

THE EMPTY QUARTER

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Last year I walked across France from Dunkirk to the Mediterranean. When I described my route to a farmer who put me up for the night he called it the “*diagonale du vide*” – the empty quarter, as one might say.

The whole of the French countryside is empty compared to what it used to be, the agricultural population having fallen from 8 million in 1950 to around 2 million. But what he had in mind particularly were the *départements* that lie on the western slopes of the Massif Central: the Cher, Creuse, Corrèze and Cantal – and one could add large parts of all the *départements* down to the Spanish border. These are the areas that have not benefited from the prosperity of the last 30 years, that are still largely bypassed by the main axes of trade and tourism and which would have suffered almost terminal decline without the subsidies of the EU’s Common Agricultural Policy. With 70 hectares, 50–60 milking cows and their calves and a full quota of subsidies, the director of a local Chamber of Agriculture told me, you can expect a workman’s wage, nothing more. In the Creuse and Corrèze average farm size is around 30 hectares and annual income around FF120,000 (€20,000), of which half would be subsidies. It is not difficult to imagine what would happen if they were removed.

The country is close, wooded, hilly and wet. The soil is poor and the winter climate harsh, with altitudes between 400 and 800 metres. It is a *pays d’élevage*: good only for raising small herds of cows on natural grass and hay. In the old days families farmed to feed themselves and surplus mouths went away. The men went off to work as builders in the cities. One of the most famous, Martin Nadaud, became an important figure in revolutionary politics. Forced into exile in London for his part in the 1848 Paris uprising, he took his tools with him and helped to build the cattle market on York Way near London’s King’s Cross station.

The haemorrhage of the young continues today. The Corrèze loses 400 *agriculteurs* a year and gains only 100. The young do not want to take over the farms because of falling prices, BSE, uncertainty about the future of subsidies and because the life is too hard and just not exciting enough for modern tastes. Numbers are partly made up by *rapportés* – incomers of various kinds. Some are the urban unemployed hoping to make their benefits go further. A few come with jobs and occupations independent of agriculture, some of them *marginiaux*, alternative types, latter-day versions of the *zippies* - from *les hippies* - who invaded rural France in the aftermath of 1968. Others try to transform old peasant farms into *gîtes* and adventure holiday centres. And then there are the second home owners. “You can buy a whole hamlet in the Creuse for the price of an apartment in Geneva.”

There is little resentment against individual buyers, but the phenomenon is unpopular, for it pushes up house prices and, as the houses are shut much of the year, exacerbates the feeling of *désertification*.

“We have to encourage people to be *local*, not *bocal*,” said a spokesman for *Développement Rural*. *Bocal* is the word for a sealed glass bottling jar. “In other words, local identity, yes. Closed minds, no.”

Last year in the village of Lupersat I met an incomer couple who had just taken over the café-bar. “The locals think nothing can be done. It won’t work, is their attitude.” This year they have started a weekend market with *aperitif* and concert afterwards. Their *terrasse* is packed out. “Two professional music groups are based in the area. They are not here all the year round, but it is their home. It shows change is possible.”

In the pastures above Salers at nearly 1000 metres I watched a farmer milking his cows, each adorned with handsome leather collar and brass bell (costing about £80 at the time), for an audience of a dozen tourists who afterwards bought his cheese. The French remain very

attached to the idea of the *terroir* or local territory, with its distinctive products made to traditional recipes. Farm as theatre. Why not? On the road below him an ex-quarryman has used his redundancy money to turn an abandoned *buron* or cowman's summer hut into a museum of traditional herding and transhumant implements.

But change and innovation does not always go smoothly.

But there are other tensions between locals and incomers and between traditionalists and modernisers. The incomers are often dynamic, wanting to try out new ideas to revive their adopted communities, and they run into the deep conservatism of the locals, viscerally attached to the land that has been in their families for generations and unable to consider as serious or worthwhile any other work than their way of farming. In these small rural communes local democracy works very directly; you know who voted for you or drummed up support against you in the elections for mayor and council. People vote by clan and bear long grudges.

In one commune I know, negotiations have been going on for twelve years to agree a *remembrement*: that is, a rational re-distribution of farmland that over the years has become divided into ever more scattered and uneconomical plots as a result of wills and sales. A new arrangement had just been voted and registered, the walkers' association was gearing up to bring in some tourism after 12 years of delay, when the diehards suddenly changed their minds and said no; this is our fathers' land, this is how it is going to stay. The mayor resigned in order to avoid taking sides. "I can understand," says a friend, "that you can look at your hay meadow and find it beautiful. I look at my my vegetable garden every morning and every day it is different, but I am interested in other things as well. These people think that anyone not sharing their interests is a good-for-nothing."

There are conflicts too at a more political level between those who favour an *agriculture durable* in which the farmer is seen more as a steward of the countryside and those who argue, as Chirac's new government does, that farming is essentially an economic activity and the farmer should be left to take his business decisions when and how he pleases. The previous government had been experimenting with a system of contracts under which farmers and other rural businesses could get financing in return for committing themselves to certain environment-friendly conditions, like sticking to traditional extensive farming methods, the scheme to be partly funded by capping the subsidies payable to the biggest producers and diverting the surplus into these *contrats territoriaux d'exploitation* (CTE).

The professional farming lobby of course regards such ideas as both too *dirigiste* on the part of the state and too townee-utopian at the same time. And the CTEs did not always suit organic farmers either; they found themselves excluded by its bureaucratic finickiness. A London-born Greek Cypriot woman I spoke to, long established in France and raising organic pigs, found that she did not qualify for the capital grant she needed to install the equipment for making sausages, *saucisson* and so forth on the farm – exactly the kind of project the CTE was designed to encourage – because her acreage was not big enough.

The small town of Neuvic, close to the upper reaches of the river Dordogne, seemed a particularly good example of the kind of energy being put into rural development with its Centre for Environmental Initiatives developing courses, research and tourist activities to do with the local environment and its well-respected *Lycée Henri Queuille* with a number of firsts to its name, like its degree in Rural Consultancy, courses in golf course maintenance and management and its breeding unit for cocks to supply feathers to the fly-fishing trade. In addition it puts its money where its mouth is, for part of its funding comes from a CTE which obliges it *inter alia* to compost its vegetable waste and maintain its springs and hedgerows.

The director expressed himself hopeful that some way would be found to prevent the creep of "liberalisation," which is seen in France as a peculiarly Anglo-Saxon creed and in effect little more than a disguise for extending the reach of the biggest agri-businesses.

“Farming is something you do because you love it,” said Denise, whose husband runs 25 cows on the farm he was born on, “not because of the money. Your passion carries you over the hard times.”

A couple of days later, while making a call from a phone box in Clermont-l’Hérault, I was surprised to see a llama and a Bactrian camel go down the street. Perhaps one does not have to go that far.