its opponent union) agrees, although he disagrees with such methods as using of liquid manure at officials' private homes and breaking into public offices: "*The protesters made no mistake (...) the regional and national leaders led everyone astray, they are the ones who buried agriculture. The target was right.*" Seen from the countryside and from the local and national press, the main picture is that of a highly fragmented space, with breeders pitted against slaughterhouses and supermarkets, abandoned by institutions because they are all urban. One

feels the isolated breeders should be defended by public institutions against the predation of large trading groups.

However, in the local press (Ouest-France and le Télégramme), this analysis is not really the dominant one. Breeders' distress is exposed, and their situation described, in their own words, as deteriorating because of their level of debt. The blame rather lies on German and Spanish competitors who drive down prices. On the side of the pages where the crisis was covered, advertisement for pig and beef meat by supermarket channels (Leclerc and Intermarché) are systematic. This is a hint at the reality one could find in the field a year and half later, when paying a visit to the pig market. Leclerc parking lot and chambre d'agriculture (this is where the main protests took place, with a great deal of violence)

When paying a visit to the Clock market on site, one discovers that Plérin is at about a ten minutes drive from the Saint-Brieux central station. One must come across the large Leclerc supermarket moll and its parking lot, then take a two minutes drive to a monumental 1960s style building: the chamber of agriculture. Sign-posts mentions most agencies dealing with agriculture and breeding in Brittany. The parking lot is quite vast, and it is only by crossing it, that at the end, a small, one floor-building, facing a line of fairly recent houses, is the Plérin clock market (MPB). It looks down on the fields of the bay of Saint-Brieux, a functional building with very large bay windows, not more than 15 years of age. This introduction gives the impression of a complete alignment of all actors and institutions, as opposed to the "crisis view" of a fragmented space with actors pitted against each other.

When one enters the MPB lobby, an assistant welcomes you and leads you to the corridor where one can see four offices (that of the president, the vice-president and the head of sales as well as an expert), as well as one large room, split in two by a glass panel. One is the auction room, with a desk with a microphone before a large screen on the wall (for video-projection) and five lines of tables with four computers on each side on an alley. On the other side of the glass panel is a large meeting room. About twenty people can sit at the table and follow a video-conference. Right on the left, on the other side of the lobby, a small coffee room is decorated with a series of small kitsch knick-knacks and ancient photographs representing pigs and pig breeding. On a board near the coffee machine and snacks, one may find the key quotations and a few information about the market trends.

In this Easter holiday period, the head of sales and the vice-president welcome me and show me around. I meet about twelve breeders and traders who attend the morning sale. I later have a long talk with the president of the clock market to answer my additional questions. All are very proud to show me their organisation, especially since the prices are back to normal, they

may even be sky-rocketing. All mention the crisis and they resent the media attention as being over-dramatic and sensational.

To them, the 2015 crisis was especially violent but not exceptional in the MPB President's mind: *"There were crises in 1992, 2003, 2008, 2009"* (...) and led by a few *"people with personal problems of their own" who took the MPB as a scapegoat* "since *"when the price for the kilo is 1 euro, it cannot be 1,40"* blaming the minister for making false promises.

In the media, at the occasion of the milk crisis on February 20, 2017 (Le Monde), one breeder's testimony tells another story to the journalist investigating in rural Brittany: *"At the last meeting of the union (the FNSEA), people were losing it (...) the young were on the verge of tears. It is a sorry sight. If they sell all their belongings, the farm, they are still delved deep in debt... The guys are 30, 35 and they are already ruined."* Yet, in the MPB, nothing of that distress is palpable ; everything is back to normal.

« The market exists for 45 years; in 2015, for the first time of its history, it stopped during a month, we feared it might never start again but it did. » (VP) The moment of panick is attributed to a group of 20 desperate breeders, the President says they had personal problems and they should have staid in their farms and work. To them, these reactions are typically irrational and they did not last long: *"I received threats, my family did too"* (the VP said) and the head of auction sales was afraid he could be hurt. Yet the VP adds: *« After that month of suspension, the members of the Cooperl (the main cooperative) came back to ask us to start again. »* (VP) To them, this is proof that the MPB is a fit for its purpose, a modern devise aimed at offering a common ground, an institution that should not be challenged; *« In 2015, with no reference for price, we were back 45 years »* (VP)

« The guys came, threatened us, but when there was no longer a price, the same guys did not dare challenge the slaughterhouses prices which were lower, they knew they had to bargaining power, no weight at all on them. » the president said. A famous breeder, owner of a large farm, insisted breeders would have no bargaining power if they did not go into the market, and he pitied the breeders selling milk because of their dependence of public direct subsidies: *« with Lactalis, what do you want to negotiate? You have no power at all on the guy »*)

Since the 2015 crisis, great improvements were introduced, with the support of the minister. The MPB president and the vice-president have exactly the same view on this; the minister was wrong to ask for a 1,40 euros price (public authorities should not go back to the control of prices which stopped in the 1960s) but he should promote market solutions such as labels to help consumers make a responsible and patriotic choice when buying pork. New labels such as "French meat" were introduced in an effort to build a unique tie between the breeders and their

clients (slaughterhouses, cutting, salting and smoking units) the president of the MPB confides. He mentions distributors in other regions, less concerned with breeders' fate (they have no pig farms) who fail to use the labels as in the West of France, but he believes the use of the label by the local distributors strengthens all actors' alliance to remain highly productive and improve their overall competitiveness. In the MPB, "French meat" logos and posters are all over the place to decorate. The MPB is a pivot place for the promotion of the agro-industry system.

2. The Auction Thrill

Walking around rural Brittany, one seldom comes across pig farms, as opposed to cows which are easy to spot from the road, as they pasture in the fields. Still, one comes across farms and slaughterhouses, and many people work in transformation factories. In the media, pig farms and slaughterhouses are seldom pictured, but when they are, it is seldom in a pleasant way.

At the "salon de l'agriculture" (every March in Paris, at the Porte de Versailles) and in the Space in Rennes (the showroom for the agro-industries in Brittany, focusing on breeding), one may see pigs, piglets and sows in their stalls with boxes on the side presenting all the most modern techniques. Animals are very present, the material dimensions of breeding, with the pigsties, the machines, the liquids, the feed, the methods to treat faeces and waste are everywhere.

During the suspension of the quotation at the MPB, on August 14, 2015, the media reported on a crowd of fifty to one hundred breeders demonstrating in front of the building. One would have imagined that all animals were somewhere, that they had been brought to the market place, whereas in fact they are traded as numbers in a catalogue where only the farm and the cooperatives are mentioned for the buyers to choose. Contrary to what Garcia (1995) shows about the clock market for strawberries or beef, the pigs are not present. Their number is listed in a catalogue, and members from the cooperatives come to sell them, as well as a two bidders (other ones make online calls). Only the voice of the head of sales can be heard, calling the numbers, and saying: "*Sale*" or "*Unsold one, unsold twice, unsold definitive*". The whole system has been computerized twenty years ago, the president tells me.

This is why, at the Plérin Clock market, the rooms are functional and transparent. The auction room and the meeting room (dealing with events) are equipped with computers, screens and microphones. Computers and a few people (most clients do not really need to come but these ones « they prefer to be present » (Kerméné and JPA; Cooperl and Uniporc do not need to come

here, but they follow the price, many other clients buy in a distance – due to the importance of transportation, slaughterhouses work with producers nearby

Everything is measured via machines connected to online devices so the information, like the market, is “transparent and fluid”. Heads of the market and traders all agree on this norm.

The auction starts at 9h30 sharp. It takes 10 to 15 minutes to sell about 20 000 thousand pigs on Thursdays, with all data transferred and kept via computers, about 5000 on average on Mondays, the sale being less important. The catalogue is available to all before the sale begins; one can know which breeders are selling; the order of passage of « lots » is random (for transparency reasons). Of course, in this trade, due to the nature of pig breeding, there are a few “granularities” but they are all under control so stakeholders’ interests are all aligned.

For instance, the vice-president explains how the distance makes a huge difference in price because you need to pay a guy in a truck either just one day to transport all pigs or all days.

After the auction price is set, the quality of the meat is scrutinized a posteriori via Uniporc, a public institution complementing the pig market by measuring the quality of the meat directly at slaughterhouses. Depending on the sonar assessment about the degree of fat of the meat and the size of the pig, breeders can get bonuses or minuses on their sale prices.

Above all, objectivity is the source of legitimacy for the MPB, and it is gradually improving through innovative technologies. More and more, technical dimensions have replaced market skills owned by traders: *“Evaluating a pig meat, it used to be done “by the eye”, now you have sonar on carcasses to determine the level of fat in the meat”*. (P)

The quality of the meat relative to the origin of pigs had been standardized: *“You should talk to my successor, I am retiring but he will be here next week, we are not from the same trade, he knows all about genetics.”* Whereas he mentioned his father, who helped Alexis Gourvénnec and other fresh vegetable merchants create clock markets in the SICA of Saint-Pol-de-Léon (Finistère).

“The cost of the knife” the president explains, means each pig needs to be bigger to compensate for lower labour costs in European countries. The norms have been adapted since the early 1990s *“leaving breeders the time to adapt they needed, but that way is not problem, getting pigs smaller would be much more difficult for them technically.”*

There is a huge difference in status between the « sow » and the « pig » since one meat is to be transformed and the other is the superior quality, sold as fresh meat and central to the principles of a clock market because it is good to sell at one single specific moment (similar to fruits and vegetables who need to be ripe but not too ripe). This is central to the conventions shared by producers and distributors. The president of the MPB takes the side of the buyers: *« We don’t*

like surprises, out here » (PR) and the Vice-President takes that of the sellers: « *Producers make the rules, out here* » (VP) but in fact the standard they abide by is presented as that of the market, also supported by stakeholders such as the public authorities and customers at the end of the value-chain.

After the short session of the two auctions (sows and pigs), the weekly meeting to share information takes place in the meeting room, on the other side of the glass panel. On Thursday 14, 2017, when we attended, about 8 people attend, clients and producers, they all look quite serene and listen to the information with a peaceful look (after the sale, with a lot of adrenaline in the air)

The expert lady has had her conference call with Germany and Spain and she mentions the good weather forecast and the Easter week-end when people like pork chops for barbecues (this accounts for increasing demand this week). She later tells me she has regular conf calls with her European counterparts, the president says he initiated it when he arrived in the 1980s. They tell me data mining is a very important part of their work as an information platform. What they believe is informational symmetry regulates transactions.

Later, the Vice-President comments for my sake that a recent progress explains why long week-ends are no longer a problem: now there are no limits with unworked days because slaughterhouses have been modernized and they have extra-capacity anyway. In general, private breeders (who own more than 1000 pigs) and clients are really interested by possible improvement in the transformation process. They believe that while breeders have modernized, some of the cooperative slaughterhouses are still underfunded and less than productive.

The president of the MPB finds the Kerméné slaughterhouse part of the Leclerc group is the most modern one (the one everyone should visit) as opposed to the slaughterhouse of the Cooperl cooperative (the sole competitor in the same area, the Trégor). This is an argument to defend private initiative, as opposed to collective action and public interventions.

The president insists that contrary to other types of industries, pig breeders have been dealing with competitive issue at a supranational level: « *we have always been in a global world* » (PR). This argument pleads in favour of letting the market act as the unique regulatory mechanism in the business.

3. Free Coffee at the Table, Behind the President's Desk

In farms, at the kitchen table, or at the bars near the rural market places, I was used to hearing tall tales about horse-dealers, disobedient young pig keepers and pigs hidden and stolen during the war and the “maquis”. These were folklore tales by people living in the same small world,

where scarcity was the rule. When people tell you these folk tales, you never know if they are part of a personal experience or collective memories and old mythologies. These are peasants and small town traders knowing each other for a long time, as neighbours.

At the MPB, the few people who attend the sales are also “old clients”, they know each other very well, and they are very few. They deal with thousands of pigs, they are learnt in international business, and the fluctuations of import and export. Their culture is not that of peasants, it is that of tradesmen, who know all the tricks of the trade. If they attend the market, it is because they know one needs to sell well, and this takes time and skills. What they want is to win the competition and get the best price they can. This is how they regulate the market and this is why they have no patience for disruptive behaviour by angry breeders who are simply not “good enough”.

“the Chinese demand is quite phenomenal (...) and will be so at least until 2020” the President explains, confident that no more crisis will occur. He even believes breeders should be allowed to have larger exploitations, despite limits set by public agencies.

He also insists that farms need to reach the proper size *“You have met PR, he owns of the biggest exploitation in France, but he would go to Denmark, he would be one of the smallest, they have 1000 pig farms and only 1000 farms cover the market.”*

Based on his personal experience and that of his father, the president considers a small farm is inefficient because the farmer always needs to tend to the pigs:

“Breeding is a specific job, you need to attend all the time, it is animal life, it is always on the move, piglets can be born at that moment, it can go badly, you lose the animals if, like today, you are in the fields harvesting the corn (...) if you are a butcher, you must be in the shop for the clients, it is still another job” (P). In fact, the farmer should be dealing his pigs to get the best price based on key information.

One of the largest farmer on the French market comments, from the Vice-president’s desk, still looking at the screen where he can see the sale going on: *“You need to come here to see how pigs sell (...) I started with 15 pigs, now I have 1000 sows, I will accept no lesson on this (...) I attended more than a thousand sales (...) I see breeders who never leave their pigs, deal with the technical details. They give up the whole business, they hire people for their accounts, for tax advice, that means they cannot remain independent.”* (PR)

The market deals with a great deal of pigs, and sets the price for France and Europe, yet only a few important men attend, and set the prices. They all share information, and determine a series of professional information and market practices (licit) and more or less illicit information and practices.

For instance, one needs to control the information, for instance about the financial health of cooperatives and slaughterhouses (who might go bankrupt soon) or about the use of hormones. When I mentioned a breeder who had just visited Spanish colleagues said they must be using a great deal of chemistry to have the pigs grow that fast; the president of the MPB objected: “*You be careful not to spread such breeder’s gossips.*”

« *I do not engage in politics* », the Vice-President said, “*only our president said a word about the Russian ban.*” This, I understand, is a form of admission that the MPB represents breeders only in situations when their export markets might be blocked, regardless of the political colours of public officials. For instance during the 2015 pig crisis, they used the public media to be heard, blaming the embargo on Russia for clogging the market.

Yet secrets are not so secrets when private breeders target cooperatives such as slaughterhouses (they deem unproductive because they chide competition by collective behaviours): « *You should look at what is happening now with Doux* » (Pr, how cooperatives are bad). « *I have a ‘feeling’ that the Cooperl is on to something, you shall see what happens this summer* » the president says. « *Cooperatives killed the peasants* » one large farmer commented after the sale in Plérin.

This I heard in the Vice-President’s office by one of the main breeders who was sitting at his desk, maintaining the traders’ status quo: « *You want fluidity, a fluid market for trade* » (this is the rule). Actually, skilled traders act as bookmakers, they tell me as I smile at the vice-president and his friend, an important farmer, comment the numbers appearing on the screen as the auction goes on. “*To us, it is like a football game.*” the important farmer says, he adds, his eyes glued to the screen: « *Sellers are in no hurry, they wait for the price to go up* » and « *Traders will not let pigs go (they are hungry), “they need the pigs* » (on the screen, both men watch with satisfaction how two prospective buyers going on the same lot which proves there is demand, otherwise they avoid going at each other like this, looking at it like they say football, it looks more like cock-fighting to me.

« *Look at that price* » (they stare at the screen, the 1,40 euros per kilo is way passed by this time), « *He is always like this (...)* » they tell each other (VP and PR comment, they look slightly annoyed, as if they were slightly robbed of something), « *This is union-based activism* » (the guy « was lucky this time », he got a better price (he did not accept the price at the Monday auction, and his « lot » came last this time, which is lucky only if demand is high) ; they do not like it, this may discourage clients to come to the auction market if producers are too demanding, what is more, one should not defend collective interests, this does not drive the market as it should if competition between all players is respected (they believe)

To an uninformed eye, regulation devices such as clock markets are part of the old French compromise system about agriculture: balance productivity with social rights of farmers (and the defence of small family farms. This makes it difficult to understand why farmers would attack the institution which defends their rights. In fact, this “compromise” is long gone, as proven by the steep decline in farms. As part of the Chamber of agriculture, the MPB implicitly agrees with the FNSEA credo that one needs less public regulation and larger actors along the agro-industrial value chain. The MPB stands as a market regulation defending private interest based on a balance of offer and demand. This approach to regulation may explain why angry breeders recently targeted both the MPB and the FNSEA. “Xavier Beulin (head of the FNSEA) demanded that deregulation via is European confederation, COPA-COGEKO, how could he be asking for more regulation now (...) today, they are killing their own troops.” Christian Hascoët (head of the AIMP, independent milk producers union) echoing Suzanne Berger’s judgement on cooperatives: “Cooperatives and corporatist organisations are still in place but their 50 years long consensus is gone.” (1975: 295). Inside the MPB, this consensus is still ongoing, but the people who attend the sales are less and less numerous.

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