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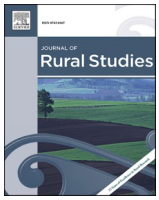

Empowering European farmers: Insights from decolonial theory and indigenous people in Latin America

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ABSTRACT

The modernization of European agriculture and new societal concerns around global environmental change and food quality have led to forms of marginalization and misrecognition of European farmers. These include limited political agency in decision-making, economic dependency on industrial inputs, devaluation of traditional farming knowledge, restrictive regulatory frameworks, socio-technical lock-ins reinforcing productivist models, and increasing social stigmatization by the public. We draw parallels between the root causes of farmers' marginalization in Europe and the oppression of Indigenous people in the Global South. Their common struggle for recognition allows us to see how a decolonial approach could contribute to addressing the social malaise of farmers in Europe. There is much to learn from Indigenous people's experience in facing the coloniality matrix of power in their claim for more justice that could benefit farmers and the transformation toward a fairer agri-food system in Europe.

Introduction

Over the last century, agricultural modernization in Europe has occurred at a fast pace, leading to profound structural changes (Vanbergen et al., 2020). The industrialization of agriculture through capital-intensive, high input and highly specialized production has resulted in agriculture being considered the main driver of environmental degradation in Europe (Pe'er et al., 2020). Furthermore, the number of farms in Europe has dropped due to strong economic pressures and public policies (European Commission, 2013). The export-driven European farming model pits farmers[1] against each other on a global scale, making them dependent upon global market prices. While the benefits of farming are increasingly appropriated by non-producing actors (Yi et al., 2021), there is a fall in the total income from farming to farmers (Knickel et al., 2018), further exacerbated by ill-adapted and/or inequitable policy frameworks. For example, in France, the EU's biggest agriculture producer and the largest beneficiary of the Common Agricultural Policy, 25 % of farmers live below the poverty line (INSEE, 2015) and many more are at risk of social exclusion (European Commission, 2017).

These systemic pressures have sparked heightened tensions and visible unrest among farmers across Europe. In recent years, farmer demonstrations have erupted in multiple countries, contesting policies associated with the European Green Deal and other measures perceived as economically crippling or environmentally disconnected from farming realities (Finger et al., 2024; Chapron, 2024). Protests have raised concerns over restrictions on fertilizer use, pesticide bans, and the growing influence of large agribusinesses, reflecting tensions between the ecological ambitions of policymakers and other societal actors, and the lived experience of farmers. These protests underscore broader challenges faced by European farmers, not only in their economic livelihoods but also in their cultural and social standing, as they navigate a rapidly evolving agricultural landscape that often fails to adequately include their voices and perspectives.

Industrialized agriculture continues to dominate the production and dissemination of scientific knowledge (Thompson and Scoones, 2009),

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[1] While we are aware that we use farmers as a simplified ideal type to describe what we know is a large diversified group, in what follows the use of the term should be seen as serving an analytical purpose.

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diminishing the role of farmers' innovation (Coolsaet, 2016a). Seeds, inputs, knowledge, norms, and practices are increasingly standardized (Bonneuil and Thomas, 2009), leading to a loss of farmer local knowledge and sovereignty in terms of their choice of crops, shedding light on more hidden struggles related to knowledge and recognition (Coolsaet, 2016b; Janker, 2019; Pimbert, 2015). Suicide rates (Dedieu, 2019; Deffontaines, 2014), protests (Ploeg, 2020), and the low number of young farmers (White, 2012) are also indicators of a broader social malaise within the farming community.

Farmers in Europe are facing an increasing number of pressures on their decisions and livelihood, undermining their potential engagement toward sustainable agriculture. The decline in the size of farming communities has weakened their sense of cohesion (Fonte, 2008) and, in some cases, eroded their identities, changing the way they define their place in society (Sen and Archer, 2022). Relationships between farmers and other social groups have also profoundly changed. New societal concerns around global environmental change, food quality, social responsibility, energy production, protection of the rural countryside, biodiversity, and animal welfare, have led to a further form of cultural and structural marginalization of farmers (Ahnström et al., 2008; Janker, 2019). Farmers are often perceived simultaneously as custodians of the rural countryside and as contributors to its demise. For example, a recent study suggests that the public identifies farmers as having the most direct role in causing environmental damage rather than large-scale agribusinesses (Ploeg, 2020). While there have been multiple calls, including in the latest Common Agricultural Policy reforms, for an agricultural transformation that promotes social justice and environmental integrity, there is an urgent need to address the tensions over a divided and marginalized farming sector.

In this paper, we argue that there appear to be parallels between the root causes of farmers' marginalization in Europe and the oppression of Indigenous[2] people in the Global South. Learning from the latter could benefit farmers and help conceptualize transformative change to the European agri-food system. Both forms of oppression emerge from what decolonial scholars refer to as the "Modernity/Coloniality/Decoloniality" nexus (Escobar, 2010), a framework that examines how power and domination are upheld through colonial legacies. The concept of coloniality was first introduced by Aníbal Quijano (2000), who argued that colonialism did not end with political independence but instead evolved into a persistent matrix of power that continues to shape economic, political, and epistemic structures. Walter Mignolo (2007) expanded on this by demonstrating how modernity and coloniality are deeply intertwined, with knowledge production and global hierarchies continuing to privilege Eurocentric perspectives while marginalizing others.

While these dynamics have been extensively studied in postcolonial contexts, their relevance to contemporary struggles within Europe, particularly in the agricultural sector, remains underexplored. The marginalization of farmers in Europe shares key characteristics with the exclusion and misrecognition experienced by Indigenous peoples in the Global South, particularly in Latin America. Examining how Indigenous peoples have resisted coloniality and reclaimed agency in environmental justice struggles offers valuable insights for European farmers. Progress made by Indigenous people in becoming central players in environmental justice struggles could inform European farmer trajectories (Rodríguez, 2020). To address these issues, we start with a short section reviewing the theoretical contribution on the nexus "Modernity/coloniality" by decolonial theory. The second section takes stock of the processes through which European farmers are marginalized, before discussing how coloniality has played out with Indigenous populations in Latin America and their struggle against it, and the learning this provides in the context of agricultural transformation in Europe.

1. Modernity/coloniality/decoloniality

Decolonial scholars suggest taking a critical look at how the "Modernity/Coloniality" nexus has persisted over time. Modernity[3] is characterized by a dualist ontology dividing nature from culture, that perceives technical and material progress as the only way forward, presents modern science as the only valid form of knowledge, and makes a distinction between modern and "non-modern" people (Gudynas, 2011). In this sense, modernity underpinned the European colonial project since the early modern period. While most former colonies have now gained political independence, the dominance of modern values and worldviews, maintained by institutions and spread through education, media, or behavioral norms, persists (Alfred and Corntassel, 2014). Such a process has been referred to as 'coloniality' (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018).

In decolonial thought, coloniality is considered to be the dark side of modernity because modernity's narrative of progress and development has historically relied on the subjugation, dehumanization, and epistemic erasure of non-European peoples (Mignolo, 2011). As Quijano (2000) and Mignolo (2007) emphasize, modernity and coloniality are co-constitutive, as colonial rule established a racialized hierarchy that viewed European knowledge, institutions, and ways of being as superior while diminishing and silencing Indigenous, African, and other non-Western epistemologies. Racialization became a fundamental tool in this process, structuring labor divisions, access to resources, and social status within colonial and post-colonial societies (Lugones, 2008). This logic of racial capitalism persists today, as economic and political systems continue to operate on asymmetries inherited from colonial histories.

Similar in some aspects to how modernity has affected farmers, coloniality is seen as eroding vital conditions for Indigenous wellbeing, including their cultural identity (Alfred and Corntassel, 2005; Escobar, 2010; Mulcahy, 2010). In response to this, decolonial theory, in particular the "Modernity/coloniality-decoloniality project" (see Escobar, 2010), has been put forward as a way of deconstructing the narrative of modernity and uncovering the forms of oppression and marginalization that it produces (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018). As such, decoloniality aims to address the different levels of the coloniality matrix of power consisting of: a) power (political and economic); b) knowledge (philosophical, and scientific); and c) the self or ways of being (subjective, individual, and collective identities) (Rodríguez, 2020). In this paper, we suggest that the common struggle for recognition of European farmers and Indigenous people allows us to make a bridge between both and to see how the decolonial approach could contribute to addressing the social malaise of farmers in Europe.

2. Marginalization and misrecognition of European farmers

Drawing parallels between the processes of marginalization and misrecognition faced by Indigenous people and local communities from the Global South and European farmers allows us to emphasize the importance of power, knowledge, and being. In this paper, we understand misrecognition as occurring when "institutionalized patterns of cultural value portray some actors as inferior, excluded, wholly other, or simply invisible, hence as less than full partners in social interaction" (Fraser, 2000, p.100).

In decolonial thought, power is organized around the codification of

[2] We capitalize Indigenous to acknowledge power for a group of political and historical communities, to bring that group into alignment with designations capitalized like American and European (Weeber, 2020).

[3] Modernity holds a "discourse that promises happiness and salvation through conversion, progress, civilization, modernization, development, and market democracy (…) to convince the population that such-and-such a decision or public policy is for the betterment of everyone". (pp, 142–143, Mignolo and Walsh, 2018).

difference with one appearing inferior to the other, in this case, non-Europeans under Europeans, but also around the use of modern institutional forms of power that organize and control labor, its resource, and its product in previously colonized society (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018). This codification of power is evident in European agriculture, where racialized and gendered labor hierarchies are present. For example, migrant workers—mainly from Eastern Europe, North Africa, and Latin America— are often found in the most precarious, low-paid positions (Molinero-Gerbeau, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic exposed this dependency, as border closures halted agricultural production due to the absence of seasonal laborers (Meuwissen et al., 2021; Molinero-Gerbeau, Y., 2021). Gender further compounds these inequalities, as women are underrepresented in farm ownership and decision-making, often lacking formal recognition and access to land, financial resources, and institutional support, making them more vulnerable and invisible in agricultural policymaking (Sutherland, 2023). These intersecting inequalities reinforce a system where migrant and female farmworkers endure systemic exclusion, reflecting the colonial legacies embedded in European agriculture. The marginalization of farmers is reinforced by institutional structures that concentrate decision-making power away from those directly engaged in food production. EU regulations are often set at a high level, leaving farmers with little influence over policies that affect them (Harrison et al., 1998). The lack of control over decision-making weakens farmers' autonomy and connection to their work (Källström and Ljung, 2005; Stock and Forney, 2014), while the modernization of agriculture has further increased their dependence on external inputs such as seeds, fertilizers, and pesticides (Timmermann, 2020). Efforts to involve farmers as equal participants remain limited, as seen in sustainability frameworks where they have little say in shaping key metrics (Slätmo et al., 2017), leading to knowledge production that may not align with their realities (Eksvärd and Rydberg, 2010). These constraints show how European farmers, despite their different position from migrant and female agricultural workers, also experience systemic marginalization within the agri-food system.

Furthermore, imposed and standardized ideas regarding 'effective' or 'efficient' farming can render invisible some deeply rooted cultural practices regarding knowledge. Outside Europe, non-European knowledge and symbolic systems have been seen as inferior and deprived of scientific validity, shedding light on a "coloniality of knowledge" (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018). Similar to this "traditional knowledge", farmers' knowledge today is given limited recognition and is seen to have only practical and local applicability (Pettersson et al., 2024). Coolsaet (2016b) has described how, during much of the XX century, farmers' relations to the world have been marginalized in the name of rigor, rationality, effectiveness, or efficiency.

The current agricultural knowledge and innovation system, particularly national-level institutions, including higher education, is dominated by the model of technologically-driven agricultural industrialization (Knickel et al., 2018). Together with increasing standardization and certification of knowledge and the concentration of the 'right' knowledge in the hands of fewer experts, farmers' knowledge and skills are devalued and their application can be restricted by laws and regulations (Šūmane et al., 2018). Examples show how scientists and agri-business driven actors have codified farmers' knowledge, excluding primary producers and local communities from the benefits of the valorization of their products (Rodrigo and Ferragolo da Veiga, 2010; Fonte, 2008) rendering farmers' contribution invisible. Timmermann (2020) speaks as well of a deskilled rural force and claims that farmers suffer contributive injustice because of a lack of work environment where people are stimulated to develop skills and learn to be productive. Links and interchanges between scientific and practitioners' life-worlds and knowledge and the asymmetry in powers and interests complicate the application and implementation of scientific knowledge in practice and the integration of farmer's perspectives in scientific research (NOE et al., 2015).

Finally, "coloniality of being" makes reference to the mechanisms of subjectivation on the life, body, and mind of the "colonized" or marginalized people, to the point of stripping them of their very essence and soul (Fanon, 1963; Mignolo and Walsh, 2018). The "coloniality of being" has the capacity to distort the self-image of the colonized and the perception of their world (Álvarez and Coolsaet, 2020). Regarding farmers' way of being, there are different indicators of a profound social malaise. For example, in France, since the 1970s, farmers have the highest suicide rates in terms of socio-professional category with an excess of suicides for men of 28 % in 2008 and 22 % in 2009 (Jacques-Jouvenot, 2014). Nicolas Deffontaines (2014) highlights the structural reasons that lead to this high number, including: the imbalance between the objectives assigned to farmers by institutions, and the resources they have at their disposal to reach those objectives; their lack of self-esteem partially link to a lack of recognition of the contribution of their work from general public; or more recently, feeling like a minority in the rural world itself. Here, the parallels between European farmers and Indigenous people and local communities from the Global South is sadly strengthened as suicide rate disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations are substantial in certain countries (e.g., Canada and Australia) and can be linked to structural injustices inherited from colonialism (Carpenter et al., 2022; Pollock et al., 2018).

Other indicators of the impact of the "coloniality of being" can be seen in how some farmers also find themselves locked-in to the persistent 'productivism' vision of the farm, which continues to emphasize the importance of the farm as a place of production. Socio-technical lock-ins driven by the dominant agri-food discourse occur at every link of the value chains, with limited access to certain plant varieties, the complexity of knowledge involved in today's agriculture, or the lack of coordination with emerging value chains (Lamine, 2011; Magrini et al., 2016; Meynard et al., 2018). Faced with this constraint, farmers convince themselves of the hopelessness of their situation and can suffer an "imagination gap" (Bendor, 2018; Moore and Milkoreit, 2020) for creatively thinking about another future for agriculture. Of particular importance here is that farmers feel responsible for those different obstacles, showing the degree of internalization of the institutional discourse.

Overall, there is a growing number of farmers referring to an increasing rupture between them and the general public, with calls for more recognition of their practices and livelihood (Ploeg, 2020; Lecuyer et al., 2022). Farmers are known to value positive appreciation of farming members toward their agri-environmental efforts, and being embedded in larger social networks (Matzdorf and Lorenz, 2010). However, there is a disconnection between the urban population and rural spaces and practices (Herman, 2015) which can express itself around questions of wildlife management where farmers perceive the return of some wild animal as a direct threat to their way of living (Skogen and Olve, 2003). More generally, farmers' demonstrations have occurred in some European countries (e.g. France and the Netherlands) to denounce the negative representation from the media and the general public of farmers as polluters (Ploeg, 2020). Feelings of lack of recognition from the broader public and sometimes even disrespect, when for example they intrude on their land, play a key role in today's farmer social malaise (Young et al., 2022).

Finally, a critical element in addressing the agricultural crisis and the marginalization of farmers lies in reconnecting to nature, which is central not only to Indigenous worldviews but also to agroecological and decolonial practices. For example, some authors argue that thinking afresh about the relationship farmers have with plants (particularly from the angles of non-human agency, cooperation and care) could be an important lever for rethinking agricultural work and the way it is perceived (Pouteau et al., 2024). To find out more, Ricardo Rozzi's concept of "biocultural conservation" emphasizes the intrinsic interdependence between cultural identity and natural ecosystems, advocating for an ethical and emotional re-embedding of human life within the natural world (Rozzi, 2013). Th is perspective challenges the modernist

dualism that separates humans from nature, a dichotomy deeply rooted in coloniality, which has historically reduced both Indigenous cosmologies and farmers' ways of life to utilitarian and exploitative relationships with the environment. Reconnecting to nature involves reviving knowledge and practices that value ecological harmony, reciprocity, and a shared belonging between humans and ecosystems. Embedding these values into European agriculture offers farmers a vision beyond production, revalorizing their role as stewards of biodiversity and culture. Furthermore, recent systematic reviews demonstrate that more equitable governance—grounded in equal partnership or primary control for Indigenous peoples and local communities—leads to significantly improved ecological outcomes (Dawson et al., 2024). Similarly, stronger inclusion of farmers and their ecological knowledge in conservation efforts could foster positive outcomes while empowering farmers as vital contributors to environmental stewardship. This cultural and governance shift affirms the interconnectedness of human and natural systems, enabling both farmers and Indigenous people to reclaim their autonomy, dignity, and capacity to thrive within ecological limits.

Those different examples illustrate the potential of approaching farmer marginalization through the lens of decolonial theory. From a decolonial perspective, the aim is not only fair redistribution or recognition or inclusion in dominant structures, but to obtain the sovereignty to grow what they want to grow how they want to grow it and the right to live well (Peschard et al., 2020), in accordance with their own identities, cultural imaginings, and ways of knowing the world (Leff, 2017).

3. Facing modernity/coloniality: learning from indigenous people

To break the concentration of power in the agri-food sector will require a transformative process enabling a reconnection of individual farmers with a larger collective rural movement (IPES-Food, 2017). It will involve finding ways of going against the effect of modernity on power, knowledge, and ways of being. In this section, we review examples of approaches from the Global South, and particularly from Latin America to counter the effect of coloniality and how those actions support the construction of interculturality, a core aspect of a decolonial praxis.

One important step in trying to reach long-term transformation of power is to allow the creation of new institutional arrangements that allow a recognition of cultural diversity and rights in national legal and political frameworks. In many Latin American countries, for instance, the increased recognition of Indigenous people's rights against the coloniality of power has required the reconfiguration of the European liberal model of the Nation-State to a new pluricultural and plurinational one, through the writing of new national constitutions (Rodríguez and Inturias, 2018; Rodríguez and Inturias, 2018; Rodríguez, 2020). As a result, in some countries like Bolivia, new instruments for territorial planning and management now exist that give Indigenous people the legal mandate to manage their natural resources autonomously and with respect for their customary decision-making procedures (Rodríguez, 2020). For farmers in Europe, this will involve finding institutional arrangements that allow them to recover some autonomy, such as the agency to decide on the price of their products, or the possibility of producing alternative products. One example of such a struggle relates to seed production (Bonny, 2017; Peschard et al., 2020). Agro-industry lobbying and unfavorable legislative context are still limiting the possibility of on-farm reproduction of seeds, notably for organic seed that require an organic certification that farmers themselves are not easily able to obtain (Demeulenaere and Piersante, 2020; 2018).

The emancipation of the coloniality of knowledge will also be central to move towards a situation of greater cognitive justice in the world, learning from, and making visible, alternatives forms of knowledge. To do so, Indigenous people in the Global South have developed transformative knowledge networks with academics and human rights and environmental justice activists, that can challenge and help re-shape existing policies through giving visibility and public legitimacy to marginalized knowledge (Rodríguez and Inturias, 2018). A good example is the ICCA Consortium (https://www.iccaconsortium.org/), an international membership organization dedicated to promoting the appropriate recognition and support of Indigenous Peoples' and Community Conserved Areas and Territories (ICCAs**).** Other examples are initiatives such as Indigenous Universities which aim to support Indigenous people's cultural revitalization and knowledge production (Rodríguez, 2020). In the context of European farming, Coolsaet (2016b) proposes to counter the hegemonic conception of modern agricultural science through what he calls an "agroecology of knowledges". This implies a knowledge production model that focuses on co-production, reskilling, and autonomy of farmers, which can already be observed in many agroecological farms. A specific example of this approach can be found with the Atelier paysan, a french cooperative which campaigns for the sharing and the circulation of know-how relating to the self-construction of agricultural tools (Angeli Aguiton et al., 2022). But it also applies to seeds, which are often protected by intellectual property rights, which differ between European countries, acting as an obstacle to develop more resilient agriculture (Gevers et al., 2019). Seed knowledge exchanges have then multiplied all around Europe, gaining ground with for example in France, the adoption of a law allowing gratuitous seed exchanges for all cultivators in 2018.

Finally, protecting and defending Indigenous people's own identity against "coloniality of being" requires the creation of new meanings, norms, and values through the creation of counter-narratives or counter-discourses. To go against the dominant development concept, local identity can be strengthened by reconstructing local history and building new visions of the future (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018). Historical memories of Indigenous peoples have been collected by the protagonist themselves in many valuables' experiences in Latin America: the Talamaqueño people in Costa Rica, the Pemon-Taurepan, and Pemon Arekuna in Venezuela or the Muinane in Colombia (Rodríguez and Inturias, 2018). Those initiatives resulted in books self-written by Indigenous people allowing the preservation and promotion of their own identity (see Ancianos del Pueblo Féé neminaa, 2017; Roroimökok, 2010). Finally, many Indigenous people in Latin America have built visions of the future through community life plans, that allow reconnecting with their identity by linking their past, present, and future (Espinosa, 2014). Similar processes could be applied with farmers in Europe, in particular regarding the visions held by farmers across Europe on agricultural sustainability, supporting farmer imagination and transformative agency (see Moore and Milkoreit, 2020). Taking again the example of seeds, the movement of French farmers that contested the seed production and regulation system have led to new ontologies, proposing new vocabulary to design "peasant seeds" and forming alliance with other social movement proposing alternative narratives relative to "The commons" (Demeulenaere, 2014). Mentioning these latter obviously refers to the work of Ostrom (1990) who studied the possibilities of collective self-organisation to manage resources coveted by individuals or communities. Pioneer at the time, this work has given rise to reflections inviting people to rethink the links to nature and to others outside of a property relationship, and initiatives - such as those challenging the privatization of genetic resources or agricultural lands by promoting collective governance and shared stewardship - offering a modern alternative to exploitative, market-driven systems.

In all the strategies presented above, one central element is to ensure that the dialogue is not about the right of inclusion in the dominant culture, but about the historical and structural factors that limit a real exchange between cultures in each country (Rodríguez, 2020). The construction of interculturality is then seen as the core of a decolonial praxis. Interculturality points toward the building of radically different societies, of an "other" social ordering, and of structural economic, social, political, and cultural transformations (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018). Interculturality is more than an interrelation or dialogue among

cultures, but a way to "transform, reconceptualize, and refound structures and institutions in ways that put in equitable (but still conflictive) relation diverse cultural logics, practices, and ways of knowing, thinking, acting, being, and living. Interculturality, in this sense, suggests a permanent and active process of negotiation and interrelation in which difference does not disappear." (p.59, Mignolo and Walsh, 2018) However, those conditions can be difficult to reach when facing coloniality of power, knowledge, and being, and especially for groups such as farmers or Indigenous communities that go through shifting identities and rapid cultural changes. Despite facing similar threats, farmers often feel isolated in their struggle against the neoliberalisation of agriculture and sometimes clash against each other, limiting their capacity to act as a group (Compagnone and Pribetich, 2017; Ioris, 2016; Rega, 2020). Identity shifts in both farmers and Indigenous communities may act as a strong barrier for discussing and defining sustainability pathways at the community level.

We finish this section with a final learning that builds both on decolonial thought and conflict transformation, showing the need for "intra-cultural dialogue" as proposed by Rodríguez and Inturias (2018) in the context of environmental struggles of Indigenous people in South America. In their paper, Rodríguez and Inturias (2018) recognize the internal fragility of certain Indigenous communities that have been through an intense process of cultural changes. They argue that this can often lead to some division and fragmentation in the community, placing them in a weak position to enter into a dialogue with more powerful actors. They suggest focusing on developing "intra-cultural dialogues" consisting of strengthening the capacity of vulnerable actors to transform conflicts, through a variety of capacity-building processes, as a necessary starting point in the long-term vision of transformation (Lederach, 2003; Botes, 2003). Such capacity building can focus on issues of social and political organization, local leadership, conflict theory, and dialogue/negotiation tactics. In the previously cited example of the "Water War" in Bolivia, internal strategies were developed by the local organizations to build capacity on subjects such as technical knowledge of dialogue and negotiation procedure, which were crucial to ensure negotiations in conditions of equity and more importantly, to halt changes in the legislation (Rodríguez and Inturias, 2018). Modernity has also eroded the cohesiveness of farmers' groups. For example, previously and in the response to the industrialization phase, a "good farmer" was defined by their ability to ensure high input, high output production systems to produce food, fiber, or fuel (Burton, 2004; McGuire et al., 2013). However, the 'crisis' of being branded polluters triggered a chain reaction that resulted in modifications of the locally accepted rules and norms for good farm management (Herman, 2015). The feeling of not being a 'good farmer' can have a negative psychological impact and act as a significant stressor on feeling part of the "farmer group" (Hansson and Lagerkvist, 2012) and reduce their capacity to act on their struggle against neoliberalisation of agriculture. Similar capacity building to strengthen "intra-cultural dialogue" with farmers would help create the conditions for more symmetrical and horizontal intercultural dialogues, which may be key to move toward a more sustainable agriculture (see Box1).

Finally, while all the experiences here highlight important steps toward decolonial governance, they also reveal the complexities of implementing transformative change in contexts marked by historical power imbalances and institutional constraints. These legal and institutional advancements have not been without tensions. Scholars have pointed out contradictions between state-led plurinational governance and the lived realities of Indigenous communities, including bureaucratic constraints, co-optation by political actors, and persistent structural inequalities (Postero, 2017; Fabricant, 2013). While these policies provide a crucial step toward self-determination, their effectiveness in redistributing power remains debated. Our discussion reflects on their potential rather than assuming they offer fully realized models, acknowledging the challenges of translating such approaches to the European agricultural context.

4. Expected challenges in empowering farmers against marginalization

In the previous section, we explore how decolonial thought allows us to understand the marginalization processes of farmers in Europe and then try to learn from the experience of Indigenous peoples struggling against the effect of modernity/coloniality. Trying however to propose such projects for supporting farmers in Europe will not be without challenges, at the farmer level first, but also for the systems in place and for the scholars that want to enter this process.

First, for an analytical purpose, we use farmers as an overarching term to describe what we know is a large diversified group. We recognize that considering farmers as a homogenous group can be counterproductive, as they might fail to recognize the varied socio-economic status of farmers with often diverging values, interests, alliances, and power (Coolsaet, 2015; Hervieu and Purseigle, 2012). Nevertheless, our point here is that farmers face similar processes of pressures and marginalization, putting at risk their farmer identity and as a consequence, their livelihood and sustainability. Large conventional farmers can also suffer from being locked in a path of development dictated by powerful discourses and beliefs (Stassart and Jamar 2008), that have erased their traditional knowledge to replace it with technical knowledge, and still experience profound social malaise, as shown by suicides of wealthy farmers (Deffontaines, 2014). However, it may be difficult for those categories of farmers to perceive themselves as marginalized, and for other categories of farmers to recognize the similarity between them and other types of farmers, limiting the potential for them to act cohesively against the effect of modernity. Decolonial studies have shown how coloniality acts in a way that the subjugated/oppressed thinks that what he desires corresponds to what Modernity/Coloniality offers and then consents to be colonized (Álvarez and Coolsaet, 2020). We argue

Box 1
Strengthening Farmers' Capacity through Intra-Cultural Dialogue

As part of the TRANSFORM research project, a two-day workshop was organized in November 2022 in France, to implement the concept of "intra-cultural dialogue" among 12 farmers from the Bourgogne-Franche-Comté region. This initiative aimed to address the fragmentation often observed within farmer groups—exacerbated by shifting cultural norms and environmental expectations—by creating a safe space for introspection and collective reflection. Activities were designed to encourage farmers to share personal experiences, explore systemic and societal dimensions of power, and reimagine their roles and collective identity within agricultural transitions.

This workshop mirrored the approach proposed by Rodríguez and Inturias (2018) in the context of Indigenous environmental struggles, focusing on building internal cohesion and agency before entering into dialogue with more powerful actors. By fostering a deeper sense of collective identity and reinforcing shared values, the process strengthened the farmers' capacity to transform conflicts and engage more equitably with external stakeholders. The experience highlighted the transformative potential of intra-group capacity building as a foundation for more symmetrical intercultural dialogues, supporting systemic change in agriculture.

that modernity has the same effect on farmers and that it might limit their willingness to engage in projects perceived as backwards. To go beyond this will initially involve a re-valorization of peasantry and a rural way of life by the general public but also by the farmers themselves.

Secondly, in the case that farmers decide to engage against the negative effects of modernity, we can expect that authorities and external actors will be questioned and challenged more frequently. However, power from those external actors will probably not be easily redistributed, as for example, agrochemical companies can form a strong lobby and will try to preserve their power and incomes (also see IPES-food, 2017; ETC Group, 2019 on the concentration of power in the agri-food system and how to fight it). Furthermore, while we see a move toward more participatory approaches from governmental institutions, participation can happen in a rather tokenistic way, with hidden power dynamics (Jager et al., 2020). It is important then to point out that in its dominant and top-down conceptualization and use, interculturality, as proposed in participative processes, is neither transformative nor critical of the established social, political, and economic order (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018). Interculturality for farmers in Europe will mean going further than individual inclusion of farmers and the façade of dialogue of participative processes but will need to support the strengthening of farmers' own governance systems. Finally, to counter the process of marginalization, farmers will have to address public opinion. The European general public has experienced big changes in their values, especially concerning nature (Orru and Lilleoja, 2015). Giving more power to farmers will probably be resisted through fear that this will involve more negative consequences for the environment. Such conflicts already exist on questions of biodiversity conservation or rewilding (Vanbergen et al., 2020; Skrimizea et al., 2020). Also, essentializing peasantry could be counterproductive to supporting environmental sustainability or local trade (Soper, 2020). Decolonial thought invites us here to realize that there is not only one way of seeing the world and that to reach sustainable and just management will involve moving beyond only one single path to finding ways for different paths to coexist.

Finally, the importance of knowledge is clear, with different decolonial authors claiming that knowledge is at the heart of everything else as it determines how someone perceives the world (Coolsaet, 2016b; Mignolo and Walsh, 2018; Rodríguez, 2020). Indigenous knowledge has gained international recognition in the last 20 years with international agreements such as the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES et al., 2019; McElwee et al., 2020). However, farmer knowledge in Europe has not been perceived as valuable while their data and work are been used to develop new biotechnologies (Timmermann, 2020). Farmers (and farming) need to be recognized not only as subjects of study but as knowledge-holders in their own right. In this regard, decolonial scholars emphasize the need to **decolonize research itself** by challenging the dominance of Western scientific paradigms and the illusion of scientific neutrality (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018; Rodríguez, 2020). This involves ecologists and agronomists trusting and including knowledge they are not familiar with, including findings relative to farmers' knowledge that might not be expressed in academic terms. It will also require critically questioning the "how", and "what for?" of knowledge production, being more aware of the power dynamics involved behind research questions (see Rodríguez, 2020). Decolonial scholars invite us to go one step further, by taking a positive stand and active role against the effect of modernity (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018; Rodríguez, 2020). This encompasses continuing to understand the process of marginalization in place in farmers' communities, and using research to support these communities, transforming the power asymmetries in the dominant paradigms of knowledge production and development.

Conclusion

To conclude, we would like to return to what decolonial thought brings to the question of the marginalization of farmers in Europe. First, using decolonial theory in a European context might appear incongruous, however, many decolonial thinkers invite us to think beyond geographic borders, to enlarge it to all " the people who are not controlling and managing but are being managed and controlled" (p.139, Mignolo and Walsh, 2018). They denounce the tendency in our current system for groups to be manipulated and divided by institutions and suggest instead institutions that support and nurture. Decoloniality invites us to think about how farmers have been locked in the path of modernity and how this may have led to a process of marginalization through power, knowledge, and ways of being. By learning from Indigenous people's struggles and their strategies of resistance, we propose that farmers could engage in creating new local forms of institutions, knowledge-sharing networks, and sustainable narratives. These would allow farmers to move beyond the "promises of modernity—not to resist, but to re-exist" (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018, p.146).

A critical addition to this perspective, however, lies in addressing the internal divisions among farmers themselves. The long-standing "divide and conquer" strategies of coloniality have left farmers fragmented along lines of socio-economic status, farm size, political alliances, and ideological differences. Overcoming these artificial divides is essential for fostering a collective identity and building solidarity. Interculturality, in this sense, does not seek to erase these differences but invites farmers to recognize the shared roots of their struggles and to work collaboratively toward shared goals. By revalorizing their diverse knowledge systems and ways of being, farmers can find common ground to challenge the systemic forces that marginalize them. Furthermore, interculturality challenges the assumption of a universal path forward, emphasizing instead the coexistence of multiple ways of being and knowing. Decoloniality promotes pluriversality, not as a prescriptive solution but as an ongoing process of dialogue, negotiation, and practice. As Mignolo and Walsh (2018, p.5) highlight, "Decoloniality (…) is not a new paradigm or mode of critical thought. It is a way, option, standpoint, analytic, project, practice, and praxis." In this article, we argue that this perspective is worth exploring to bring out the structural issues behind the marginalization process of farmers in Europe and find and/or support strategies to empower farmers in the future.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

L. Lécuyer: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **S. Calla:** Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **B. Coolsaet:** Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **I. Rodríguez:** Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **J. C. Young:** Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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