Biodynamics and Viticulture: from Militancy to Market Niches?

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The purpose of this article is to analyse social movements that champion forms of economic regulation considered as more respectful of nature. Led by the stakeholders of economic activity, these movements develop a counter-model while remaining within the framework of the holders’ daily activity and its constraints. Our example is biodynamic winegrowing in France.

In the years following World War II, rural France experienced drastic changes with the rise of high-productivity agriculture, which turned peasants into farmer-entrepreneurs producing for the market and heavily relying on the use of synthetic chemicals. The result of this policy, notably due to agricultural economists, brought about a large exodus of the rural population that did not meet the new criteria of efficiency; it also gave rise to associative movements in reaction against this production deemed as harmful to health. These movements came about in the 1950s, notably buoyed by nutritionist physicians, agricultural engineers and teachers. They gathered together a small number of farmers (known as organic farmers) as well as consumers who refused to modernize agriculture through increasing the use of agricultural chemicals. In 1963, what was commonly known as the "Lemaire Boucher" method was implemented. The first company to invest in organic agriculture, it enjoyed great success amongst organic producers, and 70% of them had joined by the 70s. This company had a monopoly on organic fertilizers and, prior to that, a monopoly of selling grain to the "organic farmers" with whom it had signed a contract. Since it was too reminiscent of the integrated system of conventional agriculture, a significant number of its members wishing for organic farming rejected the commercial aspect of this institution and founded “Nature et Progrès” in 1964.

These associations refused to use synthetic chemical molecules, and encouraged the balance between the various species. In parallel and in fairly close connection with them (according to the contexts), a movement was developing which concerned a much smaller number of farmers: not only did these refuse to use synthetic produce, but they considered that the development of plants depended on a larger equilibrium connecting the earth and the cosmos. This method, or rather, this view of the world, drew its inspiration from Rudolf Steiner’s Agricultural Course lectures. This Austrian philosopher had been sought out in the thirties to answer the concerns of German farmers worried about the orientation of farming that stemmed from the industrial revolution, and preoccupied with the quality of foodstuffs.