

Pierre Gasselin · Sylvie Lardon · Claire Cerdan ·  
Salma Loudiyi · Denis Sautier  
Editors

# Coexistence and Confrontation of Agricultural and Food Models

A New Paradigm of Territorial Development?

Foreword by Jan Douwe van der Ploeg  
With the Editorial Support of Sylvie Zasser

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*Editors*

Pierre Gasselin  
UMR Innovation  
INRAE  
Montpellier, France

Sylvie Lardon  
UMR Territoires  
INRAE and AgroParisTech  
Aubière, France

Claire Cerdan  
UMR Innovation  
CIRAD  
Saint Pierre, Réunion, France

Salma Loudiyi  
UMR Territoires  
VetAgro Sup  
Lempdes, France

Denis Sautier  
UMR Innovation  
CIRAD  
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*Translated by*

Kim Agrawal  
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# Chapter 12

## Contesting and Caring: Forms of Solidarity in Local Buying Groups



Emmanuelle Cheyns and Nora Daoud

Various forms of buying groups have emerged in recent years, such as the Food Buying Clubs in the United States, the Organic Buying Groups in the United Kingdom, the *Groupements d'achats communs* in Belgium, the *Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale* in Italy and the *Groupements d'achats locaux* in France. These buying groups are groups of consumers who buy in bulk directly from various producers. They are organised around a common principle: a commitment to solidarity, which was already present as a fundamental concept in their historical forms as consumption cooperatives. These cooperatives appeared in the nineteenth century in the wake of the utopian socialism of Charles Fourier and Robert Owen, and were intended to provide poor families with access to quality foodstuffs, to build up collective savings or to buy at a fair price in order to remunerate the producer's work (De Boyve, 1889; Guillaume, 2007a).

While these consumption cooperatives declined with the advent of mass retailing in the 1970s, a new wave of alternative consumer buying groups in the last two decades has developed with similar motivations, albeit renewed (De Munck, 2011). Like the associations that support peasant agriculture (AMAPs<sup>1</sup>) and short supply chains, they are based additionally on ecological concerns, in a new context of globalisation and the health crises of the 1990s, which call into question the domination of food supply chains by large-scale distribution systems (Chiffolleau, 2008; De Munck, 2011).

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<sup>1</sup> French: *Association pour le maintien d'une agriculture paysanne (AMAP)*.

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E. Cheyns (✉)  
Cirad, UMR Moisa, Montpellier, France  
e-mail: [emmanuelle.cheyns@cirad.fr](mailto:emmanuelle.cheyns@cirad.fr)

N. Daoud  
Consortio Andaluz de Impulso Social (CAIS), Seville, Spain  
e-mail: [noradaoud@hotmail.fr](mailto:noradaoud@hotmail.fr)

The buying groups are spaces for experimenting with forms of solidarity built outside the State's ambit and influence and at a distance from market instruments, in a broader context of criticism of public and private forms of solidarity (Tremblay, 2007). Indeed, the support policies of the post-war welfare state have been steadily diluted by programmes to reduce social expenditure and to target benefits, anchored in new principles of social protection that accord value to efficiency: the New Public Management. Forms of solidarity provided by the market<sup>2</sup> are similarly called into question because of the reduction of common goods into certified properties (Cheyns & Thévenot, 2019) in a market of passive and atomised consumers 'making choices' (Hubaux, 2011).

By coming together in groups, consumers explore alternative ways of living. This is especially true for buying groups that lay emphasis on self-management and participation, which require investment of time and effort in a collective whose aim is to 'make a community'. Do these buying groups bring about social change or a transition? If yes, what kind of change or transition? What forms of solidarity do they engage in, between contesting conventional agriculture and caring for vulnerable people? In this chapter, we discuss the different 'regimes of engagement' (Thévenot, 2006, 2015) and tensions between members of buying groups, which reflect various forms of solidarity, in particular two forms: a solidarity in familiarity and caring for others, and a public civic solidarity more 'at a distance' from the producer.

## 1 'Making a Community': A Survey of Buying Groups

In order to characterise the diversity of buying groups, our survey<sup>3</sup> first focused on 26 groups in the Languedoc-Roussillon region<sup>4</sup> in France. A series of interviews with these groups' members led us to distinguish five types of buying groups, two of which were of particular interest to us because of the high level of investment of members in their groups. The first of these two types are activist groups, self-managed, characterised by their decision to remain independent from institutions (they are not registered under the 1901 French law of associations, refuse State financial aid, etc.) and by a critical stance towards the market, and in particular towards large-scale distribution systems and supermarket chains. The second type is based on an intimacy between close persons, goodwill and a desire for togetherness.

<sup>2</sup> For example, the engagement of firms through corporate social responsibility (CSR), voluntary certifications and sustainability standards, etc., which aim for equity, protection of vulnerable people, respect for fundamental rights at work, etc.

<sup>3</sup> This research was carried out in 2011 with the support of the PSDR project 'Coxinel' (Short agriculture and agrifood marketing circuits: innovations for regional development, French: *Circuits courts de commercialisation en agriculture et agro-alimentaire: des innovations pour le développement régional*), funded by the Languedoc-Roussillon region, INRA, Cemagref, CIRAD and SupAgro (2007–2011).

<sup>4</sup> Former French region consisting of the following departments: Aude, Gard, Hérault, Lozère and Pyrénées-Orientales.

For this reason, the number of members in this type of group is often restricted in order to maintain the ease provided by a ‘family size’. The other three types of groups, which we do not discuss here, are characterised by a centralisation of decision-making that is oriented towards efficiency and/or a low investment in the group (no meetings or collective decision-making) (Daoud, 2011).

In more than half of the 26 groups, decision-making is a collective process and participation is voluntary. Members are tacitly expected to participate in the group’s activities by attending regular meetings and by getting involved in logistics (contact, purchasing, delivery, etc.). But the ways of making a community in these groups, in which a lot of personal investment is required, differ. In a second step, we thus studied two buying groups<sup>5</sup> marked by a strong investment in the community, corresponding to the first two types identified above.

The first is an activist group, the Self-Managed Socio-Ecological (SEMSE)<sup>6</sup> buying group, in Montpellier. We can observe a political engagement of its members based on a denunciation of the capitalist system and on a self-managed collective organisation leading to a strong requirement for public ‘civic justification’ (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1991). This group undertakes investigations and subjects producers to an interview-test in which they have to justify their social and environmental conditions of production. These activities have come in for criticism by some of the group’s members, who decry the group’s lack of care towards producers. The second buying group, Yummy-Yum, allows us to observe a completely different kind of engagement, in the ‘familiar’ and in the ‘close’, by adjusting to the environment and context in order to achieve a certain level of ease (Thévenot, 2006). What results is a solidarity ‘in familiarity’ and affection and a concern of taking care of others (*ibid.*). This regime of engagement is put under strain by some members who criticise the group for its inefficiency and a lack of political engagement.

These regimes of engagement and the tensions they generate reflect different forms of solidarity (Thévenot, 2006, 2015), in particular a solidarity in familiarity and affection and of caring for others, and a more distant public civic solidarity. These forms of solidarity indicate differences in the ways of forming a group and making a community as well as a coexistence of forms of support that these groups offer to local and peasant agriculture and intend to leverage to transform society.

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<sup>5</sup> We interviewed 20 members of these two groups, including founder-members, and 10 producers supplying them. We attended the groups’ monthly meetings and participated in other get-togethers organised by these groups. We also met people who decided to leave these groups or decided not to join them (5 individuals). Finally, our study also relies on the written documents of these two groups: minutes of meetings, planning or logistical tools, charters and e-mails.

<sup>6</sup> We use pseudonyms for the names of groups and individuals.

## 2 Contesting, Arguing, Caring: A Diversity of Solidarities

### 2.1 *Caring in What Is Familiar*

The Yummy-Yum buying group consisted of 17 individuals in 2011. They were all residents of a few neighbouring and peri-urban villages near Montpellier, but were not originally from these villages. This buying group accords value to the sense of ease and conviviality that can be created by the proximity of friendly persons, in the sense that they become closely tied through friendship or personal commitments and familiarisation processes (Thévenot, 2006). While most of the members did not know each other before the creation of the buying group, they now consider themselves friends or emphasise ‘a feeling of friendship’ (interview with a member).

The monthly meetings of the members take place in a residence, most often in the kitchen or living room of one of the members (in turn), with family photos and other signs of private and intimate life all around. The members share a meal there, in the comfort of a familiar place. While discussing group-related matters, members intersperse conversations about their lives and possible mutual aid. It is not uncommon at the beginning of a meeting to ask about each other’s families as well as about those who are absent, and thus to take some time to greet each other.

Engagements of care—attention, solicitousness, and concern<sup>7</sup>—are at the core of the relationships. They allow to consider positively a relationship based on vulnerability (Garrau & Le Goff, 2009) or a way of being that reveals the vulnerability and dependencies of the human being (Centemeri, 2015). At the time of this survey, several of this group’s members were in vulnerable situations, financially (precarious jobs, bankruptcy of the family artisanal business) or emotionally (bereavement, loss of property). Therefore, a central concern for these members was to share the comforting familiar with others, to develop a community of familiarity, made up of ease and solicitousness for others. This ease provides a reassuring foundation for the individual, which is crucial for exploring new things—or even for gradually building up autonomy (Centemeri, 2015).

Familiar engagement is also present in the relationships that group members have with producers. The consumer members are called ‘godfathers’ or ‘godmothers’ of the products, instead of the person ‘responsible’ for the product, indicating a good-natured and familiar relationship of accompaniment. The members seek above all a personal relationship with the producers, whom they choose more ‘through acquaintance’ and word of mouth than on the basis of a debated charter, perceived in the group as ‘too theoretical’ or ‘intellectual’ (interview with members, see below). The group frequently goes to meet the producers on their farms, to discuss their difficulties (material, access to land, farming set-up, etc.) and to share a meal, sometimes ‘between two rows of vegetables’. These forms of meetings encourage a growing concern on what may affect the producers. In case a producer is experiencing personal difficulties, group members show their sympathy through personal gestures, such as

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<sup>7</sup> See for example Paperman and Laugier (2005), Tronto (1993).

by writing a letter of condolence on the group's behalf. In addition, some producers are themselves consumer members of the group, and attend the group's meetings in the same spirit of togetherness. These meetings and farm visits have made it possible to develop ease and personal links little by little.

## 2.2 *Contesting and Arguing in Public for Solidarities*

The SEMSE group from Montpellier is much larger<sup>8</sup> and its engagement is based on expressing indignation towards capitalism.

This buying group, which historically grew out of an anarchist-inspired group in the mid-2000s, defines itself as a self-managed group, in a rejection of forms of domination and hierarchy. Unlike the Yummy-Yum group, the members meet (every month) in a public place (an activist hangout). Most of them are involved in global movements such as anti-globalisation, support for the autonomy of Zapatista communities, etc., about which they exchange information, linking the local and concrete level of their engagement to more global causes (see also Louviaux, 2011). More political than a simple charter, their manifesto sets out the group's higher principles, based on a 'market' critique of capitalism and a 'civic' engagement (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1991). This engagement accords importance to solidarity with producers (e.g. help in setting up peasant agriculture) and to independence from the current dominant economic system, especially from supermarket chains 'which exploit the land as well as the people' (buying group manifesto, 2011).

This engagement to build a fairer and more just world is manifested in a public test: an open, frank and vigorous discussion by the participants of all arguments for and against each proposal. Participants require a high degree of emotional detachment since disagreements are very publicly exposed. Decisions by the group are taken 'by consensus', i.e. without a vote<sup>9</sup> and, above all, by the unanimous agreement of those present (without proxies). The members have to be substantially invested: apart from the fact that one has to be present to be able to influence a decision, obtaining the unanimity of those present is based on a presentation and discussion of everyone's arguments, with debates concluding with a final 'going around the table'. The capacities required to take part in this public test of 'qualifying the common good' (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1991) can make some participants uncomfortable.

The process also requires an investment over a long period of time that is not well defined in advance, far removed from an efficiency-oriented managerial framework: 'We are not in a hurry [...], we are not going to pursue profitability [...] so we are going to take the time we need to discuss' (Véronique, one of the founding members).

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<sup>8</sup> About 200 members in 2011, although attendance at monthly meetings consists of only between 5 and 40 members.

<sup>9</sup> Voting is eschewed because it tends to cut short the debate ('Voting means giving up discussion'), imposes a majority point of view and because the decision, which becomes less reversible, lends itself less to reflective examination.

But at the same time the discussion process is a key aspect that most of the members enjoy. Indeed, for members the discussion is accorded more importance than the arrival at its resolution—which can even be reviewed in a subsequent reflective moment. However, this reflective attitude makes the process demanding, with some participants even experiencing it as tiring (see also Louviaux, 2011).

Some members express their capacity of critical distancing as humour, self-mockery and irony. Some use irony, not only towards the system they are criticising, but also sometimes to express disagreements within the buying group. These moments of ‘implied criticism’ can be seen as a fumbling for criticism (Daucé, 2017; Thévenot et al., 2017), and also a dissidence which, if not taken to its conclusion, becomes part of a movement of emancipation of thought (Géraud, 1999). The use of nicknames or the inclusion of cultural quotations<sup>10</sup> by some members in their signature blocks in written exchanges demonstrates their commitment to a critical, but also playful, public life,<sup>11</sup> which distances them from their everyday life so that they can act differently (Legout, 2003). This resonates with the inventive energy of the ‘humorous utopia’ of the activists of 19th-century consumption cooperatives (Guillaume, 2007b<sup>12</sup>). Humour, which is milder than irony, is present in a number of oral and written exchanges, for example in the form of critical puns or comic poetic prose, such as a meeting report entirely in rhyme, which also allows for a certain reflective lucidity.<sup>13</sup>

The participants express their concern about creating social links, in a political conception which is rooted in individual freedom and not in attachment. In contrast with the Yummy-Yum buying group, ‘If a person has not been coming for a while, we are not concerned, we don’t ask questions.’ Not everyone knows each other’s first names (or even their nicknames). Most of the participants have a stable professional and social situation and/or a political posture that values individual autonomy (teachers, civil servants, activist members of multiple networks or of anarchist culture, etc.). The spirit of autonomy, in the sense of freedom of choice and independence from near and dear ones (Pattaroni, 2007), leads members to oppose any centralisation and specialisation of tasks (e.g. they take turns to write minutes of meetings). The members keep the ties of proximity that bind them at a distance, as illustrated by this statement from Thomas: ‘We all find it hard to come forward when we are in a difficult situation. We are too afraid to ask for help from others, society has taught us to manage on our own.’

Nor do members get very close to the producers even after several months. Only the person in charge of a product is in contact with the producer, and theirs is not

<sup>10</sup> From literature, notable thinkers, cult films, etc.

<sup>11</sup> Criticism of institutions and hierarchies, such as the family and school (which transmitted and assigned value to a first name): ‘There comes a moment when you become an adult, you make yourself; I was made for something other than school’ (a member who gave himself a nickname).

<sup>12</sup> In reference to Gallus, *La Marmite libératrice ou le commerce transformé. Simple entretien* (1865). Preface by Henri Desroche, Paris, Balland, Bibliothèque des utopies, 1978.

<sup>13</sup> One of the lines, ‘Even if, as always, no consensus emerges’, underlines, for example, the constraint that surrounds the deliberation. Another, ‘The prophetic tribe of pains-in-the-backside rice eaters’ refers to a heated discussion of disagreements (meeting report, 2014).



necessarily an enduring relationship. Almost half of the producers are geographically distant. Farm visits are much rarer than for the Yummy-Yum buying group.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, in the manner of the *Ligue Sociale d'Acheteurs* (LSA) of the early 1900s (Chessel, 2017), the producers are chosen and 'validated' after an 'investigation' by the group's members. This investigation, in the form of an interview-test, is sometimes undertaken collectively, during a meeting of the group to which the candidate producer is invited to answer specific questions on the social and environmental conditions of his production. Each proposal for a new product is an opportunity for the group to take a reflective look at its own practices and values, and potentially a source of tension.

### 3 Tensions in the Buying Groups Between Regimes of Engagement

As places of collective social experimentation, these buying groups also experience tensions. These tensions have the advantage of constantly reminding the members of—or redefining—what is important, and, in this case, of redefining solidarity.

#### 3.1 *The 'Investigation' of Production Conditions as a Source of Tensions*

The internal tensions in the SEMSE buying group in 2011 were largely crystallised around the process of the 'investigation', and in particular the interview process for approval of producers by the group, in the members' presence. This interview requires the producer to call on his skills of public presentation and justification in front of a group that behaves like an informed jury. In many cases, the producers felt they emerged more worthy after having passed the test and from being fully recognised for their often isolated activity. 'It was a bit intimidating at times [...], but on a narcissistic level, it was great. I felt good that everyone was interested in me, which is not often the case' (producer). But some producers experience a certain amount of anxiety during this public test, similar to that felt during an oral exam. This public experience proved to be very trying for some of the producers and consequently for some members of the group, who criticised what they saw as a lack of care towards the invited producers. For example, a producer who was invited to present his product to the entire group and answer a series of the members' questions mentioned that his trees, affected by a disease, had to be treated with a synthetic pyrethrum. He was then subjected to a stream of criticism from members, who urged him to 'convert to organic'. The producer finally got angry, reminding the members of his

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<sup>14</sup> This was true at the time of the survey. The buying group later tried to overcome internal tensions (mentioned below) by getting closer to the producers and visiting their farms more often.

financial dependence on and his links to his cooperative. One of the group's members then interrupted him, loudly reminding him of his freedom of choice and individual responsibility: 'It's your decision, too! [...] I say: don't make excuses. Farmers have gotten into the subsidy business because it makes them money.' Several members of the group then proffered advice to the producer by giving him information and contacts of associations that help with the 'conversion to organic'. This encounter provoked a series of reactions during subsequent discussions between members. One of them expressed her unease, taking offence at the emotionally violent ordeal: 'I find that people [producers] are put in unacceptable situations... I'm sorry, but this is intolerable! [...] He knows what organic is, he wasn't born yesterday.' This opinion was not shared by all, with other members responding that such exchanges are also the purpose of the process: 'Being in front of a group can make him think and admit that he can still change his production method.' Ultimately, this producer's products were not 'validated' by the group, and tensions eased after the reminder of the necessity for a pre-investigation before inviting a candidate to appear before the group. The internal criticism revealed by this episode highlights the modalities of exclusion inherent in a model of critical deliberation, given the constraint placed on individuals unprepared for these tests, especially vulnerable individuals (Young, 2000; Charles, 2012).

Furthermore, disagreements between the group's members also sometimes stray from the ideal model of general and formal deliberation, and slide into personal attacks and exchanges some experience as particularly aggressive. This has led some members to leave the buying group. The lengthy debates of indefinite duration, disagreements that sometimes appear to be irreconcilable<sup>15</sup> and the unevenly applied boundaries of a self-framing by the members sometimes lead to exasperation and the escalation into more hostile exchanges.

Solidarity is also tested by the freedom of choice, valued in a pursuit of individual autonomy (see also Pleyers, 2011). One producer, who announced an increase in the price of a product without any justification, faced an immediate reaction from members: they stopped buying from him. He then complained to the group about a lack of solidarity. He finally explained the significant losses he was making on his crop, forcing him to review his cost price. He also regretted the lack of response from the group to his various requests for non-monetary aid. At a subsequent meeting, faced with this price increase, some members argued that 'purchasing is a matter of individual choice', and finally noted that 'there are limits to solidarity'. In this particular case, the group also discussed the capacities of the producers that it had validated in this way: 'Does the producer have to be a good communicator [i.e. able to justify or clearly explain] in order to bring about solidarity?' The group finally recognised a need to develop closer relations with the producers in their own

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<sup>15</sup> For example, many members expressed support for undocumented migrants whereas a new participant was against 'mass immigration'. During discussions, both sides' positions hardened, and their written exchanges degenerated into personal attacks and insults ('ignorant fools', 'your argument is most stupid', 'cultural colonist', etc.).

environments, through farm visits by its members, and thus made an effort to get closer to producers.

These tensions highlight the pressure that the modalities of constant investigation (Chessel, 2017) and individual autonomy exert on the regime of familiarity and affection and on care.

### ***3.2 Yummy-Yum: Pressure on the Regime of Familiarity***

In the Yummy-Yum buying group, it is, in contrast, the engagement in the regime of familiarity and affection that has invited criticism internally by some members because it reduces ‘political engagement’ in the choices of products and producers. Three members in particular lamented the fact that instead of an investigation into the social and environmental conditions of production, it is ‘love at first sight, the interpersonal relationship with the producers [living in or near these villages] or the price negotiation that prevails.’ They suggested introducing, as in the SEMSE group, the process of investigations and debates, and drafting a charter to define the group’s main principles. But this charter was rejected by the group’s core members:

‘I thought it was too much, compared to what we were doing, it was much too intellectual.’ ‘I think that the system still works because we know each other well, we see each other [in other contexts, e.g. meeting by chance in the market or in the village, etc.]’

During a meeting, Virginie, one of the aforementioned three members, criticised the others for not having asked sufficiently probing questions to a trout producer proposed by the group. She questioned the choice of this producer, who had not been surveyed about his ecological footprint, the density of his farm or the anthropisation of the water. But the group’s core chooses to maintain a distance from the expert knowledge required to engage in an investigation, and instead accords value to social ties and proximity:

‘We went to visit his farm. He said he wasn’t organic, that’s true, but compared to the others, we knew that he was better. Afterwards, it’s true, I didn’t ask him how many trout per cubic metre of water he had. I’m not expert enough in trout farming to tell him how he should do it’ (statement at a meeting).

The regime of familiarity and affection was also called into question when these three group members regretted the ‘lack of formalism’ which would ‘improve efficiency’, noting the absence of minutes of meetings, order forms, and product data sheets, necessary in their opinion for organising and even developing the group’s activities. In response, almost all the members expressed their fears that this focus on efficiency would undermine the kinship and ease that prevail in familiar places and ways. Luc preferred the ‘efficiency of his hands’ over managerial efficiency. Laura feared losing ‘feelings of togetherness’ and pointed out that if the group were to grow, the (family) conditions for meetings would be jeopardised, and Agnès added that she does not feel ‘very comfortable in large groups’.

The same members were also very unenthusiastic about opening up the group to new members. While all agreed with the idea of opening it up to a moderate level, most were uncomfortable with Virginie’s proposal to communicate publicly at a farmers’ market and to offer an open sign-up list in order to bring in new people. One member (also a producer) tried to counter this proposal by suggesting that they should instead rely on word of mouth, so that personal relationships between individuals could be maintained. However, one participant finally suggested that the next meeting, in preparation for this opening up of the group, should not be held in a familiar place, but in a public hall in the village. Finally, at the meeting following the farmers’ market, organised in the public hall, the buying group’s members discovered that none of them had taken responsibility for contacting the people on the list. The arrival of potential new members creates uncertainty on the pursuit of engagements of care and familiarity.

Generally speaking, criticism in meetings from a few members about the group’s lack of effectiveness, its reluctance to take in new members or the methods of selecting producers are not followed by a debate, nor by clearly expressed opposition from other members. The latter, when they are challenged, prefer to consider splitting the group. Some critical members have also already left the group and one of them complained: ‘There are no debates, no decisions because people know each other and when there are debates, it is not to clarify a decision (a disagreement), it fails immediately.’ Another critical member sees this avoidance of decision-making and debate as a difficulty in voicing disagreement. The ease of familiarity and the care for each other developed between members leaves little room for public dispute, which could be detrimental to the personal relationships that the members maintain. The consequences of a possible break-up go beyond the simple loss of a source of quality food products. For some members in fragile professional or family situations, it is the continuity of familiar ties and the assurance they provide (Thévenot, 2015) that is more important than an informed choice by consumers regarding production conditions.

These tensions reveal what the members of the group are keen to preserve: instead of a deliberative model, an exchange that is based on an emphasis on solicitousness and attention, and which aims ‘not at the independence of individuals, but at an attitude of mutual concern open to the always specific forms of vulnerability’<sup>16</sup> (Garrau & Le Goff, 2009).

## 4 Solidarity with Producers

These two buying groups both aim to support peasant agriculture, which encompasses not only varied production methods, but also very specific (and unconventional) ones. They re-ascribe value to local ecologies in contrast to the specialisation of labour and land found in the agri-chains of globalised and integrated markets. Through the products they choose, they support mobility of agriculture (transhumance of animals and beehives, nomadism), the association of several species on the same plot of land, pluriactivity, biodynamics, collection of produce, animal husbandry on natural meadows, and local hardy breeds. Some of the producers they support do not yet have a formal status of farmer when they start or are *cotisant solidaires*.<sup>17</sup>

These groups also promote products recognised for their dietary virtues (e.g. spirulina, old varieties) and local and/or organic farming, with or without certification (the investigation or familiar engagement with producers already allows consumers to ensure environmental protection).

However, these two groups do not engage in the same forms of solidarity with producers. The specific modalities of their collective actions lead us to distinguish between two different forms of support.

### 4.1 Civic Solidarity ‘at a Distance’

SEMSE members engage in solidarity through the expression of indignation based on a principle of ‘civic justice’ (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1991). Their financial support, relatively ‘at a distance’, is aimed at societal change.

Members choose to help low-income producers and/or those newly starting out, on the margins of conventional agri-chains, by committing themselves to financial support. This can be done through sponsorship by pre-financing part of the production, contributions to participatory funding (interest-free loans), or accepting the prices proposed by these producers without any negotiation. One beekeeper, for

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<sup>16</sup> Translation by the author.

<sup>17</sup> Formal status accords full protection under social security, but requires full contributions. *Cotisant solidaires* (joint contributors) are those who make limited contributions to the social security system and, in return, enjoy accident insurance but no health insurance or retirement benefits. Most farmers embarking on the profession with small surface areas at the beginning choose this status until their activities increase.

example, obtained half of the funding for her hives from the group's members. They provided more than 2000 euros in total in exchange for the delivery of 3 kg of honey per year to each funder. This support for starting out was critical, especially since the producer did not yet have a formal status. In another case, members of the group encouraged a producer to revise his prices upwards in order to incorporate missing elements into his production costing and thus make a better living from his work. Price negotiation is eschewed, as it is seen as unfair in the case of a producer who has no marketing skills, and as a way of opposing the relationships of domination and power observed in globalised food chains.<sup>18</sup> Proposals for attractive products have also been refused on the grounds that the producer did not need the group's financial support, as revealed for example 'very clearly by the communications budget invested on his website'.

The group supports producers who explicitly engage in the same criticism of conventional agriculture—and even of institutions—as the members, in a form of political convergence. By adopting them, the group allows them to deploy their critical postures and alternative practices through improved visibility and networking. This is the case of the 'Zapatista rebel coffee', bought from a cooperative in Chiapas in Mexico through an association that supports the coffee farmers' demands for autonomy. Another producer, supplier to the group, presented itself as 'a collective enterprise that functions without ever having asked for or received a cent of public aid', in the same distancing from the State as that of the group's members. The investigation process also selects candidates on this basis (via questions on the support that the producers have requested or received 'from Europe', for example).

Finally, these producers usually have the same critical capacities and individual autonomy as the members,<sup>19</sup> and are endowed by some intellectual and/or financial capital. The producers we met were either in the process of changing careers to farming after leaving a desk job or even long studies, or are embarking on structural changes in the family farm, envisaged as creations or projects. Here too, the validation process filters towards these capacities, if only because the prospective producers have to handle and pass the test of the interview (see above), argue about their project and spell out their commitment. Although they emerge from this process feeling more worthy, these tests are more difficult for vulnerable producers.

## 4.2 *Solidarity in Familiarity and Affection*

Some of the producers in the Yummy-Yum group are less endowed with intellectual or financial capital, even though they too may have changed careers (after working as a labourer, for example). Some do not own land. They are all geographically close to the group's members (the two most distant producers are 60 km away, the others

<sup>18</sup> Even though these principles are challenged by the principle of freedom of choice (see above).

<sup>19</sup> Recourse to humour and literary quotations (high cultural capital) are also part of the repertoire of some of the group's producers (on their flyers for example).

on average 15 km). This is in contrast with the SEMSE buying group, almost half of whose producers are from outside the Hérault and Gard departments.

Solidarity in this buying group is expressed by a concern and a solicitousness for what affects the other, from major stressful events to the small details of everyday life. It is also expressed through support for close producers, for example by coming to help on the farm in case of difficulties, including personal ones. During a meeting, Valentine, a goat cheese producer and also member of the group as a consumer, spoke of difficulties concerning her farm, which she could no longer manage on her own, following the departure of her husband. The group heard her out very carefully, and some members offered to organise mutual aid days (to fence her plot, etc.). One of the workcamps involved refurbishing her mobile homes, in which she was living alone with her children, repairing the roof and hooking them up to running water. Aid concerned not only her professional life, but also her personal life; the group took care of her daughters.

Listening to turbulent and distressing life stories of producers and taking care to welcome them in tactfully created conditions of ease, sometimes involving listening to a third party who not only knows the person well, but also has experienced these difficulties himself or herself, complements this moral and emotional support. Valentine refers to this group's unusual ability to care about the difficulties that others may be experiencing and their vulnerability: 'This group has a dynamic that is quite unusual, and yet it has experience of some hard times, because there is me, all right, but there are others who have lived through difficult times' (referring also to non-producer members).

This group is more welcoming of producers in vulnerable situations, or who have a very small production that is very unsystematic and does not allow them to develop a real market. Maintaining the link is also crucial. One of the producers, for example, always delivers his products, even though not everyone thinks they are of very good quality: 'She invites Gérard (producer) into her house to eat something even if his products are not great. It's good to have people like that, who leave the door open. Gerard is reassured and encouraged, rather than being turned away; [...] she brings this confidence to say... everyone does what they can!'

## 5 Conclusion: Transitioners<sup>20</sup> but Towards What Type of Solidarities?

Our analysis of the regimes of engagement specific to each of the two groups indicates two quite different movements to support peasant agriculture in territories. The first supports producers who do not conform to a model of industrial agriculture integrated with the large-scale distribution of supermarket chains, a model which they contest. It thus accords value to local agroecologies, embedded in a project to (re)qualify the common good. This regime of engagement facilitates and makes visible a social and

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<sup>20</sup> Term used in a buying group.

environmental criticism of production models and supports alternatives to them, as evidenced by the SEMSE group.

The second regime of engagement has the capacity to support producers in vulnerable situations through care and solicitousness. It proceeds from an engagement with the familiar, which favours relationships between members and accommodates the environment to achieve a certain familiarity. For example, in the case of Yummy-Yum, meetings around shared meals, organised at members' homes or at farms, allow individuals to establish links with each other and with producers. The purpose of these meetings is far from deliberative; it is instead to experience an emotional communication, which accords primacy to narratives and greetings for example, in order to make a community (Young, 2000, quoted by Garrau & Le Goff, 2009; Thévenot, 2015). This comparison makes it possible to place the transition, in this second case, in a wider space than that of the visible public space, whether critical or technical. A more silent transition (Lucas et al., 2020), although present, does not necessarily involve the formulation of a project or a protest. Other ways of making a community, less visible, develop in a familiar, benevolent engagement.

These two groups are vehicles for a transition that is very different from those of transformation projects driven by sustainability standards, technical indicators and objectives, which are now favoured by the market and public policies (from certified product properties to performance contracts). Groups such as SEMSE are the proponents of a transition underpinned by an explicitly critical political project, an alternative to a technical democracy that renounces the qualification of the common good. They help raise general awareness of the issues at stake and are catalysts for critical positions (Hubaux, 2011). However, due to their mistrust of the State, official arenas remain oblivious to these developments. These groups are largely linked in a spirit of 'convergence of struggles' and aim at a social transformation that would take place through 'swarming', following the example of the cooperatives of the nineteenth century (Guillaume, 2007a), forming a 'politics of small steps' (Louviaux, 2011). For their part, groups anchored in the regime of familiarity and affection (such as Yummy-Yum) are the proponents of a transition that envisages relations of vulnerability as potentially positive and are capable of welcoming them. They are open to producers who do not necessarily have the critical capacities and individual autonomy that are necessary in the previous case.

The originality of these buying groups is that they support critical capacities that emphasise civic engagement and the capacities to embrace a vulnerable public, which are no longer necessarily the focus of public solidarity policies, let alone the market. Indeed, the types of producers supported by these groups are not generally the most visible to or targeted by support policies.



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