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Generational transfer and social sustainability in the dairy sheep farms of the Basque country

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Abstract. Generational transfer in family farms is a vital factor for the social sustainability of livestock production systems. This sustainability is threatened, not because globalization will eventually put an end to small-scale agriculture, as predicted by certain authors, but simply because many younger members of farming families no longer decide to take up farming. The aim of this paper is to present and to explain, from a sociological perspective, the reasons and the social processes that drive young people either to abandon livestock farming or to remain in the sector. To that end, the context of dairy sheep farming is examined in the Basque Country and the decisions taken by the younger members of farming families with first-hand experience of the problems surrounding succession. A qualitative approach is chosen in which 24 "in-depth" interviews were conducted with the younger members of farming families. The results show, first of all, the existence of a complex set of factors and discourses framed in the context of post-modern agrarian society. Furthermore, our analysis reveals the presence of four different profiles and social discourses among the younger members of farming families facing the problem of succession.

Keywords. Dairy sheep production – Family farming – Social sustainability – Land succession – Young farmers.

Changement de génération et durabilité sociale pour la production de brebis laitières de la Communauté Autonome Basque

Résumé. Le remplacement des générations dans l'agriculture familiale est un élément essentiel pour la viabilité sociale des systèmes de production animale. Le but de cet article est de présenter et d'expliquer, à partir d'un point de vue sociologique, les raisons et les processus sociaux impliqués dans la décision soit d'abandon de l'élevage familial soit de permanence dans cette activité. Pour ce faire, nous nous concentrons sur le contexte de l'élevage de brebis laitières de la Communauté Autonome Basque et la décision des enfants d'éleveurs vivant à la première personne la relève agricole de la famille. Nous avons choisi une approche qualitative en menant 24 entretiens "en profondeur" pour les descendants des éleveurs. Les résultats montrent, en premier lieu, l'existence d'une complexité des facteurs et des discours qui s'inscrivent dans le contexte nouveau de la société agraire post-moderne. D'autre part, notre analyse révèle la présence de quatre profils différents et discours sociaux des enfants d'agriculteurs dans la succession à la ferme familiale.

Mots-clés. Production de brebis laitières – Agriculture familiale – Durabilité sociale – Succession – Jeunes agriculteurs.

I – Introduction

The study of generational transfer in agriculture has been a central theme of agrarian social sciences (Pérez Díaz, 1966; Mendras, 1992; Etxezarreta, 1977). As a field of study, however, its appeal has faded over recent decades, because family farming is a form of production that has gradually been losing ground, as a consequence of progressive capitalist industrialization, globalization and liberalization of the market for agricultural produce, as well as inherent processes of social change (Naredo, 1996). Likewise, agriculture and livestock farming have become unsustainable activities, in both social and economic terms. This work centres on the

social sustainability of the agricultural family and on one of its aspects: the continuance of the agricultural population.

Social sustainability has, for years, remained hidden behind economic sustainability or has been considered an integral part of it (Camarero *et al.*, 2009). This has meant that the gradual drop in the numbers of people that decide to become agricultural or livestock farmers has been justified by the economic viability and growth of agrarian exploitations, moving other factors aside that also intervene in the gradual exodus and ageing of the agrarian population. Social sustainability is understood as "the existence of a diverse and equitable human structure, sufficiently active and interconnected to generate social and economic dynamics that are capable of satisfactorily meeting the material and subjective needs of all the social groups that constitute the population of a territory". Thus, the end purpose of social sustainability is none other than that of stabilising the population in those areas where their survival may not be guaranteed beyond one or two decades, if the same demographic dynamic continues (Alario and Baraja, 2006).

The main objective of this work is to explain part of the social sustainability of productive systems, mindful of the survival of family farms from the perspective of those who are considered the protagonists: the younger members of agricultural and livestock farming families. Thus, the study will look at their decisions that, in livestock farming families, relate to the continued presence of their business in the agro-livestock sector, more specifically dairy sheep farming in the Basque Region. By doing so, the aim is to understand the process by which the younger members of agricultural and livestock farming families decide to continue to work on the family farm or to abandon it for other employment options in the context of the new rurality. For this, a qualitative approach is chosen in which 24 "in-depth" interviews were conducted with the younger members of farming families.

II – The causes of lack of continuity in family farming

Before defining the focal point of our study, it is necessary to account for certain characteristics of family farming, as well as for the factors that determine its incapacity to regenerate social and productive structures.

Allowing for finer distinctions, it could be said that family farming takes place whenever one or more family members constitute the farm and the greater part of the work force. According to Friedmann (1978), one of its general characteristics is precisely that of the continued existence of the family farm over the generations. Given technical progress and social transformations, some people suggest that agriculture and the family are two separate dimensions today. The family no longer participates as a whole in the running of the farm, due to processes of individualization and the different expectations of each of family member. However, it continues to be relevant and of importance with regard to patrimony, in the search for economic stability and in the actual participation in agrarian tasks (Gómez-Benito and González, 2002).

The reasons for the reduced presence of family farms, both in Spain as well as in the Basque Country, constitute a theme that has been approached from various disciplines and theoretical stances. From among them, four main groups may be distinguished. In the first place, the structural factors, which in turn encompass two different sub-types. On the one hand, those relating to the farm holding, which is to say, the economic results of the farming activity, and the factors that make up the holding such as land ownership and its extension and diversification of production. On the other hand, factors that are linked to the socio-economic structures where the farm holding is situated: employment alternatives nearby and the infrastructure that surrounds the farm holding (equipment, services, access roads and mobility alternatives); and, the successional norms relating to the succession of the agricultural patrimony of the family.

The second group is made up of factors relating to changes in social values. We refer here to modifications caused by socio-economic transformations that ensue from the development of capitalism. These are values that relate to the perception of agriculture as a profession, the

dignity of work and the role of the family. In the third group, I include family factors that refer to all those processes and strategies in which the family intervenes to try to avoid the abandonment of agrarian activity. In the fourth and last place, individual factors appear that refer to the particular characteristics of potential agriculturalists such as the educational profile of the potential successors, their personal preferences and the individual careers that they have followed. Without forgetting the importance of the gender of the descendants, which in the case of women, historically invisible, continue to encounter many difficulties and a situation that is frequently damaged by the union between family and farm holding.

The present work has sought to bring together, to a greater or lesser extent, each and every one of these perspectives, although it has obviously attributed greater importance to the individual decision of the successors, the true protagonists in the process. This is perhaps what the sociological context in which we live requires of us.

III – The context and the methodology of the study

1. The Basque agrarian sector: dairy sheep

The agricultural activity in the economy of the Basque Country is of scarce importance and is progressively losing force. At present, the agricultural and fishing sectors represent 1% of PIB (2005) and 2.3% of all employment (2007). In the Final Agrarian Production (FAP) 2007, the agricultural and livestock sub-sectors were those that contributed most to the Basque agrarian economy: 52% and 34% of FAP, respectively. In contrast, the contribution of forestry is almost 12%¹.

One of the most relevant livestock activities and the one with the longest tradition is sheep farming and in particular dairy sheep farming. Briefly, it may be said that dairy sheep in the Basque Country represent a sector made up of 2,120 commercial dairy sheep farms².

Its medium size stands out among its characteristics – small, of a markedly family nature and according to the data, highly aged. The odd cases of intensive livestock farming, similar to those developed in other Autonomous Regions, may be combined with farms with little land where the dairy sheep farmers share their tasks on the farm with external employment³. All in all, a heterogeneous reality which has however a common denominator, the clear lack of generational succession.

Nevertheless, the livestock sector has undergone a degree of revitalization as a consequence of the growth of "artisanal" productive systems in recent years. One of the products from these farms –cheese– has become a highly valued product and, therefore, in great demand. And the *Denominación de Origen Idiazabal* is the commercialization method used by Basque dairy sheep farmers and promoted by regional government institutions. It is a very popular trade mark for the commercialization of milk and cheese in the Basque Country as well as the rest of Spain, thanks to socio-economic attitude which attributes growing importance to the origin and identity of the agrarian products and traditional foods. In addition to the unquestionable quality of the product, it may be affirmed that Idiazabal has involved the creation of a vigorous sales network,

¹ According to the *Encuesta de Estructuras de las Explotaciones Agrarias* [Survey of Structures on Agrarian Holdings] 2007.

² The figures relating to dairy sheep farms are taken from the 1999 Agrarian Census. Unfortunately, it has not been possible to offer more recent data from the 2009 Agrarian Census, which we are still unable to access. Other data sources are discounted because they are incomplete such as those from the statistical source quoted above, Survey of Structures on Agrarian Holdings, or the livestock health campaigns.

³ For a more complete description of the dairy sheep sector, see Ramos Truchero, G. (2009): *La sucesión en la ganadería familiar: el ovino de leche en el País Vasco*, Vitoria, Servicio Central de Publicaciones del Gobierno Vasco.

a transformation of organizational practice within the holding and above all, visibility and the revitalization of livestock farming.

As well as this advantageous alimentary situation, the permanence of dairy sheep farms in the Basque region has two specific characteristics that can affect their stability: the legal systems for the transfer of agricultural property and the specific measures adopted by public authorities with regard to the problem of generational transfer in Basque agriculture.

A. The transfer of agricultural patrimony in the Basque Country

As already pointed out, inheritance and the regulations on the transfer of agricultural property figure among the factors that are usually advanced to explain the lack of generational succession (Guri and Jouve, 2009). Inheritance is the legal transfer of property rights over all the constituent parts of the family-owned agrarian exploitation (Blanc and Perriet-Cornet, 1993). The way in which the family plans the succession is fundamental for the viability of the agrarian business, both from a material and an affective perspective (Cabrera and García, 2000). Without going into the various comparative models, inheritance rights in Spain are subject to legal pluralism due to the existence of "*foral*"⁴ civil law. This is also the case in the Basque country.

Two legal models for the legal transfer of property coexist within the Basque region. The most widespread model, which predominates in Álava and Guipúzcoa, corresponds to those established in the Civil Code. It fosters equal stakes among all the heirs of the *caudal relicto* [the estate of the deceased], which implies the division of the farm holding as a further part of the family patrimony. Navajas Laporte (1975) has already pointed out in the 1970s that this system could be causing the disappearance of farm holdings in the Basque Country, either because of its fragmentation, or the financial burden that the successor has to assume in relation to the co-successors.

The "*fueros*" of Vizcaya and Ayala constitute the second model, which are applicable throughout the province of Vizcaya and small part of Álava. Both permit the agrarian holding to be maintained intact, insofar as the inheritance may be claimed by one single successor. It is of interest to point out that, in 1999, the institutions amended civil legislation in Guipúzcoa, so that the farms and the family holding could be indivisibly transferred to one single successor, thereby allowing the successor who so wishes to take charge of the agrarian business, without bearing the death duties that would otherwise ensue from the estate.

Curiously, contrary to what was thought, the norm in Guipuzcoa is not applied. Moreover, we would say that the farm holdings have no opportunity to put it into practice, as there are often no successors to whom it may be transferred (Arrieta, 1998).

B. Policies on the establishment of farm holdings in the agrarian sector in the Basque region

Public institutions in the Basque Region have been raising awareness of the problem of the lack of agrarian generational transfer and have a stable structure of supporting measures in that regard. Both the Regional and Central Government started to draw up action plans related to agrarian succession for the period 1994-1997. The plans are, in reality, the transposition of different European Union regulations on the matter. We shall not examine the content of each programme in detail, but we may say that an emerging institutional and regulatory network exists in the Basque region that is intended to help and protect young people who chose to work in agriculture. Different plans and measures may be found that are designed to do so.

⁴ The "*Fueros*" or "*Derecho foral*" are old laws based on historic rights that are applicable only in certain regions of Spain.

In general, these measures involve financial benefits, direct and indirect financial assistance and scholarship programmes, intended to foster the establishment of new farmers, consolidate farm holdings managed by young people, assist with the retirement of older farmers and facilitate the transfer of agricultural property. All these measures have formed part of different plans and regulatory norms, although they have all finally been grouped under the umbrella of the *Plan de Jóvenes Agricultores de la Comunidad Autónoma Vasca – Gaztet*, prepared in 2005. As far as we know, it is the first governmental initiative in Spain specifically directed at a cross-cutting approach to the problems of agrarian succession and the lack of generational transfer. Evidently, like all pioneering policies, it has weaknesses: excessive bureaucracy to access the grants, regulatory rigidity and overlapping norms and the preparation of measures that do not manage to cover all the circumstances in which potential successors may find themselves (Izquierdo, 2007).

2. Study methodology

The methodological design is based on a qualitative approach to social reality. Given the nature of this study, the information that we wish to obtain from this investigation is directly related to the understanding and interpretation of wishes, opinions, experiences and feelings of the younger members of dairy sheep farmers with respect to the continuity of their families' farm holdings.

Among the qualitative methods, the semi-structured interview was considered the most appropriate technique to comply with the purpose of our study. The interviews were conducted with the offspring of dairy sheep farmers. These interviewees were chosen, insofar as the percentage of dairy sheep farmers from outside the sector is insignificant. Management of the farm holdings invariably remains in the same family. Interviews were considered necessary to understand family motivations in relation to the problem of generational transfer in the agrarian small-holdings.

The interviewees selected for the study are people aged between 18 and 45 years old, whose parents were at some point in the past in charge of a commercial farm specializing in the production of dairy sheep products, located in the Basque Country. When we talk about commercial agrarian holdings, we refer to those farms in which the greater part of the income comes from the production and commercialization of dairy sheep products. The geographical focus on the three provinces of the Basque Region looked at four administrative districts: Encartaciones, Arratia-Nervi6n, Cant6brica Alavesa and Goierri. Four administrative districts that were thought to encompass the diversity of the dairy sheep sector. The main body of the research involved a total of 24 interviews.

IV – Results: The decisions of the young dairy sheep farmers

The results of this study have been classified into four different discourses and situations and two similar ones, taking account of personal experiences and the arrangement of the factors that have been shaping the decision-making processes in relation to the continued existence or abandonment of the family business.

1. Born in a livestock family

It has to be pointed out that being born in a livestock farming family implies that the younger members of the family engage in a shared discourse around early contact with the different aspects of livestock work and with the animals –sheep– that are kept on the farm. The parents always guide their children towards studies so that they may leave work on the farm holding or find an alternative to it in the future. In consequence, the parents instil in their children that "the

first thing" for them should be education and if they do not find satisfactory employment, they will always have the alternative of staying on the family farm. However, it is inevitable that in the end the direct relation with the chores of livestock farming and the farm holding, often converted into real obligations, create affective bonds within the family business.

2. Offspring with a vocation for livestock farming

As the epigone of the shared discourse, in the first place there is the discourse of those with a vocation for the work. This is repeated by the younger members of the family that decide to follow the family profession. It is characterized by being an eminently masculine and minority group among the group of interviewees. The continuity of livestock and family activity is clearly determined by subjective elements. In other words, we would say that the most important thing for them is the satisfaction they get from tasks relating to sheep and the strong ties that they feel for the survival of the family business, for which they consider themselves responsible.

Perhaps for this reason, they soon leave their studies, to start work on the farm earlier. Knowledge of livestock learnt with the family is usually complemented by professional agrarian training available at the *Escuela de Pastores de Aranzazu*. Economic gain is not the principal motive that leads young people to stay on the farm. If we add to that a preference for self-employment and the importance that they attribute to artisanal knowledge in order to carry out their daily tasks, it could be said that this conception of the profession of the dairy farmer fits in with the discourse of the post-modern work aesthetic (Bauman, 2005).

3. Family work as an employment opportunity

The second discourse, described here as "family work as an employment opportunity", is held by younger members of the family that have chosen to work on the farm holding because this will provide them with stable and secure employment in view of the precarious employment to which they might have access. The family and personal context of the members of this group is initially very similar to those with a vocation (they leave their studies earlier, they do not wish to be salaried workers and they value traditional family knowledge over and above a professional training). However, they are more pragmatic than vocational.

If they continue to work on the farm holding, it is not out of love for the work, but because they understand that the family business is profitable and economically viable. Moreover, we consider that the harshness of livestock work, of which they are well aware, may be compensated or relativized in an environment that is conducive to links between productive aspects and the family dimension. In this context, the work force and economic support from the family, from parents, brothers and other relations, is presented as an important factor when wrestling with the decision over whether to continue with livestock farming.

4. The "penned-in" waiting for alternative employment

The third discourse on continuing with dairy sheep farming is repeated by younger members of the sheep farming family, described here as "penned in". It is characterized as the discourse of the youngest members of the family, mainly women perhaps, who do not wish to commit themselves professionally to livestock farming. Despite this, the lack of obvious employment opportunities outside the farm and the temporary abandonment of their studies, leads them to work exclusively on the dairy farm holding while waiting to find satisfactory employment. They are nevertheless young people closely linked to the family business in their own right, which is why it is likely that the modernization of agricultural machinery or greater involvement in the management of the business may finally convince them to become successors.

5. Taking charge of the family business: the transfer of the dairy farm holding

The opinions of the interviewees on three fundamental questions assume importance in the three aforementioned discourses: the transfer of management, the ownership and the property rights of the dairy farm holding. With regard to the first question, the results confirm the difficulties encountered by young family members who have decided to work with livestock, when their parents do not transfer the business activity at an early stage: particularly, in the case of the youngest family members and women. These to a greater extent experience a gender division in livestock work. Moreover, this group is frequently at a disadvantage because of the refusal of their parents to hand over formal ownership rights of the business, which reinforces the invisibility and the limited social recognition of their work.

The problem of the transfer of farm ownership, which usually arises at the last stage of the succession, is in general usually avoided through company arrangements, rental agreements, extra-judicial agreements between the successors or the purchase of farmland and installations. Evidently, when all these mechanisms fail, civil law regulations of inheritance are applied; which is to say equal transfer between successors; even in areas where *foral* or old law still prevails. Logically, it can lead to family squabbles, but the upkeep of the farm holding is a question that depends on the priorities that parents and siblings are ready to give to the rights of succession, over and above the property rights.

6. The discourse of those fleeing or liberated from the family tradition of livestock farming

The last of the discourses, which incidentally is the one that predominates, is made up of young people "liberated from the family tradition of livestock farming". It concerns younger members of the dairy farm holding who have successfully completed their studies in urban settings, and who make a definitive decision not to enter the profession of livestock farming. We find nothing new with respect to the research conducted by either Fuente Blanco in the 1980's or Pérez Díaz. Many are aware that the family business brings them greater economic benefits than the work they might find or that they have outside of it; nevertheless, they reject the harsh working conditions of the agrarian sector, the abnegation of a life conditioned by the demands of the livestock, preferring instead the security that the ideal of a salaried job might bring them.

V – Conclusions

This study has approached the sustainability of dairy sheep farms in the Basque Country and the factors that influence its upkeep or abandonment by the younger generation. Greater attention has been given to those subjective aspects that in an individualized society such as the one in which we live today, mark out the future professional livelihood of the people that are directly involved, in this case, in the social sustainability of family livestock farming, particularly in the field of dairy sheep farming.

The succession of an agrarian farm holding is a complex matter in which different sorts of aspects intermingle. Nowadays, individual factors overshadow family strategies. This circumstance would be in keeping with a more individualized, post-modern agrarian society, where cultural, symbolic and affective contradictions emerge, in the context of the family, labour relations and personal development. The individual perspective has allowed us to unearth a very complex reality that is articulated through four discourses and social situations. It is not a matter of repeating them, but only of noting that excessively simple approximations are worthless. This should lead to a process of reflection by the authorities that prepare public policy, which at times in an illusory manner, try to incorporate young people in rural employment. The scant success of these measures suggest that at times it would be better to

centre on people that are already established and others, in that group of young people with a meaningful vocation to develop livestock farming. This study has set out to make a modest contribution to a more complete and a more pragmatic view of the agrarian world and of its social and economic sustainability.

It likewise confirms the difficulties faced by younger family members who have decided to work in livestock farming when their parents do not transfer the family business at an early stage. Willingness on the part of the parents to facilitate the establishment of their offspring is decisive in a context of labour hierarchies and family mistrust over the "grants" in the shared livestock holding. As we have seen, it is women who to a greater extent experience this situation and have to cope with the gender division in livestock farming, from which they can not escape because on many occasions they have spontaneously accepted the discrimination inflicted upon them.

With regard to the transfer of the agricultural holding, it may be seen that the legal regime in force in the area is not decisive for dairy sheep farming in the succession process. Dairy sheep farmers transfer their businesses without following the norms on inheritance in the areas where their farm holdings are found, as the families themselves decide on the way of carrying out the transfer. On this point, equal transfers between successors, in areas where the Civil Code is applicable, as well as in areas where the *Fueros* (Old Law) are still respected. Avoiding the fragmentation of farm holding is a question that depends on the priorities that both parents and siblings are ready to give to the rights of succession, over and above property rights.

It would be of interest to note, on this point, that we live in a society in transition, enmeshed it appears in a permanent crisis, from which the countryside can not escape. Post-modernity has also established its particular pastoral idyll, trying to substitute the ethical for the aesthetical and the material for the immaterial. Today more than ever, scientific knowledge is required of social reality, of the global economic paradigms that trouble local views of the world and the processes and representations that define the reality of life for people working in agriculture.

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