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Understanding farmer co-operation: Exploring practices of social relatedness and emergent affects



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ABSTRACT

The potential of co-operative working within the farming sector has received increasing interest in recent years, given a range of potential benefits. However, uncertainty persists in understanding the balance between individual and collective priority, how members inter-relate and negotiate these different motivations over time, and how this connects to different forms of outcome. This paper evaluates the experiences of the Pontbren farmer co-operative in Mid-Wales (UK) to explore these issues, as an exemplar of the multiple and sometimes unexpected outcomes of co-operative activity. Here-in day-to-day practices and emotional affects are highlighted as critical elements of co-operation alongside the skills and know-how required to sustain working relations. In addition, the farmers' changing sense of self is considered to evaluate the extent to which co-operation can bring about new forms of identification. The approach outlined aims to augment existing Bourdieu-inspired readings of social learning and capital exchange with insights from the literature on social practice and diverse economies (following the work of Elizabeth Shove, J.K. Gibson-Graham and colleagues). Overall, findings demonstrate a need to frame co-operation as an emergent process which can move the individuals involved beyond preformed judgements and measures of social positioning, altering their conceptions of how to relate to others. Moreover, it is argued that the value of this relatedness needs to be understood in more expansive terms, and not only as calculable forms of 'capital'.

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1. Introduction

The potential of co-operative and collaborative working within the farming sector has received increasing interest in recent years, given a range of potential environmental, social and economic benefits - including landscape-scale resource management and tackling socio-economic vulnerabilities and decline (Renting and Van der Ploeg, 2001; Emery and Franks, 2012; Prager et al., 2012; Prager, 2015; Flanigan and Sutherland, 2016; Tregear and Cooper, 2016). Collective organising and movements founded upon the principle of co-operation have also been hailed as important mechanisms for more radical forms of agrarian change and emancipation (Borras et al., 2008; Stock et al., 2014; Van der Ploeg, 2008) and connect with a wider movement for social economy (Amin, 2009) and post-capitalist politics (Gibson-Graham, 2006; Gilbert, 2014). However, co-operation is understood in diverse terms across the literature, with sometimes conflicting motivations

attached.

Co-operation can be defined rather all-encompassingly as “an exchange in which participants benefit from the encounter” (Sennett, 2012, p5), but it comes in many forms and may be formal or informal, combined with competition, or exist as a self-standing value. Whilst there is a well-developed literature on the potential benefits and factors informing the success of farming co-operatives and collective endeavours, uncertainty persists in understanding the balance between individual and collective priority and how this relates to different forms of outcome. Emery (2015) highlights distinctions between co-operation pursued for reasons of self-interest (often, although not exclusively, economically motivated), and that which is undertaken for a range of collective gains. Prager (2015) echoes this by highlighting difficulties in securing public benefits, which are primarily identified as forms of environmental outcome, whilst ensuring sufficient drivers for private gain. Stock et al. (2014) add a further dimension by highlighting the tension between co-operation that seeks to gain a more competitive stance within agricultural markets and co-operation intended to regain control from the dictates of structural forces. As such, uncertainty

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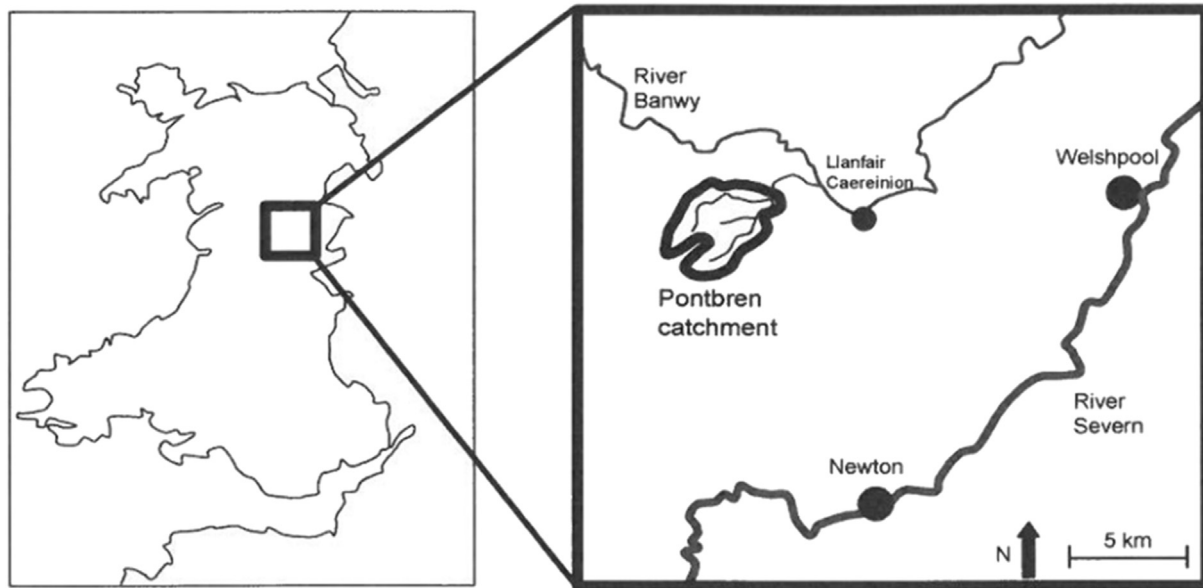


Fig. 1. Location of the Pontbren Project, from Wheater et al., 2008 p8.

emerges over the ways in which different forms of benefit interrelate, and whether farmers are primarily individualistically motivated in their aspirations for co-operation. Moreover, as Tregear and Cooper (2016) outline, there is a need for further interrogation of how producer co-operatives work and develop over time. This is particularly in terms of how members interact and negotiate their differing motivations, and whether existing measures of capacity and disposition, including social capital (e.g. Svendsen and Svendsen, 2000) and tacit knowledges (e.g. Proctor et al., 2012), are sufficient to explain these dynamics.

This paper tackles these questions through an evaluation of the Pontbren farmer co-operative in Mid-Wales UK (see Fig. 1 for location), to unpack the role and form of co-operation in their collective working. The analysis considers how co-operation has supported their successes whilst also enduring in more testing times, assessing the careful balances evident between the farmers' individual desires and their care and investment in the group. The Pontbren group have been chosen as the focus for this analysis as a useful exemplar of the multiple and often unexpected outcomes of collective working. The group have received international recognition for their work to support sustainable catchment management (Mills et al., 2011; Keenleyside, 2013; Ford et al., 2016), but their initial aspirations were much simpler, driven by a need to advance more resilient production systems. Their collective working has met varying successes, gaining substantial funding support from charitable and government sources, whilst attaining high levels of publicity and visitors. But they have also experienced notable failures in their efforts to secure more financially advantageous contracts with supermarket buyers and other lucrative retail avenues. Their persistence in the face of such

disappointments marks them out from other experiences (e.g. Kasabov, 2015) and offers useful insights into the dynamic of individual versus collective priority, and the place of economic drivers.¹

Understanding farmers motivations for co-operation, and the tensions associated, is important for the expectation management and efficacy of nascent groups at a time where greater funding and support is being channelled through EU Common Agricultural and Rural Development Programmes to encourage co-operative and collaborative practices (see Prager, 2015 for a range of existing examples). In Wales this has manifested in the form of funding for group ventures to ensure 'sustainable management' of natural resources.² However, these incentives are notably vague about the benefits offered, beyond indications of a need for larger-scale and connected working to deliver desirable outcomes, and economic stimuli appear to be the primary mechanism for inciting interest amongst farmers.

In other spheres of advocacy economic framings dominate, leading to a potentially reductive perspective on the purpose and potential of co-operative working. For example, the World Farmers' Organisation offers the following definition on their website: "Agricultural co-operatives enable producers to realize economic benefits that they could not otherwise achieve alone".³ Similarly, a recent European Commission analysis frames agricultural co-operatives as "... a means to consolidate their market orientation and so generate a solid market income." (Bijman et al., 2012, p7).⁴

² Scheme particulars are detailed here <http://gov.wales/topics/environmentcountryside/farmingandcountryside/cap/ruraldevelopment/wales-rural-development-programme-2014-2020/sustainable-management-scheme/?lang=en> [last accessed 15/11/16]. It should be noted that whilst any post-Brexit policy landscape is as yet unclear, funding currently allocated is set to be maintained until the end of the current CAP cycle.

³ See <http://www.wfo-oma.com/documents/agricultural-co-operatives.html> [last accessed 23/9/15].

⁴ A primarily economic emphasis is further evidenced by the former English Farming Minister, Jim Paice, available online at <http://www.co-op.ac.uk/2012/09/role-farming-agricultural-co-operatives>; and in the Wales Co-operative Centre's (2004) 'Farming Co-operatives a better future for farming', announced online at <http://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/local-news/farming-co-ops-working-2431178> [last accessed 9/9/15].

¹ The group have been the focus of an earlier study by CCRI in 2008 (see Mills et al., 2011) which explores factors affecting the success of agri-environmental co-operatives. Whilst there are overlaps in the two studies, they were carried out independently. This later phase of data collection was intended to gain a longer term perspective on the group dynamics and insight into later developments including efforts to advance product marketing and the impact of substantive changes in policy context. Published material from the earlier studies has been assessed as part of this evaluation, but the author has not had access to interview transcripts or other data from the earlier research.

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