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Perspectives

How to cite:

Van der Ploeg, Jan Douwe. "We Should All Have the Right to Link Ourselves More Directly to the Land." In: "Think Global, Eat Local: Exploring Foodways," edited by Michel Pimbert, Rachel Shindelar, and Hanna Schösler, *RCC Perspectives* 2015, no. 1, 29–36.

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Leopoldstrasse 11a, 80802 Munich, GERMANY

ISSN 2190-8087

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Deutsches Museum 



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We Should All Have the Right to Link Ourselves More Directly to the Land

This article aims to reflect on the relations between “man and the land” (to use an old fashioned turn of phrase). Today, the relations between people and the areas that feed them are almost non-existent. As consumers, we are effectively (and often physically) excluded from the places where production takes place. Instead, our information on these locations comes from advertisements and public relations campaigns, which paint rosy pictures that are quite at odds with the realities in the fields, stables, and slaughterhouses. Farmers are, in a way, equally excluded. When doing their work, they have to follow the script written by the agro-industrial conglomerates that supply them with their tools and technologies and to whom they have to deliver the raw materials they produce. The consumer is an abstract entity for the producer, just as the ways in which the producer uses the land and living nature in order to produce food is a mystery for most consumers. “Man and the land” are separated: the ties that once bound them together are broken.

Certainly this mutual abandonment has been convenient, and many of us were not at all uncomfortable with it. But increasingly this “separation of convenience” is falling into disarray. Food scares, financial and ecological crises, unemployment, loneliness, and dissatisfaction are all potential reasons for redesigning this relationship.

In discussing the relations between people and the land (or at least some aspects of such relations), this article builds on two modest points of departure. The first one is an Italian research program on pluriactivity. This program, designed and supervised by Flaminia Ventura and Pierluigi Milone from Perugia University (and funded by *Rete Rurale*) included two large surveys. One involved “part-time farmers” who work both on their own farm and in another occupation (the latter often generating the bulk of their income); the other involved farmers whose partner has a job outside of the farm and whose income is, again, important for the overall family income. I played a role in this research, helping design the methodology. A second source is China, a country I know well. In recent years I have witnessed in China a specific form of pluriactivity, which is mostly referred to as “multiple job holding.”

From Deprived to Privileged

For many decades, part-time farming has been overwhelmingly defined in negative terms. A part-time farm is *not* a full-time farm and by extension it has been seen as a farm that fails to be a real farm. Most countries' agricultural statistics exclude part-time farms, as if denying their validity. A part-time farmer may be perceived as a failing farmer, one who is unable to develop his or her farm into a "real" full-time farm. As a result the part-time farm has been viewed as a temporary phenomenon—a relic from the past, destined for extinction. Today, though, it is clear that part-time farming is a permanent and durable phenomenon, rather than merely an expression of a transitional process towards an agriculture that is fully geared towards and sustained through the global markets for agricultural products.

Part-time farming is essentially about *combining* farming and another job outside of the farm. This might be done for many different reasons: for example, pluriactivity is used by young people as a mechanism to finance the acquisition of a farm and its subsequent development. The farms we are talking about might differ considerably, just as the outside jobs can differ considerably. Alongside highly valued jobs that generate substantial incomes (army officer, university professor, lawyer), there will be seemingly modest ones (wage labor on other, larger farms; taxi-driving) with low levels of remuneration. Thus, there are at least four sources that produce heterogeneity among part-time farms: the farms themselves, the outside jobs, the reasons for the combinations, and the *interactions* between these factors.

In essence, part-time farming involves actively constructing a combination of different activities (farming activities on one's own farm and the outside job). If we want to understand the background, meaning, and dynamics of this combination, we have to go beyond socio-Darwinist views that see the world as a place in which only highly specialized species can survive. Equally, we have to look beyond economic factors.

When asked about their motivations, part-time farmers stress that their choice is not governed by economic need. Thirty-eight percent argue that it is a "personal choice," whilst 60 percent indicate that they wanted to "preserve the family farm" (only two percent refer to an "economic necessity"). People do not generally become part-time farmers because of a lack of alternatives: 41 percent of the part-time farmers in the

survey finished secondary school, and as many as 18 percent have a university education. These people will have had (and probably still have) alternatives, but they choose part-time farming. Admittedly, economic factors might well play a role in personal choice and the willingness to continue the familial patrimony. However, the reasons given reflect consciously made choices.

When asked why they do not dedicate all their time to the farm, 78 percent of part-time farmers indicate that farming by itself would not generate enough income. This could be interpreted as being the main, and economic, explanation of part-time farming. However, such an interpretation would be wrong. Because, if farming renders insufficient income, then why do these people not sell their property and dedicate themselves to the other job?

The part-time farmers were asked to compare their situation with that of non-farmers living in the same area. According to the part-time farmers, non-farming rural residents miss out on certain benefits linked to active participation in farming. Forty-eight percent of the part-time farmers, for instance, think that the food they consume is of better quality than that consumed by non-farming rural dwellers. Slightly paraphrasing Rachel Carson, one could say that these part-time farmers ensure that in their farms and gardens “spring is alive.” Twenty-nine percent think that the two groups consume the same quality of food, and only five percent think that the quality of their food is worse.

Part-time farmers also believe a farm is a better place to raise children. Space for the children was the second most mentioned difference. This was immediately followed by “the house.” Farming activities (and the associated contact with nature) make the part-time farm a better place to live. Next came the absence of stress: part-time farmers perceived farming as a stress buster. Other factors were access to services and social contacts. Those involved in part-time farming do not feel isolated: having a foot in two different worlds opens more opportunities for them and allows them to relate to others.

Income was perceived as the least significant difference: most part-time farmers think that their own income is equal to that of non-farming rural dwellers. Some think it is higher and a smaller portion thinks it is lower.

The Centrality of Food Quality

From one perspective, it is remarkable that quality of food stood out as the most striking difference between farming and non-farming rural residents. From another, though, it is perhaps no surprise at all. The response is a direct reflection of the deep lack of faith in the quality and reliability of the food supplied by food industries and large retail organizations. Against this background, being able to produce even just part of your own food can be seen as an enormous and increasingly recognized privilege. And this is not limited to Italy or Europe. In our ongoing research in China we have found exactly the same motive. Although the 250 million small farms in China are only one of the assets of families with multiple jobs, the main reason given for the importance of the farm is the same as in Italy: the quality and reliability of self-produced food is considered to be superior to that of the food processed by agro-industries and distributed through large retail organizations. In China, preserving the family farm is also important for a number of other reasons: the farm is understood as a fallback in a crisis, for example when levels of industrial employment are suddenly reduced. It is also part of a decentralized system that holds food reserves.

It is not just rural dwellers who are actively focusing on food quality. The inhabitants of large cities and metropolises (such as Beijing and Shanghai) share the same aspiration, and in some places this translates into a variety of new forms of urban agriculture. Some of these represent novel ways of linking both people to people and people to the land. Little Donkey Farm (a cooperative located north of Beijing) is one example. Here city people can obtain direct access to a piece of land and, importantly, to the required knowledge (which they often completely lack). Farmers (mostly elder ones) are part of the co-operative and they transfer their knowledge, through a variety of mechanisms, to the new part-time farmers. The co-operative also provides the basic infrastructure (access roads, demarcation of parcels, water, manure, seeds, and so on). Beyond this, it provides an important and friendly meeting place.

There are several new mechanisms for distributing food produced on small part-time farms in the countryside to the major urban areas. Glass noodles are a good example. Made from sweet potatoes through a lengthy process requiring significant labor and high levels of craftsmanship, these glass noodles travel from their villages of origin towards the cities (often through the networks of migrant laborers). They are a popular

gift during the Spring Festival. Thus the produce of part-time farmers may reach far beyond the local area.

Part-time Farmers and the Wider Panorama

From these examples I argue that part-time farming is not about poverty and deprivation. Incomes are the same, and beyond that there are considerable non-monetary advantages. Part-time farming often represents a choice for a more polyvalent life. In more general terms, what we are witnessing here is a return of the “link to the land.” This link was an important characteristic of the peasantry: peasants were strongly tied to the land, a land they had actively constructed and thus loved dearly. Similarly, many part-time farmers are tied to the land because it offers them a good place to live and to raise their children, because it offers them food that is far better than the food obtained through modern retail chains, and for a multitude of other reasons. This link to the land turns part-time farming into a continuous and resilient phenomenon. Young people raised on a part-time farm will be taught the importance of certain values and will probably opt, in the future, for a similar existence.

Part-time farming might be a valuable option at personal level, but how does it fit into a broader context? Six percent of the Italian sample of part-time farmers believe that they play a fundamental role in maintaining the territory in which their farm is located, and 40 percent consider that they play an important role. The main contributions that they believe they make are related to the maintenance of the landscape (36 percent) and the quality of the produce (28 percent). Twenty-two percent consider part-time farming to be important for securing the volume of agricultural production and 13 percent consider it important for the development of other economic activities in the area.

“Full-Time” Farming

The same research project also examined full-time farmers that form part of a pluriactive family. This means that part of the overall family income is earned from the farm while another part is earned elsewhere.

Comparing these two groups is extremely helpful, I believe, because it shows that there is no sharp boundary—neither conceptually nor empirically—between part-time and full-time farming. Semantically there may appear to be a clear division; however, in real life there are far more similarities, and the differences are minor.

The first notable difference is that these full-time farmers are almost as dependent on off-farm earnings in order to generate an adequate household income. The main data are summarized in Table 1, in which the horizontal axis shows the contribution of the farm to the overall household income and the vertical axis the amount of time that the *conduttore* (the farm manager) dedicates to the farm.

Table 1: Contribution to family income according to time dedicated to the farm (n=947)

	Marginal	Substantial but less than 50%	Equal to 50%	>50%	Almost 100%
Full-time	43%	18%	8%	0%	15%
≥50%	26%	18%	30%	21%	4%
<50%	80%	15%	4%	1%	0%

Table 1 clearly shows that full-time and part-time farms do not differ greatly when it comes to the contribution that the farm makes to the overall household income. If we take all the part-time farms together, in 71 percent of cases the farm only makes a marginal contribution to household income. On the full-time farms this is 43 percent. Ironically, on the part-time farms where the *conduttori* dedicate more than half their working time to the farm, the situation is slightly better: in only 26 percent of these cases is the contribution marginal. Only 15 percent of full-time farms derive nearly all of their income from the farm. The differences between full-time and part-time farms are therefore minor.¹ Most of these farms, whether full-time or part-time, can be maintained only with the help of additional income generated outside of the farm.²

- 1 We may equally assume that over time there will be many changes to this configuration: part-time farms may become full-time, and vice versa. Such changes will depend very much on intra-household relations, work opportunities, administrative and fiscal regimes, etc.
- 2 In the case of so-called full-time farms, there often is an interesting gender aspect. It is commonly the women working elsewhere (as teachers, nurses, engineers, directors, and so on) who that generate the family income. Thus the “full-time farm” functions, in the end, as the expensive hobby of the husband who dedicates all his time to it. The earnings of the farm are re-invested in it; they do not contribute to the family income.

The argument that the differences between part-time and full-time farming are minor is reflected in the opinions of full-time farmers themselves. On the whole they do not think that part-time farmers perform worse than them. In fact, 53 percent of them believe that part-time farmers play an important (or even fundamental) role in the area. Part-time farmers are seen as especially important for the maintenance of the landscape (37 percent), for the supply of high quality food (35 percent), and for the maintenance of an acceptable level of production for the area as a whole (28 percent). It is telling that these full-time farmers are almost as likely to advise youngsters and/or family members to become a part-time farmer (17 percent) as to become a full-time farmer (20 percent). Even more telling, perhaps, is that 38 percent would advise the next generation not to engage in farming in any way whatsoever. When it comes to prospects for the future, five percent of full-time farmers think that part-time farms have the best prospects compared to 24 percent for full-time farms. Notably, 38 percent indicated that multifunctional farms have the best prospects. Thus the essential choice is not between full-time or part-time farming, as may have been the case in the past. Rather, the two forms are interchangeable expressions of the same difficult situation. The essential choice now, it seems, is about new ways forward, particularly in the development of multifunctional farms.

The Moral of the Story

Having direct access to the land is increasingly seen as something of great value. It allows people to actively increase the quality of their lives in a variety of ways. However, at present only certain minorities can gain such direct access. Some people might relocate to the small farm owned by their grandparents. Similarly, they might take over their parents' farm, maintaining it as an attractive place to live, to raise children, to produce food, and to meet other people. They are likely to sell a part—perhaps a considerable part—of their produce. This will help them to better face the harsh conditions that come with the economic and financial crisis. Others might be well-paid professionals, countering the stress of urban life by running a farm as a hobby. Yet others might be granted access to land through new institutional arrangements, such as *Terre des Liens* in France and *Rural Estates* in the Netherlands.

There are many more social groups, though, who would like to gain direct access to land but lack the mechanisms or resources to do so. I believe that this offers new op-

portunities for local politics (although the consequences will be felt at regional and national level). Local politicians should adopt policies that create direct access to land for everybody who wants it. This will require tailor-made solutions—hence the need for local politics to find the most adequate local solutions. It will require new, creative infrastructures (for accessibility, water, and so on). It will also require new patterns of cooperation and new meeting places. Farmers will be needed to show and teach to the others how to prepare the land and how to manure, plant, and harvest it. A multiplicity of new Little Donkeys will emerge, adapted to other circumstances but always creating new linkages between farmers and urban people.

Part-time farming carries the promise of an improved quality of life, especially when circumstances are difficult. If efforts are made at a local level to bring part-time agriculture within the reach of everybody who wishes to engage in it, it might well become an important factor in the wider processes of societal change that we are currently experiencing.