

Unearthing European Agriculture(s): The Politics of Pesticide Reduction in France and Germany

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In its quest for food security and self-sufficiency after the Second World War, Europe saw the co-production of mutually supportive policies and techno-scientific innovation and expertise, which together established a European agri-food system centered around increasing agricultural productivity and industrializing the production and distribution of food. These national agricultural modernization projects, massively encouraged by European Union public policies, have progressively erased local forms of agricultural knowledge and practice and have catalyzed profound physical transformations of the European landscape. Pesticides—along with other agricultural inputs—have played a critical role in reducing (bio)diversity and enabling the increased control of nature, in turn rendering their use “indispensable” in industrial agriculture.

Reducing the consumption of pesticides has been identified by scholars and policymakers alike as a key component of transitions towards sustainability in the agri-food sector. Though relevant globally, the reduction of pesticides has been a particular focus of policies in the EU in recent years, notably in its 2020 Farm to Fork, Chemicals and Biodiversity Strategies under the Green Deal. Yet the EU’s ambitious proposal to decrease pesticide use and risks by 50 percent by 2030 raises fundamental questions about both the technical and political processes that could enable such a shift from today’s pesticide-intensive food regime, since such reductions have not yet been achieved by any country in the EU.

The failure to reduce pesticides and to find adequate governance tools is exemplified by glyphosate, the most widely used pesticide in the world and an emblem of the intensive post-war agricultural modernization regime. After the regulatory controversy surrounding its re-authorization on the EU market in 2017, several European countries, notably France and Germany, promised a national “exit” of glyphosate. Despite their participation in common agricultural, biodiversity, chemicals, and sustainability policy frameworks at the EU level as well as similarities in the economic role of their agro-food sectors, the two countries have enacted divergent political and policy responses to the glyphosate “problem” and to the reduction of pesticide use and risks more broadly. By 2022, both countries have backed down from their initial glyphosate phase out promise, enacting only partial bans.

As part of my cumulative dissertation, my Landhaus Fellowship project entails writing a journal article comparing the governance of pesticide reduction by these two major agronomic and economic players in the EU. This comparative analysis allows for an examination of the context within which alternatives to pesticides are considered in the policy process and the ways in which pesticide reduction may—or may not—be planned as part a broader sustainability transitions agenda. I consider alternatives as a range of options spanning from substitution-based approaches to deeper structural change in the agricultural sector, considered from a historical perspective of the evolution of post-war agricultural policy in Europe. The heterogeneous political treatment of pesticide reduction in the two countries will enable an analysis of how the debates around alternatives to pesticides—as much as those around the

reform of the Common Agricultural Policy—reveal the structural issues which condition the consideration of alternatives, and how these debates have become places of intense confrontation between different possible futures and the modes of reasoning associated with them.