

Peasant seeds at the test of identification signs

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Background

As a result of the development of peasant seeds in the fields and their recognition, the question of the economic valorization of the products resulting from the cultivated biodiversity arises more strongly within the networks of producers. Can proprietary tools such as brand and label promote this valuation? The French Peasant Seed Network (Réseau Semences Paysannes, RSP) has been experimenting for 2 years (2016-2017) with the implementation of a collective private brand to identify products derived from peasant seeds.

History of the label within RSP

Work on the economic recognition

Several groups of producers members to RSP are engaged since many years in producing their own farmer's seeds. To valorise their work some of them are interested in using a common identifying sign. In the meantime, the evolution of European seed laws does not take in consideration farmer seeds as they have no weight on the market. The general assembly in 2011 decided to work on an economic recognition and on a distinctive sign on products stemming from peasant seeds. In this context, RSP decided to test the development of its own, private label or brand in an experiment of two years.

Members of RSP working on product valorization

Two members of RSP in Brittany, Koal Kozh and BioBreizh, have been working on participatory plant breeding program on cabbage since 2001 from old cabbage originating from genebanks (Figure 1 a. and b.). It was financed through regional funds. Cabbage is a specie where all new varieties are obtained by CMS (male cytoplasmic sterility, which is a GMO). In the group of farmer participating, some of them are selling into long food chain with small added value. Indeed, these farmer are part of a area in Brittany which is historically producer of vegetables (20% organic vegetables product in France) and have a farmers' seed tradition.

To valorize their product coming from peasant seeds in long chain, they settle a specification book in appendices as well as a flyer on product (Figure 1 c.).



Figure 1: PPB program on cabbage in Brittany (a. and b.); flyer on products coming from peasant seeds (c.)

RSP set up its Private Collective Brand

RSP started, with its members in Brittany, to settle the brand "Semences Paysannes en Réseau" (Figure 2) [3]. The Regulation of use contains: the definition of the property of the brand, the means of its management and control, the rights of use and use, sanctions, appeal procedures.

The specifications book contains: the eligibility criteria, the definition of the peasant seeds to respect, the origin of the seed via the traceability criteria, the minimum rate of self-production and the eliminatory criteria.

This work was done under a partnership with Biocoop, which is a supermarket chain specialized in organic product selling in France. At the beginning, it was discussed to apply a tax on hybrides (hybritaxe). But it was easier for Biocoop to have a positive label and not a negative one ... indeed Biocoop sells lots of hybrids (with CMS) vegetables: attract attention of consumers on negative varieties is not a good communication strategy for them.

In the meanwhile Carrefour tried to use the products coming from the RSP's brand (chronology in Table 1).

Results of the label experimentation

Value capture downstream of the chain

The micro-chain of peasant varieties (short chain or specialized) are currently under tension: the volumes are very limited and we are witnessing speculative strategies generated by downstream players who aggressively invest in the organic sector. The stagnation or even the historical regression of mass distribution margins are now leading different major groups to invest the civil society to capture the value existing off market to transform it into market value. Organic food grow by 20% per year in France and is seen as an interesting market to make new profit! For example, Carrefour plans 5 billion euros to boost organic product sells while it historically plays a role in the norms to create homogeneous variety adapted to industrial chain that are responsible of decrease of peasants in countryside and lose of biodiversity and is well known to capture most of the added value.

Shift from a use value of peasant seeds to a market value

As an industrial property right, its use is indeed not neutral: the shift from a use value of peasant seeds (linked to user rights) to a market value (linked to property rights and unbalanced power: added value are not well distributed) has consequences for peasant seed systems that are fragile from economic, organizational and legal point of view [1].

The majority of producer's organization members of the RSP market directly their product or in short local chain. They are not seeking an umpteenth quality label knowing that most are involved in other labels such as Organic Agriculture, Nature & Progrès, Demeter, Bio Coherence, GI, other brands

Therefore, the demands for a brand is very minor in RSP and stems only from two "atypical" organizations of rather big organic vegetable producers marketing their products in long food chains. Moreover, only technical issues are discussed to write the specification book and it is difficult to include ethical issues. Finally the cost of the guarantee is supported only by downstream actors.

The brand, initially thought by the producers to highlight practices and take into account actual production costs (including farm seed conservation / selection) has proved to be in practice a purely commercial tool.

RSP learned several lessons from this experimentation and literature analysis:

- it is ambiguous to struggle against intellectual property rights (IPR) on living while developing a brand which is also an IPR.

- A brand is transforming the shared value of use, determined by the rights of use, into a market value determined by property rights. As an example as soon as the label SPR was ready to be issued, the big company Carrefour tried to capture the value through a very big communication campaign (Table 1 & Figure 3).
- brands and labels are setting up standards on wide scale and often end up in a standardization of products and practices when diversity of practices is required. Standards become more and more strict and disconnected from initial actors (cf Organic Agriculture label, Geographical appellation). This standardization is the first step of marchandization followed by industrial.
- a product label or brand does not inform about real practices and autonomy on the farm. It is for instance impossible to distinguish products stemming from seeds produced on the farm from products stemming from population varieties sold to farmers by small seed companies.
- put the burden of proof on the producers and their grouping is not neutral: extra cost for the producers (certification to ensure traceability) and for the organizations (management of a brand), shift of the work factor towards the control of the guarantee and the marketing and no towards the structuring of peasant selection, risks of standardization of practices via national specifications that may lead in a loss of cultivated biodiversity.
- a brand is creating a market segmentation, for products identified as stemming from farmers seeds but in the meantime hybrids with CMS are more and more used and seed for hybrid-breeding and are hidden to consumers, also within the organic market.
- the niche market or market segment created by a label will be supplied by population varieties already on the market and will not help renewing cultivated biodiversity. The renewal process is a key aim of the network and relies firstly on the re-appropriation of know-how by farmers who can select their own varieties.
- for consumers it is much more needed to be able to identify products stemming from industrial varieties, obtained by biotechnological processes protected by patents than to identify farmers varieties in a small market segment or a niche market which help to hide GMOs sold in the same supermarket.
- brand is used by big actors on the market as a tool for greenwashing action.

These results conducted RSP to stop the experiment and to reorient activities toward the frame of commons.

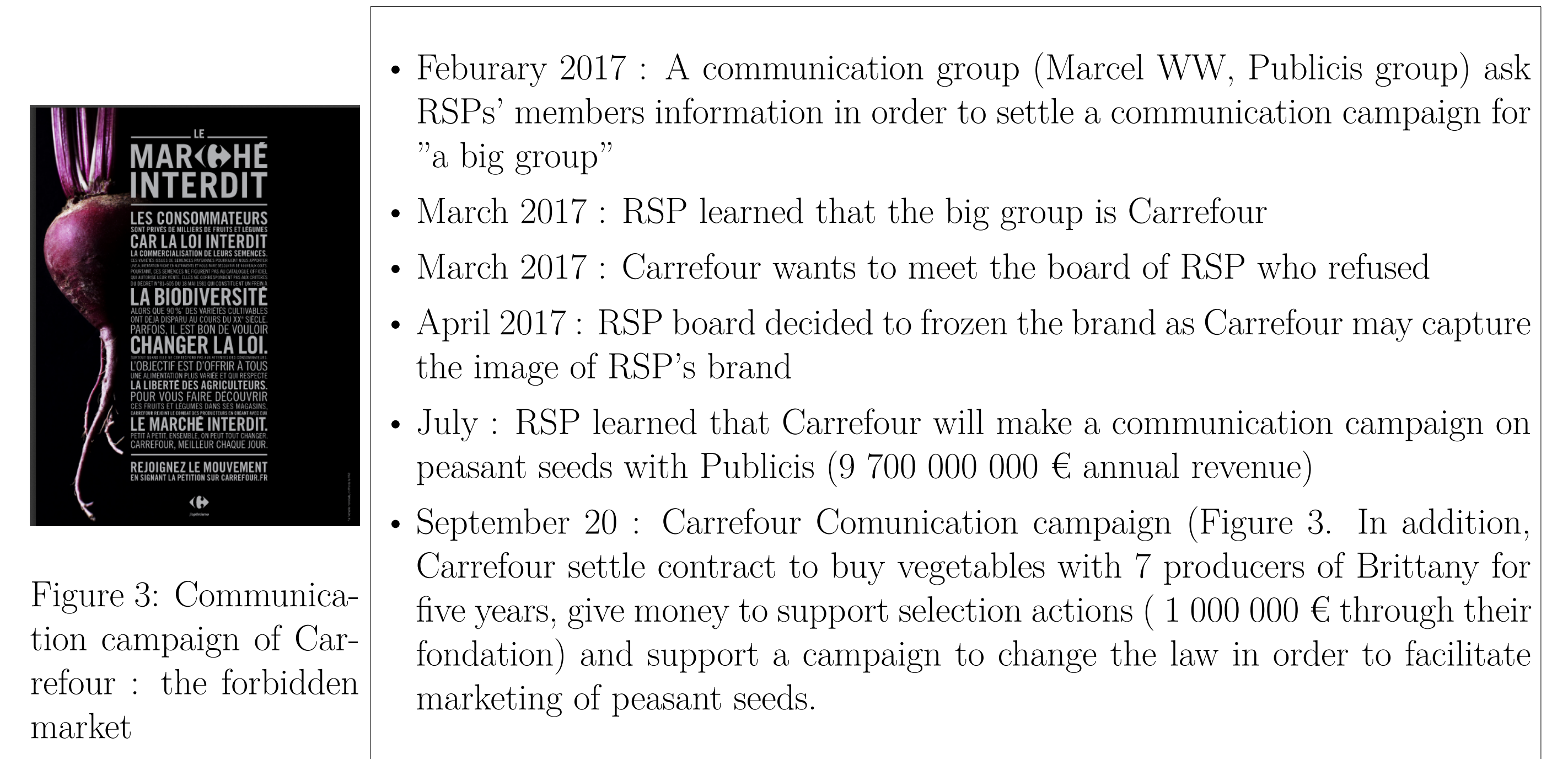


Figure 3: Communication campaign of Carrefour: the forbidden market

- February 2017: A communication group (Marcel WW, Publicis group) ask RSPs' members information in order to settle a communication campaign for "a big group"
- March 2017: RSP learned that the big group is Carrefour
- March 2017: Carrefour wants to meet the board of RSP who refused
- April 2017: RSP board decided to frozen the brand as Carrefour may capture the image of RSP's brand
- July: RSP learned that Carrefour will make a communication campaign on peasant seeds with Publicis (9 700 000 000 € annual revenue)
- September 20: Carrefour Communication campaign (Figure 3. In addition, Carrefour settle contract to buy vegetables with 7 producers of Brittany for five years, give money to support selection actions (1 000 000 € through their fondation) and support a campaign to change the law in order to facilitate marketing of peasant seeds.

Table 1: Chronology of the Carrefour case

Alternative of a brand through the frame of commons

Based on the results of this experimentation, RSP decided to stop the label development and gave up the private brand. Instead, RSP chooses to explore the possibility of working throughout the framework of commons [4]. Commons are usually locally managed and actions of farmers network should concentrate on local and regional empowerment. This is in opposition to the development of consumers in big metropolises and producers in rural area. This is leading to industrialization of agriculture and, in parallel, to simple consumers looking for food without or with attached brands and logos corresponding to multiple consumer's financial means. In the frame of commons, rights of users dominate rights on property rights. Therefore, RSP is engaged in discussion within supply chain with all users in order to build fair and transparent supply chain with a share of the value for all actors and professions involved in order to ensure a sustainable renewal of cultivates biodiversity.

By doing so, the focus is brought to the necessary work of in situ conservation and on farm breeding which are steps usually not taken into account in the value chain and which still rely on volunteer work. This approach is currently explored within members of RSP.

Conclusions and perspectives

Based on the first experience with the framework of commons, RSP comes to the following conclusions [2]:

- RSP is convinced that getting back diversity in the fields and the plates will only be achieved by promoting and practising a peasant agro-ecological model with lots of small and diversified farms using diverse and locally adapted seed varieties and not by contributing to more and more industrialization of the organic sector.
- All actors of the organic sector should struggle together to firmly request full transparency on breeding process to avoid having more and more CMS hybrid or new GM technology within the varieties cultivated by organic farmers.
- RSP practitioners are considering seeds together with their know-how as a common which should be managed in a sustainable way by all the users from the field to the plate. For that purpose it is essential to mobilize the appropriate means as means are conditioning the ends.

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