



# Soil as a key criteria in the construction of farmers' identities: The example of farming in the Austrian province of Burgenland



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## ABSTRACT

Studies of farming symbols in modern agriculture indicate that soils and agricultural land are important factors when it comes to the construction of farmers' identities. This article uses Bourdieu's framework of habitus along with his theory of capital to discuss the importance of soils in this construction process of farmers' identities. A range of methods was used in this study involving qualitative and quantitative interviews with 124 farmers in the Austrian province of Burgenland. In the Burgenland, soil and landscapes are loaded with meaning and therefore never neutral: always implying a wide range of moral concepts of what is "good" or "bad" in the context of soil and land. Farmers "read" soils and related management practices as indication of farming skills and the farmers' interpretation always depends on farmers' aesthetic perception of the world and thus on the farmers' habitus and cultural capital. Farmers distinguish themselves from other farmers, groups or areas of work relating to soil quality aspects or soil management strategies of others. This reciprocal construction of boundaries locates the standing of individual farmers within a community. The importance of the relation between farmers and their soils for the construction of farming identity is especially important for organic farmers.

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## 1. Introduction

This paper discusses the influence of symbolic meanings of soil on decision making in soil and land management. Soil has to be understood within a particular cultural context, fixed in time and space. Its meaning in everyday life goes far beyond its mere reduction to physical or chemical aspects (Barrera-Bassols and Zinck, 2003; Barrera-Bassols et al., 2006c; Winklerprins and Sandor, 2003). In arable farming, as well as in other farming sectors, soil and its qualities are essential parts of a farmer's everyday life. This is not only due to soil's productive abilities, but also because soil is an inherent part of the symbolic representation of rural communities and connected to a value system (Barrera-Bassols et al., 2006a; Toledo, 2000).

In our hypothesis, for implementing new resilient or organic soil management strategies successfully in existing farming cultures, an understanding of the cultural dimension of soil is urgently needed. The present research was driven by two main research questions: 1) What symbolic meanings does soil and do soil management strategies have within the agriculture in Burgenland and 2) what influences do soil and do soil management strategies have within agriculture on the construction of (organic) farmers' identities in Burgenland?

## 2. State of the art

### 2.1. Ethnopedology and local knowledge systems

In our research we follow up the debate on ethnopedology, which focuses on the knowledge, worldviews and practices (rituals, customs, ways of processing) of people in the context of pedological phenomena (quality, texture, structure, humus, content, erosion) (Barrera-Bassols et al., 2006c; Winklerprins and Sandor, 2003). Research in the field of ethnopedology in recent decades has mainly focused on studies undertaken outside Europe and North America, for example in Latin America (Barrera-Bassols et al., 2006b; Barrera-Bassols et al., 2006c; Barrios and Trejo, 2003; Erickson and Ardon, 2003; German, 2003; Grossman, 2003; Niemeijer and Mazzucato, 2003; Pauli et al., 2012; Reséndiz-Paz et al., 2013; Zúñiga et al., 2013), Africa (De Jager et al., 2004; Gray and Morant, 2003; Habarurema and Steiner, 1996; Hillyer et al., 2006; Jungerius, 1998; Maconachie, 2012; Osbahr and Allan, 2003; Ramisch, 2014; Rushemuka et al., 2014; Steiner, 1998; Warren et al., 2003) and parts of Asia (Ali, 2003; Payton et al., 2003; Saito et al., 2006).

The field of ethnopedology is formed around the concept of *local knowledge* or, to be more specific, people's *local soil knowledge* (Barrera-Bassols and Zinck, 2003; Winklerprins, 1999; Winklerprins and Sandor, 2003). In the debate that is still ongoing, there are certain disagreements about a valid definition of local knowledge and there

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are several terms in use to describe the same or similar concepts, such as *indigenous knowledge* or *traditional knowledge* (Antweiler, 1995; Berkes, 2008; Toledo, 2000). In the authors' opinion, all these terms have certain advantages and disadvantages, expressing varying focus on the concept. Nevertheless, the terms “indigenous” and “traditional” are strongly loaded in meaning and to a great extent misleading “as they imply these knowledge systems to be static and unchanging entities that do not interact with ‘the outside world’”. However, societies and people are not isolated from each other; changes in knowledge are generated by interactions between and within societies and people's adaptations to changes in their environment” (Oudwater and Martin, 2003; Winklerprins, 1999). Therefore we use the term *local* when talking about the informants' knowledge. For the authors, local knowledge is the body of knowledge of specific well-identified people (the respondents) living and working in a certain location at a certain time.

## 2.2. Symbolism and representation: the “good farming” identity

Various studies (Burton, 2004b; Burton and Paragahawewa, 2011; Sutherland and Burton, 2011; Sutherland and Darnhofer, 2012; Sutherland et al., 2012; Sutherland, 2013) show that farmers' communities are based on well-established value systems and normative sanctions in which soil is closely linked to certain symbolic values. Burton (2004b) points out that “within modern agricultural landscapes there lie meanings developed through the performance of everyday farm tasks by members of the farming community that to the farmers speak of their toil and personal victory over the land, and yet to us may represent the excess of the agricultural industry – of pollution, industrialisation and the degradation of the countryside. In particular behaviours that appear to be entirely utilitarian (monoculture) may in fact take on a totally different significance to those who understand what they represent”. This is also the reason why landscapes (as represented in industrial agriculture) that are perceived by a wide public as “aesthetically unattractive” (Nohl, 2001) in contrast, are perceived by many farmers as the most attractive ones. Farmers have a distinct understanding or a different view on farming landscapes and, most importantly, they know about the practices required to form these farming landscapes (Burton, 2012). Farmers rather see what Winkler (2005) calls the “beauty of the work” than “the beauty of the land” and everyday practices become loaded with symbolic meanings. The fact that soils and land can be easily assessed by colleagues and other members of a community generates a permanent “transfer of status information through looking over neighbouring hedges” (Burton, 2004b) and thus constructs farming identities.

The term *identity* is in itself very ambiguous and much discussed in social science in particular. On the one hand, it refers to uniqueness and personal character, everything that distinguishes a person (group, category, institution) from the rest. On the other hand, the term “refers to qualities of sameness, in that persons may associate themselves, or be associated by others, with groups or categories on the basis of some salient common feature” (Byron, 1996). Godelier (2010) defines “identity” as the “crystallization within an individual of the social and cultural relations in which he or she is involved and which he or she is led to reproduce or reject”. Identities are based on interactions between individuals (or groups) that construct what Greverus (1987, 1995) calls the “other self” by an approach being given a common form as a result of expectations (e.g. organic farmer). Identity is therefore always a construct because images of social identities are always connected with conscious and unconscious ideas. On the one hand we can find the “this is how it is”, whereas on the other there is the “this is how we would like it to be”.

As Michel-Guillou and Moser (2006) show, pro-environmental action depends more on social factors than on environmental awareness. The predominant components in farming are still production-based

identities (Burton and Wilson, 2006). This is crucial when it comes to the conversion to organic farming or the establishment of organic farms<sup>1</sup> in rural communities (Sutherland and Darnhofer, 2012; Sutherland, 2013). Even though there are various reasons and motivations leading to farm conversion (Darnhofer et al., 2005), it is also known that identities do not necessarily change with a change of work (Brandth and Haugen, 2011).

As Schneider and Rist (2012) outline in their study on aesthetics in the adoption of no-tillage farming, the reasons for the adoption or rejection of no-tillage farming has to be seen in the context of their entire lifeworld. Aesthetic perceptions (e.g. a “tidy” vs. badly managed field through ploughing) and the professional and personal identities of farmers have a huge impact on decision making. In the case of conversion, farmers not only have to adapt their farming methods to new practices, but also rethink the perception of what constitutes a “good farmer”.

This concept of the “good farmer” has already been described in various articles (Burton, 2004b; Burton and Paragahawewa, 2011; McGuire et al., 2012; Sutherland and Burton, 2011; Sutherland, 2013). However, while these studies document the importance of the *good farmer* concept, Sutherland and Darnhofer (2012) point out that it is not only important to recognise this concept, but also to understand how definitions of good farming become part of farming culture. Organic farming differs in various aspects from typical agri-environmental schemes. After conversion, farmers do not automatically change their values and cultural symbols in response to their experiences with organic farming. As a concept and per definition,<sup>2</sup> organic farming features a set of practical (symbolic) values, e.g. soil fertility, minimum tillage techniques, extensive agriculture or environmental concerns. Sutherland and Darnhofer (2012) suggest that these symbols are not automatically adopted by converts, but that their existence, in combination with the “devaluation of cultural capital based in ‘productivist’ good farming traditions, offers alternative symbols” from which farmers can draw certain benefits.

## 2.3. Forms of capital

This *cultural capital* is part of Bourdieu's sociological conceptualisation of social reproduction, which has already been discussed by various studies (Burton et al., 2008; Burton and Paragahawewa, 2011; Sutherland and Darnhofer, 2012) in an agricultural context. It is the most commonly used theoretical approach to the good farming concept. Bourdieu (1986) argues that all human relations are based on three forms of wealth, or what he calls *capital*: *economic capital* (material and financial property), *social capital* (social connections or mutual obligations) and *cultural capital* (knowledge, skills, disposition). This theory of capital is based on different forms of power, all of which are transferable between one other under particular circumstances via *symbolic capital* (status, prestige, reputation). Based on this theory there are a number of articles (Burton, 2004a; Burton, 2012; Burton et al., 2008; Burton and Paragahawewa, 2011; Sutherland and Burton, 2011; Sutherland and Darnhofer, 2012; Sutherland et al., 2012; Sutherland, 2013) drawing on Bourdieu to demonstrate the importance of cultural capital in farming practice. Agricultural land can be seen as a “display of the farmer's knowledge” and value system (Rogge et al., 2007). As soil and farmland activities are very visible to other members of the community, all visible activities and features that are not indicative of “good farming” “may restrict the generation of cultural capital, damage the reputation or status of the farmer and,

<sup>1</sup> With the term “organic farms” we mean those farms that are officially registered and certified as organic farms, underlying a control system based upon EC Council Regulation 834/2007 and 889/2008.

<sup>2</sup> Organic farming is defined e.g. by the IFOAM (International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements) as “a production system that sustains the health of soils, ecosystems and people. It relies on ecological processes, biodiversity and cycles adapted to local conditions, rather than the use of inputs with adverse effects. Organic agriculture combines tradition, innovation and science to benefit the shared environment and promote fair relationships and a good quality of life for all involved.”

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