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The cosmopolitan farmer: Ideas and practices beyond travel and internationalisation

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ABSTRACT

The occupation of farmer has traditionally been associated with spatial boundaries expressed in farm organisation and renewal, including generational succession, attachment to land and a local activity range. Recent studies have pointed to the existence of new forms of attachment and a rise in transnational activities, contributing to new perspectives on farmers' identity and development of practices in response to change in agribusiness.

In this paper we seek to add to the ongoing discussion of how farming practices develop, with reference to contemporary translocal practices in Swedish farming, asking whether and how farming relates to cosmopolitanism. Being a globalised industry and activity, farming involves translocal practices expressed in farmer and labour mobility, information exchange and economic and political interdependencies. Cosmopolitanism as an idea and in relation to practices contributes to understanding of what characterises transnational practices and what they are intended to achieve. We argue that farmers exhibit cosmopolitanism, but from a specific spatial position. Cosmopolitanism is thus not free from spatial connections, while references to mobility are numerous. Someone has to be mobile, but it does not always have to be the farmer. Mobility may be a means to achieve something, but cosmopolitanism as a mode of thought and action is more embedded in everyday work and strategies on the farm.

1. Introduction

The occupation of farmer has traditionally been associated with diverse kinds of continuity and spatial boundary, including generational succession, attachment to land and a local activity range. Attachment to land and place due to inheritance and kinship has been seen as embedded in the occupation of farmer (Chesire et al., 2014). Similarly, integration of home and workplace and deep knowledge of the land are characteristics associated with agriculture and the 'farming spirit' (Flemsæter, 2009; Hildenbrandt and Hennon, 2005). Such bonds with the physical environment have been shown to affect farming practices in such a way that they may limit room for manoeuvre. Evidently, they also pose the risk of amplifying a farmer's trauma when the business collapses (Hildenbrandt and Hennon, 2005).

Over the past few decades, the occupation and identity of farmers pursuing business restructuring have been signified by independence and strong bonds with the farm, on the one hand, and increased mobility and networking on the other. In the former strand of research the identity of farmer has been described as infused by loneliness and vulnerability. Restructuring of the sector has resulted in fewer and larger farms, and the family-farm concept has been superseded by the one-person business (Kallioniemi et al., 2016). Farmers' social situation has changed, which has meant fewer contacts with other farmers and also, according to Nordström Källström (2008), with the consumers of their goods; accordingly, farmers experience loneliness. Problems related to loneliness are incorporated in their identities as farmers (Kallioniemi et al., 2016).

However, the occupation of farmer is practised not in isolation but, rather, close to the surrounding physical, cultural and economic environment. It is dependent upon economic and political structures. Farming is also a profession and practice that develop in relation to agroindustry in national and international contexts, and to the customers, food consumers and rural population. Consequently, the identity of the solitary farmer has also been questioned. The farmer may be alone in the tractor or while feeding the animals, but elsewhere on the farm or in the village the farmer has extensive networks comprising family, relatives and neighbours, who are crucial for making the farm function (Flygare, 1999).

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A more recent strand of research focuses on the farmer as an actor in a global setting, engaged in an ongoing occupational transformation. This strand emphasises mobility and openness towards new ways of running the business. In this interpretation, farmers are becoming global actors and travellers. New forms of attachment are arising (Cheshire and Woods, 2013), and expanding transnational activities (Cheshire and Woods, 2013) are contributing to new perspectives on the farmer's identity and practical developments in response to agroindustrial change. For Chesire et al. (2014), farmers who travel and sell their products on international markets are to be regarded as cosmopolitans. Accordingly, not only agricultural goods but also their producers are mobile and, in their travel, the producers show a pronounced will to achieve openness and 'cross-cultural mastery' (Chesire et al., 2014: 100). Cosmopolitanism is thus bound up with travel across national borders, and dependent on movements of people.

Farmers evidently operate in both a local and international context, which contributes to their perception of the local as a site of global exchange and interaction. We use the term 'translocal' rather than 'transnational', and this standpoint has emerged with the growth of insights into farmers' local activities and ties, as well as interest in other localities and actors. 'Translocality' (or 'translocalism') has been referred to as capturing social-spatial interactions with an actor-oriented approach (Greiner and Sakdapolrak, 2013: 376). In this article we seek to add to the ongoing discussion of how farming practices develop, with reference to contemporary translocal practices in Swedish farming, asking whether and how farming relates to cosmopolitanism. Being a globalised industry and activity, farming involves translocal practices embodied in farmer and labour mobility, exchange of information and economic and political interdependencies.

This study follows the mobility and cosmopolitan perspective on farming. We explore how ideas and practices related to cosmopolitanism are present in contemporary Swedish farming and how these ideas and practices also extend beyond travel and business internationalisation. Our study elucidates how attachment to land can be combined with understanding of the relationship between farms and the rest of the world that is based on attributes associated with a cosmopolitan world view. These include openness, connectedness, a holistic perspective and acknowledgement of the farm as part of a worldwide system of producing and consuming agricultural products. The contribution of this study is thus to emphasise mobility, both abstract and embodied. The research question is formulated as follows: how do farmers express cosmopolitanism in their thoughts and/or practices?

2. Farmers, internationalisation and mobility

Our theoretical focus on rural cosmopolitanism prompts us to investigate some specific, farming-related aspects. This includes work to internationalise the labour force and farmers' networks and mobility practices.

2.1. Internationalisation of the labour force and worker mobility

By employing people from the local surroundings or from other regions or countries, farmers affect rural society. They offer job opportunities and cause a local population increase that raises issues about migrants' contributions to translocal rural processes (Rye, 2014). It has been debated whether these migrant workers participate in local life; their interaction with the local community is described by some researchers as weak, and there is no pronounced transnational identity (Andrzejewska and Rye, 2012). At farm level, labour–capital relations develop and cooperative social contexts arguably contribute to certain work arrangements, including structural disempowerment (Rye and Andrzejewska, 2010). The reason for hiring workers from other countries is a perceived lack of workers with the right skills and attitudes. Employers want workers whom they can trust and who represent continuity. (Zachrison et al., n.d.).

Volunteers are one specific group of migrant farm workers. Researchers in tourism studies have paid attention to voluntary work in international organisations such as World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms, WWOOF (Deville et al., 2016; Mostafanezhad, 2016; Mostafanezhad et al., 2015; Yamamoto and Engelsted, 2014). In these studies volunteers are primarily seen as tourists, but of the kind that resist conventional tourism (Deville et al., 2016). These studies state that the foremost driving force for voluntary engagement in farm work is the opportunity to experience other cultures by taking part in everyday life in rural areas (cf. Deville et al., 2016: 98ff). A desire to learn more about organic farms and alternative ways of living is also present, but seen as a subordinated wish to experience other countries from within. This represents volunteers not primarily as farm workers, but as (young) people interested in learning more about alternative ways of living. Voluntary work on farms has also been studied within the framework of an existing caring economy (Lans, 2016) or as spaces of encounter (Ince, 2015). Ince concludes that WWOOF participants 'negotiate the grey area between mutual aid and voluntary (self-)exploitation' (Ince, 2015, 837).

The organisational structure of WWOOF, with its more or less autonomous operation, means that the WWOOF ethos is adapted to local contexts, 'relatively independently of the hierarchical structures of capital and state' (Ince, 2015, 833). The global network thus results in local outcomes, and farmer hosts develop diverse practices. According to Lans (2016) there are, broadly, two different kinds of farmer host. First, there are the hosts who are interested in sharing knowledge about farming methods and the like, and values around organic farming, and in helping young adults to develop. Second, there are those who are interested in getting extra labour on their farm. Voluntary work is seen as part of social relations and interdependence between volunteers and hosts, based on common interests and mutual trust. For first-time migrant farmers, however, the networks that voluntary work creates may be seen as replacing family networks and place-bound networks (Mostafanezhad et al., 2015: 128). At the same time, there are economic realities that make this kind of labour valuable, since it primarily benefits small enterprises with limited scope to afford employees. Although volunteers and hosts are seen as sharing common values, Lans points to the fact that the relationship is not to be seen as an 'idealistic and ethical space' (Lans, 2016: 19), free from conflicts. There are, for example, systems where volunteers may warn each other of hosts who perform poorly, which indicate that there may be uneven power relationships between hosts and volunteers.

2.2. Networks, mobilities and flows

In a study on Australian farmers, Cheshire and Woods, 2013 investigate emotional attachments to place and farm among 'globally engaged farmers', i.e. those who continuously negotiate how to meet economic and political realities applying in a global industry. They categorise farmer attachment in three decoupled elements: 'attachment to farming as an activity and source of agrarian identity; attachment to the farm as an economic and social unit; and attachment to place'. The specific context will affect the way these various elements of attachment are balanced, and the farmers' choices reflect emotional attachments as well as rational economic decision-making (Cheshire and Woods, 2013). Thus, farmers develop mobility and network practices in relation to strengthening the business, perhaps in response to external demands or as opportunities identified as aligned with the farmers' own interests. Globalisation processes create opportunities for business development, while it may also be necessary to meet needs shaped in the contemporary business climate. These farmers are agents of globalisation, regardless of whether they are driven by business interests and have an intensive schedule or travel in a more immersive way, driven by an interest in new farming systems and a desire to see more than an ordinary tourist would (Cheshire and Woods, 2013: 240).

Young farmers' strategies involve learning and acquiring knowledge