



# How is agriculture reproduced? Unfolding farmers' interdependencies in small-scale Mediterranean olive oil production



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## A B S T R A C T

### Keywords:

Mediterranean agriculture  
Small farms  
Sustainability  
Embeddedness  
Part-time farming

In some regions, small-scale low productivity farms persist despite modernisation pressures and policy pitfalls. This phenomenon calls for a deeper understanding of the dynamics at play which are largely bypassed in current academic debates, but are regaining momentum given the complex challenges faced by the agricultural sector. Some Mediterranean areas represent a particular case, characterised by a landscape of small farms, managed part-time, extending through high nature value areas, and producing reputable quality products. This research aims to unveil how this type of agriculture is reproduced. Through an enlarged notion of embeddedness this study explores the distinct farmers' strategies and their interdependencies in Alto Palancia County (Spain). For that purpose, semi-structured interviews were conducted in three municipalities that sought first to unveil the role of social and territorial embeddedness in reproducing the system, but also revealed the necessary contribution of capital flows from the local and regional economy as well as welfare state transfers. These findings shed light on the nature of part-time farming, which needs to be considered as part of a broader agricultural system. Furthermore, this paper calls for a more place-based and relational analytical framework in order to understand the reproduction of agricultural dynamics. This approach is paramount to assess public policy impacts – which go beyond agricultural policy measures – and improve the design of future interventions.

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## 1. Introduction

In recent decades the agricultural sector of developed countries has been characterised by a 'never-ending' crisis, traditionally expressed as a loss of importance of agriculture in terms of national GDP contribution, number of people employed in the sector and lowering of farmers' incomes. This crisis has been contextualised in the race for modernisation of European farm households, based on increasing yields and lowering revenues; however, small scale low productivity farms persist despite pitfalls in policies and market pressures in form of cost-price squeezes (Arnalte-Alegre and Ortiz-Miranda, 2013; Aubert and Perrier-Cornet, 2009). Understanding changes and continuities has regained momentum in the current context in which new pressures have been placed on the agricultural sector as a result of the era of austerity capitalism, and the agricultural sector is increasingly expected to optimize within a complex landscape of demands (Pretty et al., 2010).

In Europe, Mediterranean agriculture represents a particularly interesting case, often envisaged as a landscape of small scale low intensity farms – managed by part-time and aged farmers – spreading through mountainous and semi-mountainous areas of high nature value (Caraveli, 2000; Paracchini et al., 2008). These structural and ecological characteristics of some Mediterranean areas together with cultural aspects have been highlighted as significant factors in the construction of worldwide recognisable high quality food products (Parrott et al., 2002). However, the dynamics sustaining this type of Mediterranean countryside are complex and diverse. Agriculture is transforming internally, for example in terms of labour organization in the agricultural holding and functioning of the farming family; in relation to farm practices, technology and quality standards; in the means of accessing different markets and positioning in the food supply chain; and also regarding the relationships that farmers establish among themselves and with other actors inside and outside their territory.

Many efforts have been focused in analysing the different types of farmers, and how they adapt and transform in the face of these processes. In this regard, contributions under productivism, post-productivism, multifunctionality and the new rural development

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paradigm have revealed the emergence of distinct farming strategies (see for example Evans et al., 2002; Ilbery and Bowler, 1998; Marsden, 2003; Van der Ploeg et al., 2000; Walford, 2003; Wilson, 2008). Most of the empirical studies underpinning these theoretical contributions have generally focused on individual niche initiatives, for instance the development of quality products, agri-tourism, the provision of environmental and educational services or pluriactivity, that stand out for their exemplifying nature. Nevertheless, this focus might potentially prevent a more integrated comprehension of the interrelationships among processes and also of the internal dynamics of agriculture, resulting in a neglect of key explanatory elements at play. Additionally, Mediterranean agriculture has had a difficult assembly into these theoretical paradigms (Moragues-Faus et al., 2013), for instance some academics have expressed their reservations about the relevance of these innovative activities in rural areas of Southern Europe (Hoggart and Paniagua, 2001; Paniagua, 2007).

In order to overcome some of these limitations, the adoption of a more *relational* and *territorial* perspective from which to study farmers' strategies maybe appropriate. The present study consequently relies on an enlarged notion of embeddedness which allows understanding the diversity of actors and strategies, and how they interrelate; paying special attention to the territorial dimension of the concept (Moragues-Faus and Sonnino, 2012; Sonnino, 2007). The analytical interest of this perspective relies on the consideration of territory as a 'meeting place' (Marsden et al., 1993) where different actors, interests, resources, processes, etc. that act at different scales coalesce having concrete effects in a particular territory.

In this context, this study aims to unveil how agriculture is reproduced in a particular type of rural area, characterised by small and low productivity farms and which constitute a common motif of many Mediterranean landscapes. The objective is then to unfold how farm management and labour organisation have evolved in order to reproduce agriculture in this setting. What are the strategies of agricultural actors (farmers and cooperatives)? Why do these actors undertake specific strategies? What are the economic, social, or cultural factors that underpin, limit, reinforce or influence these strategies? How do the strategies of different actors relate to one another? Finally, this research aims to unveil the reproduction mechanisms of this type of agriculture; and consequently, what theoretical, analytical and political implications can be drawn from these findings.

To address these questions, this paper provides a comparative analysis of three municipalities within Spain (Altura, Viver and Vall d'Almonacid), belonging to the county of Alto Palancia, in the Valencia region (see Fig. 1). This area has been selected as a

representative example of a type of Mediterranean agricultural landscapes, characterised by low-intensity olive farming in small scale holdings managed mainly by part-time farmers and retirees. These olive groves cover mountainous and semi-mountainous areas with high nature value, some of which are inside Sierra Calderona or Sierra de Espadán Natural Park boundaries. However, Alto Palancia County also holds significant internal geographic and socioeconomic variation mostly linked to the improvement of rural-urban linkages, which has resulted in municipalities undergoing processes of demographic expansion and regeneration – mainly related to the development of second home residences and the emergence of new commuting routes, i.e. Altura and Viver. In contrast, other more remote municipalities that have not benefited from the construction of the new transport route have continued to experience de-population and decreased economic activity; i.e. Vall d'Almoncid (Vall from now on).

In order to capture the interrelations between different agricultural actors' strategies and their territory that conditions the reproduction of agriculture in a specific area, a total of 42 in-depth interviews were conducted in the three case studies, including i) seven key informant experts on agricultural and rural dynamics on the region of Valencia and specifically of Alto Palancia County, ii) nine technical staff of the three cooperatives and members of the board of directors and iii) 26 farmers and members of the cooperatives, chosen to reflect variability in terms of the centrality of farming (retiree/part-time/full-time), the level of outsourcing, the type of olive oil produced, the commercialisation channel and the relationship with the local area (residents/commuters/newcomers).

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows. First a literature review on pluriactivity and part-time farming is presented, including the study of outsourcing farming operations which are particularly relevant in the context of this study. The relational character of these farming dynamics leads to a second review on the study of farmers' strategies and the selection of an enlarged notion of embeddedness as an appropriate analytical tool. Subsequently, the case studies are described, characterising the olive sector of Alto Palancia, the different ways of managing olive farms and finally identifying three emerging types of farmers. Section five explores the interdependencies among these types of agricultural holders, followed by an analysis of factors and motivation that agricultural actors consider to sustain agriculture in the area. Finally, conclusions on the role of social and territorial embeddedness in reproducing the system are highlighted jointly with the necessary flows of non-agricultural capital which lead to an outlining of theoretical and political implications.



Fig. 1. Localisation research setting and local case studies.  
Source: Author's own elaboration

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