
Challenges to the Agroecological Transition: Can We Talk About “Agribashing” in France?

1.1. Introduction

In October 2019, the French Ministry of the Interior announced the creation of a working group entitled “Déméter” under the gendarmerie. According to Christophe Castaner, Ministry of the Interior at the time, the “Déméter task force” is a response to “agribashing”, distrust and hostility against French farmers (Ministère de l’Intérieur 2019). Created under pressure from the two main agricultural unions, the National Federation of Agricultural Holders’ Unions (FNSEA) and Young Farmers (JA), the missions of this “task force” are to help farmers against theft, detect new threats, promote judicial responses as well as, more controversially, to prevent and monitor “actions of an ideological nature, whether simple symbolic actions of denigrating the agricultural environment or brutal actions with material or physical repercussions” (Gendarmerie Nationale 2019). The newly created working group is also working in coordination with 10 regional “agribashing observatories” which are to assess the nature of “the stigmatization of agricultural and livestock activities and the sale of products from this sector” (Seine-Maritime Department 2020).

Indeed, in recent years, the agricultural world has faced increasingly strong societal demands to move towards an agricultural model more respectful of the environment and in line with the challenges of ecological transition: municipal decrees in favor of buffer zones, a governmental desire to ban certain synthetic pesticides such as glyphosate or neonicotinoids, or even laws on animal welfare. Though the agricultural world does not ignore these injunctions to change their

model, other preoccupations have come to intersect with these issues, whether economic, like the significant decline in the number of farmers and the erosion of their incomes (Chardon et al. 2020; Delame 2021) or psychosocial, such as a higher suicide rate than the general population (MSA 2020; AFP and Le Monde 2021). Considering their efforts sufficient in terms of health and the environment (Le Hesran 2020), some actors in the agricultural world seem susceptible to a growing malaise and a feeling of constant denigration, culminating with the FNSEA and JA's national campaign: "France, do you still want your farmers?" (FNSEA 2019). A paradoxical sentiment in view of the fact that most opinion studies show not only the attachment and confidence of French consumers towards "small producers" and "farmers" in general (ANIA and TNS-Sofres 2013; FrenchFood Capital 2018), but also their willingness to support them – by paying more – to adopt more rational models ensuring food independence in France (BVA and Crédit Agricole 2021; IFOP and Ouest-France 2022). Thus, in a context of ideological confrontation over models of agricultural transition, the concept of "agribashing" is controversial.

In this chapter, we question the mediatization and circulation of the concept of "agribashing" and the semiopolitical implications of its use by certain actors in the agricultural world, in a context of ecological and agricultural transition. More precisely, we question, firstly, the way in which the concept of "agribashing" emerged and established itself as a real "formula" (Krieg-Planque 2009; Simon 2015) in defense of a certain agricultural model. We then observe the media coverage and circulation of this term, to finally question how it seems to disqualify those actors in civil society who promote a discourse critical of intensive agriculture and promoting the ecological transition. Our corpus is based on the study of the French daily (n = 121) and regional (n = 1356) press between January 2018 and October 2021, as well as on semiopolitical analysis of the supporting discourses of "agribashing" and the material forms of their inscription in the public sphere: reports, official documents and communication materials produced as part of the establishment of the "Déméter task force".

Thus, in line with the questions raised in information and communication studies around the issues of environmental communication as well as around the increasing complexity of discourses relating to changes in models (Bernard 2018; Catellani et al. 2018), does talking about "agribashing" amount to framing discourses around changes in the agricultural model and the agricultural transition within a comminatory and agonistic register? Do the polemics over critical discourses and civil society actions against part of the agricultural community reflect opposing and unreconcilable visions of the ecological transition?

1.2. “Agribashing”, a formula?

Mentioned in March 2016 during a debate at the *Salon international de l’agriculture* in Paris (Agriculture & Environnement 2016), by the editor of the “Agriculture & Environnement” newsletter, “agribashing” is a portmanteau made up of “agriculture” and “bashing”, meaning an attack or harassment, and also implies any form of significant denigration. After circulating for a while on Twitter, it was popularized in 2018 by the “expert consultant” Eddy Fougier in his report “The agricultural world facing the challenge of ‘agribashing’”, where he concluded that “agribashing” was a real thing, corresponding, according to him, to an “intensification, expansion, radicalization and greater visibility of the questioning of the conventional mode of agricultural production” (Fougier 2018, 2020). The concept was then widely popularized by FNSEA and other journalists defending the conventional food and agricultural model. Analysis of the documents supporting the creation of the “Déméter” task force is thus informative about the nature of the challenges facing the agricultural world.

Indeed, behind the creation of the task force and the observatories lies the ideological postulate shared by the proponents of the agri-food and agro-industrial system and their allies, such as pesticide producers, that the French agricultural and food system is facing a rising wave of hostility, a “systematic denigration on social networks and in the media of ‘conventional’ farmers” (Rass 2020). This hostility is said to result in violent actions against actors in the agricultural world as well as in discourses challenging the productivist model. Among these “actions”, anti-speciesist activists are particularly targeted, as well as other environmental groups in civil society carrying out “ideological actions”, for example, against the use of pesticides, and therefore automatically considered “extremists”.

For others, particularly environmentalist and anti-speciesist associations, the use of the term is a strategy of backlash designed to divert the attention of public opinion and government resources in favor of a single model and to muzzle opposition (Astier and Rimbert 2020; Chapelle 2020). Furthermore, for Stéphane Foucart, Stéphane Horel and Sylvain Laurel, the term serves as a “‘Godwin point’ of criticism of the intensive agriculture system” (Foucart et al. 2020, p. 27) and is part of a broad reactionary movement aimed at criticizing environmental movements as a whole.

Thus, we find within “agribashing” processes relating to a *formula*: the freezing and circulation in the public sphere of a single concept; the crystallization of social and political issues, here linked to the agricultural world, its models and its practices and, finally, a certain polemical character that precisely emphasizes “a conflictuality” (Simon 2015) specific to the ideological clashes which traverse the agricultural world.

1.3. Inclusion in the media agenda

The second part of our analysis focuses on the inclusion in the media agenda of the concept of “agribashing”. To do this, we created a corpus of articles from the national (NDP)¹ and regional (RDP)² daily press from October 2018, the date of its first appearance in the press, to October 2021, the closing date of our investigation. The corpus analysis provides us with interesting information about the peak of mentions of this term, its context and its spaces of media circulation.

At first glance, we see differences in treatment and media attention between the NDP and the RDP. While 1,356 articles from the RDP mention the term “agribashing”, there are only 121 for the NDP over the same period. Analysis of the publication dates of the different articles mentioning the term “agribashing” allows us to observe the different periods during which the term was most common in the different media of our corpus (see Figure 1.1). In the regional press, the first article in our corpus to mention this term concerns an intrusion onto a farm which led the president of the Île-de-France Chamber of Agriculture to “[denounce] the daily ‘agribashing’ suffered by farmers” (Dutheil 2018), which corresponds well to a central claim of the agricultural movements at the time of the establishment of the Déméter task force. Conversely, in the national press, the first article from *Le Monde* mentioning the movement in December 2018 deals with fundamental opposition among farmers, and “agribashing” is associated with “measures taken by the government to try to support agriculture towards an ecological transition” (Prudhomme and Girard 2018), anchoring the ideological confrontation conveyed by this formula within the broader movement of transitions in the agricultural world. However, although the term appears as early as October 2018, the real “peak” of media attention only takes place between September 2019 and March 2020 when the majority of articles in our corpus were published for both the RDP (n = 893) and for the NDP (n = 78).

This peak of attention coincides with the victory of unions associated with the FNSEA (National Federation of Farmers’ Unions) and JA (Young Farmers) in the professional elections of January 2019 and the launch of a joint campaign entitled “France, do you still want your farmers” (FNSEA 2019) as well as in the context of professional elections within Mutualité Sociale Agricole, the agricultural social insurance association.

1 The Europresse search engine includes some weekly news pages in the NDP category. We have chosen to retain them.

2 Europresse search, agribashing, NDP and RDP, from January 1, 2018 to October 31, 2021.



Figure 1.1. Temporal distribution of articles. For a color version of this figure, see www.iste.co.uk/catellani/transitions.zip

For comparison, we carried out a Google Trends analysis on the term “agribashing” which places the peak of interest and searches in November 2019, which might well correspond to interest linked to the appearance in the media of this term and to public curiosity about this new concept in circulation (see Figure 1.2).

In both cases, the number of publications mentioning the term “agribashing” decreases sharply after September 2020, never exceeding 20 mentions in the NDP. Thus, we can see that circulation of the term is directly linked to lobbying actions by the main French agricultural unions which, through mobilizing their electorates and their members, managed to put the term on the media agenda, even the public agenda, through various highly publicized and visible actions in the public space (demonstrations, blockades, etc.). For example, analysis of articles published in *Ouest-France* reveals more than 60 articles directly mentioning “agribashing” in their publication with very varied themes. If the question of anxieties in the agricultural world comes up very often – “FDSEA: concerns about “agribashing” or “Farmers worried about the rise of “agribashing” (Ouest-France 2019; Tymen 2019) – many publications discuss the measures put in place by the government to fight against it, or local initiatives which extend to education: “‘Agribashing’ explained to high school students” (Amiotte 2021). However, few articles directly refer to the oppositions that this term arouses. Ultimately, media attention seems to remain confined to local and regional issues, as the difference in the presence of the term between the major national dailies and the regional press is significant.

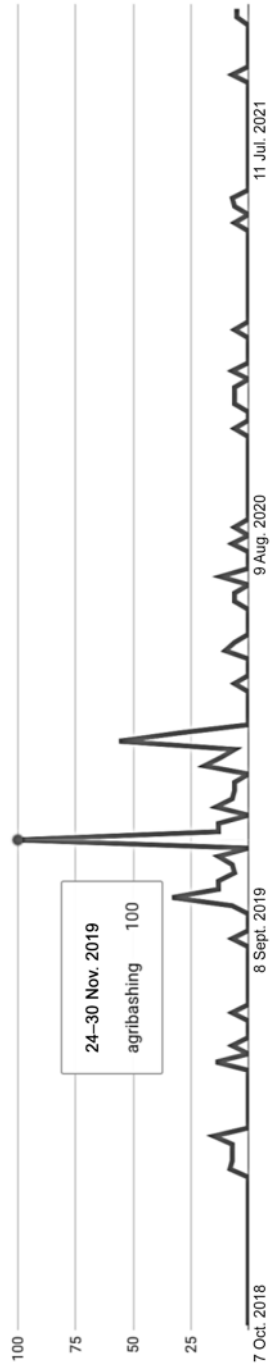


Figure 1.2. Google trends analysis of agribashing

Indeed, looking at the geographical distribution of the articles in our corpus, we see very strong disparities. Firstly, in terms of the national publications which are mainly interested in this question, *Le Monde* (n = 32), *Le Figaro* (n = 30) and *Libération* (n = 16) come first (see Figure 1.3). The other national titles in the corpus do not seem very interested in the question, which clearly reflects, over a period of two years, a lack of interest, or even the absence of an increase in the generality of the issues raised.

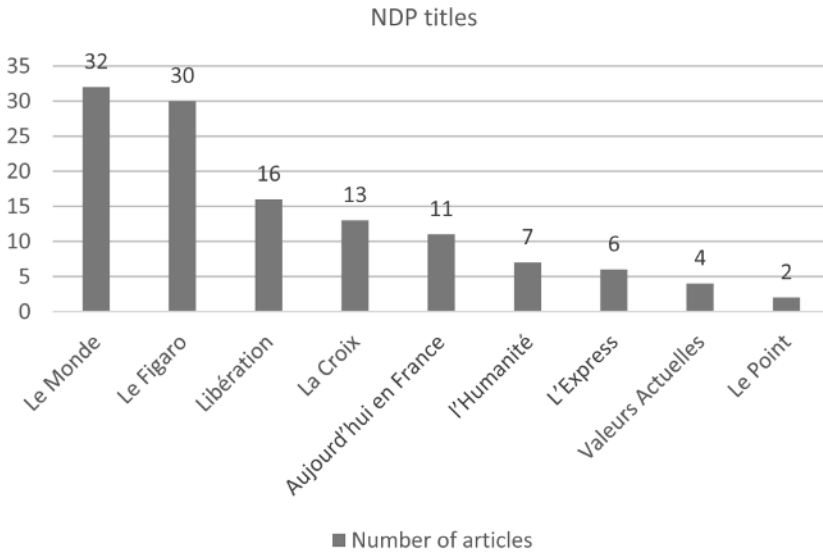


Figure 1.3. *Distribution of NDP publications*

In terms of the regional press (see Figure 1.4), we see a broad interest in publications from the West and South-West of France, with a majority of articles devoted to the issue by *Ouest-France* (n = 326) followed by *Sud-Ouest*, print and Web (n = 227), *Le Télégramme* (n = 107) and *La Nouvelle République du Centre-Ouest* (n = 104). In the East and South-East, it is essentially *L'Est Républicain* (n = 105) and *Le Progrès de Lyon* (n = 91) that deal with this theme, far ahead of other regional titles.

These different spatial distributions also seem to reflect differences of interest in the subject according to agricultural specializations. Indeed, the Western and Central-West regions, which are mainly oriented towards livestock farming (Agreste 2020), are those where the subject is most covered in the regional press. This interest

is consistent with the agricultural world's concerns around the issue of “intrusions” into farms and anti-speciesist activism.

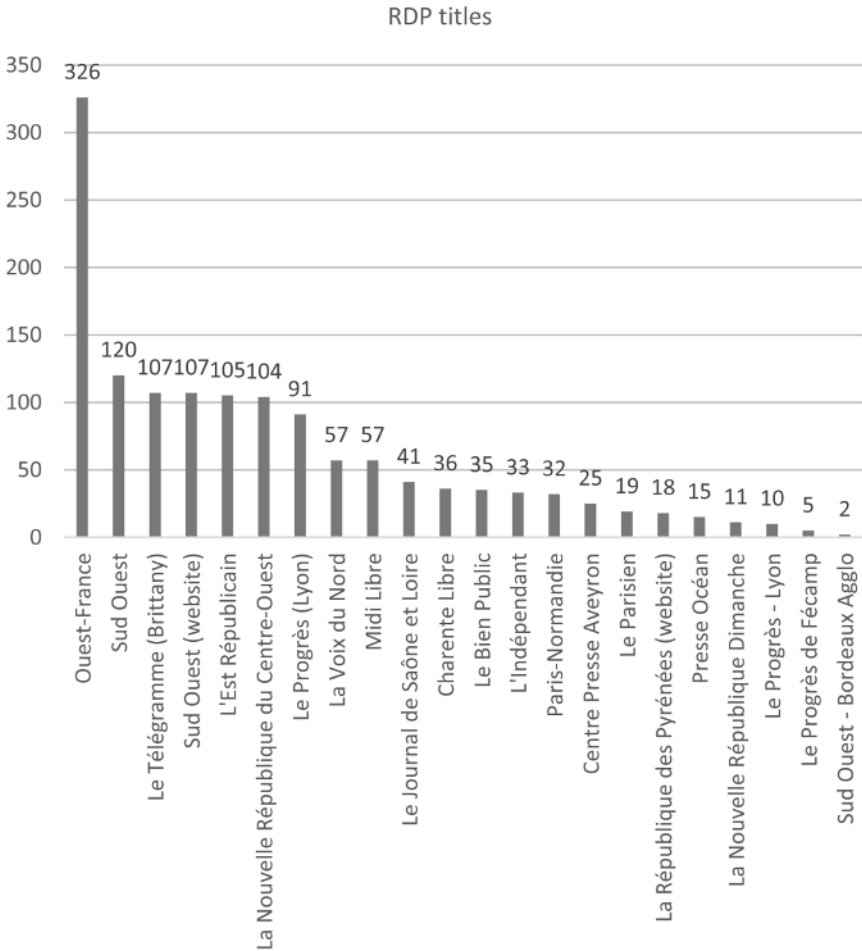


Figure 1.4. *Distribution of RDP publications*

1.4. Disqualification of dissenting voices

Analysis of the spatio-temporal circulation of the term “agribashing”, as well as analysis of the context of this circulation, allowed us to understand the strong links between the inclusion of this term on the media agenda and the political interests of

certain actors in the agricultural world. A thematic and discursive analysis of the articles, supplemented by the reading of documents linked to the Déméter task force, also allows us to better understand the ideological issues that make this concept a *formula* in its own right.

We performed an analysis of the main terms present in the two corpora of NDP and RDP. Using the AntConc software (Anthony 2005), we observed the frequency of terms and their co-occurrences, and we produced “word clouds” to visualize the terms most frequently associated with “agribashing” in both corpora.

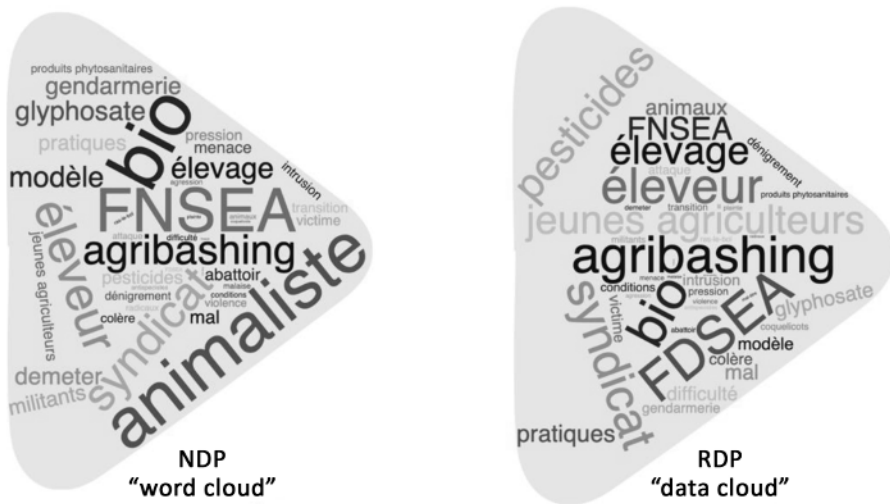


Figure 1.5. “Word cloud” for NDP and RDP in French. For a color version of this figure, see www.iste.co.uk/catellani/transitions.zip

As can be seen in the two “clouds”, the presence of agricultural unions (FNSEA, FDSEA, Young Farmers) strongly dominates the corpus, with, however, a more “local” anchoring in the RDP corpus where the different local sections of the FNSEA, the FDSEAs, are the most commonly mentioned. Although the question of livestock farming is present in both cases with its lexical field, we notice an important focus on the figure of the “livestock farmer” who is foregrounded. Another point of convergence between the two corpora is the question of pesticides, which often arises as a stumbling block specific to “agribashing”. We may nevertheless note that although the generic term “pesticides” is used in both corpora, the RDP titles use the positive name “phytosanitary products” much more clearly than the national titles. In this respect, we note the interesting presence of

“glyphosate”, which often attracts public attention and is a marker of current media polemics around agricultural models in France (Allard-Huver 2021, 2022).

Finally, within the articles, the question of different agricultural practices is at the heart of the debate with the opposition between the so-called “conventional”, “intensive” or “agro-industrial” models, on the one hand, and the “organic” model, on the other. However, the question of ideological confrontation around the figure of animal rights movements is much more present in the NDP corpus, with a debate around the very nature and mission of the Déméter task force (Gendarmerie nationale 2019). The media framing is then constructed around a different perception: on the one hand, the NDP presents those who fight for animal welfare and for whom intrusions are justified, the “animalists”; on the other, the RDP focuses on livestock farmers who are “victims” of attacks and intrusions and denigrated in public spaces. Nevertheless, some of the articles do testify to a more global movement of opposition to the ecological transition that is said by some to be a “forced march” imposing “unacceptable additional burdens” on farmers (Menvielle 2018). The actors of the Confédération Paysanne (Peasant Confederation) even see in this the reasons for their failure in the October 2019 elections, arguing that their program “to develop agriculture to support the ecological transition” was unable to cope with the FNSEA playing on the “distress” of the agricultural world (Boussion 2019).

Thus, from a perspective of communication on sensitive subjects (Libaert and Allard-Huver 2014), the “agribashing” formula serves several interests that are found in these different media framings. Firstly, it reverses the perspective by creating a story where livestock farmers become the victims of a systematic denigration of their practices, which makes it possible to avoid the axiological debate concerning the condition of animals. Furthermore, it operates a form of syllogism where any criticism of the intensive agricultural model and its chemical avatars (pesticides, glyphosate, non-treatment zones, etc.) is considered as a form of “stigmatization of agricultural activities” (Seine-Maritime Department 2020). Finally, in terms of controlling the framing of the public sphere, this formula seems to contribute to muzzling, with the help of public authorities, any form of investigation or communicational action by civil society actors engaged in the agroecological transition (Astier and Rimbert 2020; Chapelle 2020; Pollinis 2021).

1.5. Conclusion

From a semiotic and discursive point of view, the term “agribashing” is a “formula” (Krieg-Planque 2009; Simon 2015) at the heart of a broader debate, a global controversy around the transition of the agricultural model that crystallizes the oppositions between the actors (Pascual Espuny 2014, 2017). Though the

formula appearing in 2018 then circulating in the media until 2020 is, at first glance, the expression of a certain unease in the agricultural world, it is just as much the politicization of an ideological argument disqualifying any dissenting voices.

Thus, this work is to be seen in the context of proposed reflections on the production, circulation and acceptance of discourses around the agricultural transition and the controversies they may arouse (Aulagnier and Goulet 2017). Although we note the slow disappearance of the term in the media space, we nevertheless observe its return in the specific space of social networks where it is still widely used by some radical defenders of the productivist model. This polytopia of the concept (Jeanneret 1998) also confirms that beyond its deeply polemical nature, the “half-life” of this concept can only be seen as consequent to a lobbying campaign by certain actors in the agricultural world. Furthermore, this campaign allowed the creation of the “Déméter” task force which in turn sparked significant controversies. The creation of this tool is part of a complex context in which certain actors in civil society criticize the appropriateness of the State using the police force to decide, ideologically, which discourses around the ecological transition have the right to be heard, or not, just as it reflects the changes in operation within the agricultural world around a deeper debate on the models of the agroecological transition to come.

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