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# Reclaiming localisation for revitalising agriculture: A case study of peri-urban agricultural change in Gothenburg, Sweden



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## ABSTRACT

Agriculture near urban landscapes has recently been re-appreciated with the recognition of its economic, social and environmental contributions. However, rapid urbanisation and global agricultural restructuring constituting complex processes across multiple scales tend to threaten the survival of peri-urban agriculture. Focusing on family farms near Gothenburg in Sweden, this paper intends to explore the relations between location and agriculture and how family farms have been able to continue farming in peri-urban areas. Unlike previous studies of peri-urban agriculture, mostly carried out by planners from an urban-centric perspective, this paper deploys a rural and place-based perspective by drawing on theories of agricultural location. Based on statistical and spatial analyses of land use change, and interviews with farmers and authorities, the processes and drivers of local agricultural change are analysed. The results identify four simultaneous processes that produce the diversity in forms of agriculture between farms: structural changes, loss of farmland to urban expansion, specialisation of on-farm activities and a niching trend of on-farm activities. The new findings which shed light on the theory of agricultural localisation are: 1) niche production greatly takes advantage of the peri-urban location; 2) a reverse von Thünen's transportation pattern is enabled by the proximity to urban consumers; 3) enhancing competitive advantage through saving labour costs is enabled by the direct relation to consumers at the peri-urban location; 4) multifunctional agriculture has potential but also raises conflicts between different types of land use in peri-urban areas; 5) a secured access to land for farmers enabled by the local governance which separates the increasing land value from land rent is fundamental for supporting continued peri-urban agriculture. Our recommendation is that policy makers need to shift to a location-sensitive governing praxis of agriculture in order to re-vitalise peri-urban areas.

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## 1. Introduction

Agriculture near urban landscapes has recently been re-appreciated. In the global north urban and peri-urban agriculture is suggested to serve an indispensable function in urban landscapes by supplementing urban food needs, providing ecosystem services, enhancing cultural values, and even increasing economic resilience (McClintock, 2010; Mok et al., 2014; Zasada, 2012). Different from early negative accounts of the conflicts between agriculture and urban interests (Berry, 1978; Rettig, 1976), recent perspectives have attempted to show more of the opportunities and positive implications that cities provide to peri-urban agriculture (Beauchesne

and Bryant, 1999; Bryant et al., 1982; Bryant and Johnston, 1992; Zasada, 2012). Moreover, challenging the dividing assumption in the dominant economic model (Epstein, 2001: 6), historical studies show evidence that farming was an integral part of urban landscapes (Björklund, 2010; Kostof, 1991). Many peri-urban areas, especially those with certain types of agriculture such as fruit, nuts and vegetables, are found to remain the major food suppliers to their nearby cities (Jackson-Smith and Sharp, 2008; Mok et al., 2014). On the other hand, the rapid progress of urbanisation has been reported to drive the continuous loss of farmlands to industrial and residential uses, and the decline of population working with agriculture (Bryant et al., 1982; Nilsson et al., 2013). This tension is especially likely to be high in Europe where over 75% of the population live in urban areas today, and it is projected that this figure will reach 80% by 2020 (Nilsson et al., 2013). Sweden is claimed to be already more urbanised than the future European average with 85% of the population living in urban areas

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(Svanström, 2015).

The current relationship between agriculture and urban landscapes is nevertheless fundamentally structured by agricultural transitions. Within the countries of the global north, the problem of over-production, together with the public concerns about environmental impact of intensive farming, animal welfare and food quality, created pressures for reforms in agricultural policy and practice in the 1980s (Woods, 2011). At the global scale, capitalist agriculture facilitated by trade liberalisation has rapidly grown into a model where high-volume productions are spatially concentrated in sites with low costs and the products are then transported to serve mass markets across the world (Robinson, 2004). By breaking down limits of geographical dependence on local resources, the global agri-food system has led to the spatial remoteness between production and consumption, the erosion of local rural-urban relationships, and essentially the alienation of humans from the local natural environment (Clark et al., 2013; McClintock, 2010; Robinson, 2004; Whatmore, 2002). Farmers are forced to directly confront new market realities and food chain issues which they used to be shielded from by protectionist policies (Winter, 2004). Abandonment of farms and farmlands, and the decline of agriculture in rural areas in Sweden (Myrdal and Morell, 2011; Statistics Sweden, 2013; Svanström, 2015) as well as in other European countries (Evans, 2009; MacDonald et al., 2000), are suggested to be the outcome of the global agricultural restructuring where traditional farms were marginalised or lost in competition with corporate agribusinesses. Nevertheless, the recent reframing of agriculture as being multifunctional, especially the establishment of multifunctionality as an objective of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) in the European Union (EU), on the contrary seems to create new rooms for (state-assisted) development of farms and revitalisation of the countryside (Potter and Tilzey, 2005; Woods, 2011). Our theoretical and empirical knowledge is still very limited regarding the processes of how these different layers of forces generated over the past decades intersect to impact the development pathways of farms which are integrated to different extent in the global agri-food system, and especially when the farms are located next to each other and close to cities.

A recent revisit of the European agricultural question by a research project RETHINK (where the work behind this article contributed one of its case studies in 14 European countries) concludes that “it is very difficult for farmers to rationalise and grow their farms fast enough to cope with the low producer prices in global markets”; meanwhile “there is much to be learnt from local farmer-driven innovations” where “farmers value location-specific experimental knowledge highly due to its relevance and efficient use of available resources” (Knickel, 2016: 17). The latter is related to an important fact that farming is still often carried out by families with generations of experiences and rooted in these places. Many of these farms are also located in peri-urban areas. Therefore, this peri-urban agriculture is very different from urban agriculture which is often practiced by urban residents as part-time activities on empty spaces (McClintock, 2010; Mok et al., 2014; Tornaghi, 2014). Small and medium-sized farms in peri-urban areas are at the frontier of experiencing the double jeopardy (dealing with both globalisation and urbanisation) but peri-urban areas are also likely to be the spaces “left behind” by globalisation or “created” through urbanisation (Clark et al., 2013). Studies of agriculture in such spaces are rather specific to show how peri-urban spaces are especially engaged by attempts to reconnect consumptions to local places and to create networks of food provision alternative to the global agri-food system (Paül and McKenzie, 2013; Winter, 2003). Farms, without such agendas, are considered to develop local production for grasping the marketing opportunities to cater for the needs of urban consumers (Inwood and Sharp, 2012).

Nevertheless, insights from the wider scope of agricultural and rural studies have not been drawn on to study how location matters for the processes of peri-urban agricultural change.

Therefore, the aim of this paper is to combine knowledge from rural studies and agricultural geography to explore how agricultural change in a peri-urban location is configured by multi-layered forces and manifested by development pathways of family farms. Two questions are asked: what are the main processes of local agricultural change in peri-urban areas over the last few decades? And, what are the locational explanations for the change? This paper examines these questions based on a case study of family farms close to the city of Gothenburg, the second largest city in Sweden. It should be noted that this case does not represent a common situation of peri-urban agriculture in Sweden. The reason of studying this case is because its unique value with active farmers on the absolute border to the city enables a deeper understanding of the relations between agriculture and the city. The special situation of the case can also shed light on developing better policies for sustaining peri-urban agriculture. The next section outlines the theoretical sources of our approach for examining agricultural location. Section 3 then introduces the case study area and explains the mixed group of methods that have been deployed. In Section 4, four simultaneous processes and the underlying drivers of local agricultural change are analysed with a focus on examining the role of location. The discussions in section 5 reflect on both the new empirical findings and the theoretical insights from this case study. The conclusion in Section 6 further advances the policy implications of our analysis.

## 2. Theorising the location of peri-urban agriculture

### 2.1. A conceptual framework of agricultural location

Unlike previous studies of peri-urban agriculture mostly carried out by landscape architects and urban planners from an urban-centric perspective (Bryant et al., 1982; Scott et al., 2013), this article sees peri-urban agriculture from the perspective of agricultural geography. This means that our primary interest is with the activities of farms. However, given that significant changes in agriculture and rural areas have complicated the activities of farms with new political, economic, social and environmental realities, the current agricultural geography actually looks beyond “the farm gate” (Clark et al., 2013; Evans, 2009) to align with the interests of other fields such as rural and economic geography (Morris and Evans, 2004: 96).

A key theoretical question here is ‘agricultural location’. Why an agricultural activity takes place in one peri-urban location rather than another and why one form of agricultural activity rather than another takes place in this location pinpoint the need of this concept. Previous studies have suggested in different ways the usefulness of a close concept to location - place - for explaining agricultural and rural change. The appreciation of ‘place’ as a fundamental element within a rural economy has been growing among regionalism and community oriented literature (Bafarasat, 2016; Hall and Stern, 2009; Markey et al., 2008), which follows the geographical turn (Massey, 1984). Meanwhile, in the literature of agricultural geography, place-based views also emerged as a challenge to the structural deterministic view of the global agri-food system by highlighting local adaptive strategies (Van der Ploeg, 1992; Whatmore, 2002) and local experiences of globalisation (Woods, 2007). However, agricultural location has not been put at the theoretical core for a long time after Heinrich von Thünen’s study (Hall, 1966) in the early 19th century for explaining agricultural land use patterns and driving forces near towns. The exception is Sinclair (1967) which revisited von Thünen’s theory to adapt

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