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Placing resilience in context: Investigating the changing experiences of Finnish organic farmers

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1. Introduction

Although discourses around organic agriculture have moved beyond its initial, rather particular ecological morality (Fouilleux and Locanto, 2017), the narratives and practices of its production and consumption remain widely positioned as a solution to the problems associated with conventional agri-food; an alternative to industrial and productivist agricultural models; an opportunity to (re)connect and (re)embed in local socio-ecologies; and a way to achieve healthy soil, people and environment (Clarke et al., 2008; Fouilleux and Locanto, 2017; Läpple and Van Rensburg, 2011). However, such utopian perspectives serve to enact an unproductive and overly structured analysis of conventionalisation and bifurcation in which the organic movement is separated into small/local/authentic and large/national/commercial operations (Guthman, 2004; Halberg et al., 2006; Padel, 2008; Milestad and Darnhofer, 2003; Ilbery et al., 2016; Lobley et al., 2013). Following Campbell and Rosin (2011), we agree that this masks the evolution of organics as a participatory and negotiated process composed of a diverse interplay of spaces and practices. Organic systems – despite increasing institutionalisation through standards bodies and certifiers (Fouilleux and Locanto, 2017) – remain heterogenous and regionally uneven (Campbell and Rosin, 2011; Ilbery et al., 2016), and the complex ethics involved preclude an easy mapping onto the scales of local, regional and national, which are oft-referenced in debates around organics (Clarke et al., 2008).

In this paper, we contribute to calls for a greater understanding of the contested worlds and complex farm-level dynamics of organic agriculture (Campbell and Rosin, 2011; Rosin and Campbell, 2009) through a focus on the experiences of Finnish organic producers. Finland presents an interesting empirical arena because of its unique position, within the European context, as a recently developed industrial and urban nation with a consequently deep and persistent peasant culture, and widespread connections to rural spaces and identities (Buciega et al., 2009; Silvasti, 2003a). While the state continues to play a significant role in ensuring the continuity of agriculture, Iancu (2012) argues that the competitiveness of Finnish farming also depends on the introduction of hi-tech innovations and the latest agricultural knowledges, which, given its recent rural heritage, establishes Finland as an interesting negotiation between traditional and modern techniques and ideas; organics is a key part of this mix, becoming part of Finland's brand strategy in 2010 (Evira, 2014). Furthermore, the Finnish focus serves to broaden the empirical scope of rural research more generally, which to date has been highly UK and US-centric (Mcdonagh, 2012).

Rather than judging whether different practices, discourses, motivations or scales within Finnish organic agriculture are good, bad, conventional or alternative (Gibson-Graham, 2008), here we take a more contingent and open approach to explore and analyse the local negotiations and relations that facilitate, and are facilitated by, the global development of a stable organic market and reduced sectoral uncertainty (Rosin and Campbell, 2009). Nonetheless, as Milestad and Darnhofer (2003: 84) comment 'farmers have always lived in changing environments – politically, economically and ecologically – where surprise and structural change are inevitable'. We therefore take a longitudinal approach to investigate the multiple and varying engagements through which Finnish organic producers have struggled to maintain their livelihoods, legacies and identities in an evolving and volatile agricultural sector. We draw on the experiences of both early adopters, who converted in the 1970s and 1980s and who are now largely retired, and more recent converts who became organic between 2008 and 2013. While, as Läpple and Van Rensburg's (2011) Irish study found, the two groups did demonstrate different characteristics and motivations, we are more interested in the fluid and hybrid subjectivities of both groups that the empirics uncovered.

Resilience – as the 'ability to persist in an uncertain world' (Perrings, 1998: 221) – offers a useful conceptual framework to understanding farmers' experiences of, and practices in relation to, processes of change. After all, understanding how individuals and communities negotiate unpredictable environments is critical for management responses at both the state and farm level (Maclean et al., 2014). Although the intertwining of the social and ecological within systems has long been recognised in resilience literatures, Adger (2000) argued that the concept had not been effectively brought across the disciplinary divide from its origins in ecology and that its very

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transferability was questionable. This argument persists with Maclean et al. (2014) noting that the inherent challenges in bringing together the social and ecological have meant that a distinct knowledge gap with respect to the normative aspects endures while Olsson et al. (2015) argue against the inappropriate and unifying extension of natural science concepts to society. Despite the growing research into social resilience (see Aldrich and Meyer, 2015; Cuthill et al., 2008; Dale et al., 2008; Krøvel, 2014; Maclean et al., 2014; Magis, 2010; Mason and Pulvirenti, 2013; Berkes and Ross, 2013) more work is therefore needed to further conceptualise this important but under-theorised concept.

Cote and Nightingale (2012: 475) argue that using ecological principles to analyse social dynamics masks the key normative questions 'resilience of what and for whom?'. Here, we draw on Milestad and Darnhofer's (2003) and Darnhofer et al.'s (2016) framework of farm resilience to reflect on a socio-agricultural resilience that acknowledges all the entangled economic, social, cultural, political and environmental interconnections involved in constructing and performing a farm. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to fully explore this holistic nexus, we engage with four key and interlocking themes – building social capital, market innovations, governance engagements and family working – to explore the multiple and changeable strategies for resilience at the farm-level. By doing so we respond to Cote and Nightingale's (2012) call to stop abstracting resilience, and instead situate it within the heterogeneous, mediated and power-laden socio-cultural relations and processes that govern human adaptations to change. We engage with producer experiences at the local scale since it is through everyday practices that the latter encounter risk (Komino, 2014) and so operationalise resilience.

In this paper, we first critically reflect on resilience through a discussion of agricultural and farm resilience, and organic production literatures before outlining our research context and methods. We then move on to explore the changing cultures of Finnish organic production; organic farmers are not a homogenous grouping because since 1990, and particularly in the dairy sector, the movement has mainstreamed, becoming recognised as a key strategy to maintain economic profitability while meeting EU environmental targets (MMM, 2007; SGPFS, 2010; MMM, 2011). Taking a comparative approach to the changing strategies of both early adopters and recent converts, we develop a nuanced understanding that moves beyond the conventionalisation and bifurcation debates. Through a focus on social networks, economic changes and skills development we analyse the varying and multiple contexts through which farm resilience is performed. We conclude by critically reflecting on the hybridity and dynamism of the farmer subjectivities that highlight the spatial and temporal contextuality of resilience, which is – as both Anderson (2015) and Olsson et al. (2015) argue – better understood not as an universal and unifying concept but as pluralistic resiliences.

2. Socio-agricultural resilience

Social resilience is the *process* by which 'individuals, communities and societies adapt, transform and potentially become stronger' (Maclean et al., 2014: 146) when faced with challenges. Central to this is the fact that change, not stasis, is the constant because social memory and learning ensure that a social system can never revert back to an 'original' state (Folke et al., 2003; Magis, 2010). For Howell (2015) this is because resilience is fundamentally about 'enhancement' but critics argue it is difficult to reconcile this ambiguity, with resilience seemingly about both change and resistance to change (Olsson et al., 2015). As Berkes and Ross (2013) note a system may also have various stable states, which may not all be desirable; this emphasizes the multiplicity, uncertainty and contingency of social resilience, which belongs in 'a real world that is messy, complex and often unpredictable' (Krøvel, 2014: 64).

Resilience, like other 'buzzwords', has been dismissed by critics as ambiguous, depoliticised and disengaged with justice issues (Brassett et al., 2013; Diprose, 2014) but, while acknowledging its limitations in terms of definition and quantification (Anderson, 2015; Olsson et al., 2015), we agree with proponents who argue that it remains a useful tool to engage with experiences of unpredictability and processes of change (Coward, 2015; Wilson, 2015; Cote and Nightingale, 2012). Despite these challenges, a number of common themes emerge in the literatures that allow us to begin to conceptualise how social resilience may be practised. Communication, co-production/participation, active agency, social capital, resources, learning and social memory, attachment to place, social networks, local knowledges and equity (Aldrich and Meyer, 2015; Berkes and Ross, 2013; Krøvel, 2014; Magis, 2010; Norris et al., 2008; Wilson, 2015; ELMS, 2015, Uscher-Pines et al., 2013) emerge repeatedly in the literatures, highlighting the multi-dimensional nature of social resilience as well as hinting towards the power and social relations it must negotiate (Mason and Pulvirenti, 2013). Maclean et al. (2014: 146) offer a useful synthesis, arguing that the key attributes that shape 'the way in which individuals, communities and societies adapt … when faced with environmental, social, economic or political challenges' are: (i) knowledge, skills and learning; (ii) community networks; (iii) people-place connections; (iv) community infrastructure; (v) diverse and innovative economies; and (vi) engaged governance. Therefore:

> 'Resilience thinking offers a useful framework to analyse agricultural issues because it focuses attention on the unpredictable nature of disturbances and management options that accommodate such unknown threats' (Hammond et al., 2013: 317, emphases added)

To date, research on agricultural resilience has focused predominantly on economic, policy and management issues (see Maleksaeidi and Karami, 2013; Ranjan, 2014, Hammond et al., 2013; Björklund et al., 2012; Lin, 2011); for example, Hammond et al.'s (2013) study analyses farmer responses to disturbances such as climate change, flooding and fluctuating energy costs. They note that individual commitment and farming in an historically consistent manner are important components supporting farmers' persistence. The *place* of the farm itself forms an integral part of farmer identity, which connects into a responsibility to the decisions and wishes of predecessors (Lähdesmäki and Matilainen, 2014). Indeed, Burton (2004: 206) argues that the nature of farming means that the farmers 'are representing not simply their own identity but those of their families past, present and future' and so the land is both a working environment and a 'self-portrait'. This reminds us that we need 'to look outside the farm and inside the farmer' (Ahnström et al., 2008: 43) when considering the factors developing and supporting social resilience, because we must acknowledge both the internal and external factors, which shape how a farm is experienced and practised (Gray, 1996). After all, the farm scale is always embedded within larger nested systems (Hammond et al., 2013), with farm resilience enabled and constrained by what happens at both the micro and macro scales (Darnhofer, 2014). This emphasizes the potential for significant heterogeneity within farming networks (Maleksaeidi and Karami, 2013; Ranjan, 2014) and reminds us of the empirically various nature of resilience itself. Anderson (2015) warns of the dangers of obscuring the uneven spatialities and temporalities of different formations of resilience, which echoes questions as to whether it is possible for farmers to attain resilience in multiple dimensions (Ranjan, 2014) and whether an individual can be resilient in one context or to one stressor but not others (Berkes and Ross, 2013).

Farming typically consists of multiple regulatory, environmental, economic and socio-cultural stressors; how these are addressed are strongly shaped by the local contexts and discourses defining what constitutes 'good' farming, which can have significant impacts on the mental health, and so personal capability, of the farmer (Burton, 2004; Hansson and Lagerkvist, 2012). Mental health has formed a significant part of the existing research into agricultural resilience and highlights the importance of social capital, community, learning, local knowledge