

Bachelor Farmers in France: An Explanation by Evolutionary Psychology

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ABSTRACT

This article uses some evolutionary psychological micro hypotheses to explain the high number of bachelor farmers in France. The authors argue that three factors are responsible for farmers remaining single: their low average income, the migration of females away from rural areas and a steady rise in the divorce rate. According to the theory of sexual selection, the authors can expect females for whom wealth is a criterion in their choice of partner to migrate where the average income is higher. Growth in the number of divorces further increases the scarcity of younger females. The authors then show that when the divorce rate is high, young farmers are even more affected by the phenomenon of bachelorhood.

Keywords: Celibacy, Divorce, Evolutionary Psychology, Farmer, France, Migration

1. INTRODUCTION

In this article, we propose an explanation for the high level of bachelorhood among farmers in France. In 1990, according to the French Institute for statistics and economic data (INSEE), for all male farm holders, one in three was unmarried at the age of 35 and one in six was unmarried after the age of 45. From 1962 to 1975 these rates fell slightly for farmers less than 35 years old. They rose strongly after 1982 (INSEE, 1993). 35% of young farmers (under 35) were single in 1988, compared with only 26% in 1979. The highest rate of singleness was observed among family members working on the farm – farmers' children – and the phenomenon was to grow even further (Agreste, 1991). There is nothing specifically French about this

phenomenon: in 1987, an abnormally high rate of singleness among farmers was recorded in every country in the European Union, with the exception of Greece (Jegouzo, 1991). The same is true for the United States (Landale, 1989). This high level of bachelorhood among farmers has existed since the end of the Second World War, although it has stabilized, or even moved slightly closer to the national rate of singleness, over the last thirty years (Jegouzo, 1991). However, this does not mean that the proportion of unmarried farmers is falling. Rather, it is the result of changes in the national rate, as more and more city dwellers choose to live as couples without getting married. This trend is much less pronounced in rural areas (Audirac, 1986).

This high rate of bachelorhood among farmers is partly responsible for the decline of the number of the farms and for the lack of investments in rural areas (Facchini & Magni Berton, 2010). This article aims to provide an

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original explanation for this fact and, then, some recommendations for improving this situation.

Classic literature offers some explanation based on cultural biases in rural areas. In a first explanation, singleness is explained by the extent to which it is considered socially acceptable. When a social group acquires modern values and rejects the idea of the “couple” as the only acceptable norm, the number of single people increases (Kinbielher, 1991; Kaufmann, 1999).

A second explanation has developed from the work of the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. The high number of single male farmers can be explained by the interaction between the right of male primogeniture and the devaluation of the farmer’s profession. The reasoning goes as follows. The progressive devaluation of the profession of farming has provoked a massive exodus of individuals towards urban areas. The reasoning goes as follows: The hardship of life for farmers’ wives; a life composed of work and discomfort (Jegouzo, 1979); poverty which is felt more strongly by the females because they are “stronger and more accumulative” (Jegouzo, 1984) and because they suffer more from the comparative constraints on their daily budget; the symbiotic relationship between farmers’ children and their parents. These are the elements most often quoted to illustrate the negative and devalued image of farming. This explains why the exodus of females is so great and why it is larger than that of males (Jegouzo, 1984; Kaufmann, 1999). But the question then arises of why males do not migrate in the same numbers as females in the search for better work. This is where the right of male primogeniture comes into the argument. The eldest son remains on the farm because he is the one who will inherit it. This explains why females migrate in higher numbers than males, resulting in a disproportionate number of males and a scarcity of females in the farming population. Here, bachelorhood is no longer considered voluntary, as in the previous interpretation, but unwanted. The eldest sons do not enjoy the same opportunities for getting married as their siblings, who leave to work in the towns or cities. The smaller the size of the farm they inherit,

the less likely they are to succeed in getting married (Bourdieu, 1972). The proportion of bachelors is indeed higher in small farms than in larger ones (Jegouzo, 1984; Rattin, 1997). The same principle also explains why there is a higher proportion of single farmers in livestock regions than in crop regions (Rattin, 1997). As far as this argument goes, the reasons for bachelorhood among farmers are not specific to agriculture, as “*the probability of a male remaining unmarried is linked to his status*” (Bourdieu, 1972; Jegouzo, 1984).

This article sets out to explain the high level of bachelorhood among farmers through an evolutionary psychological approach¹. This theory, situated within the movement pioneered by Charles Darwin, was developed in the works of Symons (1995), Buss (1994, 1999), or Buss et al. (2001). It applies the theory of natural selection to human sexual differences, arguing that the different mating strategies of males and females cannot be explained solely in terms of cultural differences. Biological differences, which render the two sexes psychologically different, must also be taken into account. Humans share these general features with many other species of animal. In species where the males are larger than the females, for example, they are also more prone to aggressive behavior. Humans are no exception to this rule (Geary, 1998).

Consequently, evolutionary psychological theory can make a useful contribution to our study of marriage. It should not be seen as an alternative to the theory of choices, but as a complement. More precisely, the explanation provided here combines postulates on tastes, based on evolutionary psychology, with a standard utility-maximizing behavior.

This is the theoretical framework - with its accompanying reservations - which we shall adopt for our explanation of bachelorhood among farmers. As far as marriage is concerned, evolutionary psychological theory predicts that males and females do not share the same motivations. In the next section, we draw on the empirical works of evolutionary psychology to present a justification for this proposition. In the

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