



## Keeping agriculture alive next to the city – The functions of the land tenure regime nearby Gothenburg, Sweden

Anders Wästfelt, Qian Zhang\*

Department of Human Geography, Stockholm University, 10691 Stockholm, Sweden



### ARTICLE INFO

#### Keywords:

Lease  
Land tenure  
Peri-urban agriculture  
Land use  
Spatiality  
Sweden

### ABSTRACT

Sustaining food production close to cities is not easy, as farming is often much less profitable compared to other activities in such locations, and it is at the frontier of resisting the pressures from urbanization and globalization. This study looks into an underexplored issue in peri-urban agriculture research – the role that land lease can play for preserving peri-urban agriculture. Leasing has increasingly become a common praxis in the Western industrialized world and it is a very necessary means for accessing limited farmland especially in peri-urban areas. Focusing on farms near Gothenburg, this study explores how the spatial structure of leasing brings opportunities as well as constraints to the change and continuation of farming in this peri-urban area. The investigation is guided by social, spatial and functional conceptualizations of land tenure, which 1) consider land tenure as a social relation, 2) are centered on functional constraints for agricultural production, and 3) highlight the spatial effects. Based on a combination of map interpretations, statistical analysis and interview analysis, the results show a strong and spatially structured pattern of production, farm and land use changes. Agriculture shows mainly to be driven by the landowner's leasing strategies but is also shaped by the interplays between the landowner and the leasehold farmers. Existing food production farms have been able to rely on adding land from side lease for development even though the increase of small horse farms, holding whole-farm leases, makes it hard for new food production farms to start up. Policymakers are recommended to strategically use long-term leases as a policy instrument on municipal land at the peri-urban location, to incentivize food production farmers as well as to reduce land management costs.

### 1. Introduction

Urban and peri-urban agriculture has been widely discussed and suggested as a solution to future food security (McClintock, 2010; Mok et al., 2014; Zasada, 2012). However, sustaining food production close to cities is not easy, as farming is often much less profitable compared to other activities in such locations. Nowadays this is most obvious in highly developed Western countries, where food is very often imported at cheap prices from far-away places (Robinson, 2004). Meanwhile, urbanization and industrialization further squeeze and convert farmland near cities to other uses (Ravetz et al., 2013). Nevertheless, changes from agricultural to urban land use are particularly problematic, as they are largely irreversible (Slätmo, 2017). A key theoretical question for the studies of peri-urban agriculture is the “agricultural location” – why an agricultural activity could persist in a peri-urban

location, and why a particular form of agricultural activity could exist in this location. The earliest theorization by von Thünen in the 1820s (Hall, 1966) identified transportation costs to the urban market as the determining factor, while in the 1960s, Sinclair (1967) emphasized the determining role of land value, including anticipation of land value increase. Upon reassessing Sinclair and von Thünen's theories, a recent study framed by a new locational theory suggests that localizing farming near the city demands an analysis of the role that different forms of land lease play in the development of competitive advantages for farmers, as well for a location-sensitive governing praxis, so as to resist pressure from urbanization and globalization (Wästfelt and Zhang, 2016).

This study aims to investigate the functions of the land tenure regime for keeping peri-urban agriculture alive. Agricultural land tenure, i.e., the different ways in which people have rights to farmland, was a

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [anders.wastfelt@humangeo.su.se](mailto:anders.wastfelt@humangeo.su.se) (A. Wästfelt), [qian.zhang@humangeo.su.se](mailto:qian.zhang@humangeo.su.se) (Q. Zhang).

classical and central question in the history of industrialization, capitalism, and societal change. Nowadays property rights remain a very important source of power in the rural arena – they are “instruments of regulation”, where the state often plays a crucial role in maintaining and modifying property rights to accommodate forces of restructuring (Marsden et al., 2005: 31). However, property has also simply become taken for granted in the Western industrialized context (Blomley, 2005), where established institutions and functioning markets are a hidden assumption. Thus, contemporary scholarship of agricultural land tenure is mostly focused on the developing context where a strong, though debated, institutional approach focuses on formalizing and setting up more transparent and stable institutions so as to secure (small) farmers’ land access (Agegnehu et al., 2016; Ho, 2013).

On the other hand, since World War II, lease has increasingly become a common praxis in the Western industrialized world for active farms without capital to purchase land to increase their size, as well as for landowners without active operations to keep farms within their families. Nowadays, population increase, generational transitions, the decline of farming population, and conversion of farmland to non-agricultural use all tend to further expand the relevance of land lease for farmers to the detriment of land ownership. Recent case studies show that leasing is a very necessary means for farmers to access limited agricultural land in Europe (Koopmans et al., 2015; Lamine et al., 2015), and in the USA (Petzelka and Marquart-Pyatt, 2011). In Europe, 20% to 90% of agricultural land is under lease contracts, with wide differences between countries (Ciaian et al., 2012). In Sweden, rented land represents about 40% of the total agricultural area in the 2010s, while the rent has steadily increased (Statens jordbruksverk (Swedish Board of Agriculture), 2016). In countries where farmland sales are constrained by credit market imperfections and transaction costs, rental markets are considered more efficient for promoting agricultural productivity and transforming the rural economy (Ciaian et al., 2012; Jin and Deininger, 2009). Moreover, the adoption of different forms of leasing contracts can facilitate landowning actors to separate land value from land rent; this is especially meaningful for the persistence of agriculture in peri-urban areas where land value is rapidly increasing (Bryant and Johnston, 1992).

In exploring a central question – agricultural restructuring in Western industrialized countries – the large number of studies either from macro-perspectives (Robinson, 2004; Whatmore, 2002) or micro-perspectives (Evans, 2009; Inwood and Sharp, 2012; Van der Ploeg et al., 2002) have often mentioned the relevance of land tenure, without, however, having done in-depth systematic analysis of the role of land tenure. Wilson (2008) argues that, compared to owner-occupiers, tenant farmers face more external constraints on changing to multifunctional pathways of development, but Ilbery et al. (2010) has empirically shown that in practice, a variety of lease agreements provides different possibilities for farmers’ upscaling and/or intensification.

This study aims to examine the role that land lease can play for preserving peri-urban agriculture.

Four specific research questions guide the study:

1) *What specific roles do land lease play in the persistence of peri-urban agriculture?*

Specifically, through a case study on the island of Hisingen near Gothenburg, the second-largest city in Sweden, this study will distinguish different forms and functions of property and lease rights.

2) *How do different forms of lease affect agricultural production and land use in the peri-urban location?*

Food production, land use and investments in agricultural land will be studied at both the district and farm levels so as to explore the multiple ways that different kinds of lease have affected peri-urban agriculture.

3) *What are the spatial effects of lease on peri-urban agriculture?*

The spatial processes of how leasing affects farm transformations will be investigated to answer this question.

4) *How does the negotiation of lease affect the survival of peri-urban agriculture?*

Property rights work to enforce and sustain power relations between people; lease is not fixed but negotiated between landowners and leaseholders based on their respective interests and strategies (Bowen and Gerritsen, 2007; Petzelka and Marquart-Pyatt, 2011). A situation peculiar to this case study is that the Gothenburg municipality is both the biggest landowner in Hisingen and in charge of planning the urban expansion. This enables us to explore lease from a governance perspective and leasing as the outcome of strategic interplays between the landowning municipality and leasehold farmers.

The next section will explain our conceptualization of land tenure, especially lease, and its relation to agricultural production. It will be followed by an explanation of the case study area, our methods, and data. Then the results will be presented, which show how different tenure forms correspond to different orientations in land use and how different forms of lease also have different effects on the organization of farming and land use. Discussions will be developed around how a social, spatial and functional perspective of land tenure can help to re-interpret peri-urban agricultural change, how different types of lease design can support the development of peri-urban agriculture and what the planning monopoly role simultaneously played by the biggest landowner implies for peri-urban agriculture. In the conclusion, relevant policy implications and leasing’s potential as a governance regime to sustain peri-urban agriculture will be addressed.

## 2. Social, spatial and functional conceptualizations of lease

Social, spatial, and functional conceptualizations of lease are needed for understanding the implications of leasehold for agricultural production and land use. A social view means considering how a lease is embedded in relational economic and social power relations between the relevant parties. A spatial view means that location, scale, and spatial land configuration matter, and finally a functional view means seeing how leases affect the organization of agricultural production and how they are affected by new production considerations.

In Sweden, two distinct forms of leasehold, whole-farm lease and side lease, the basic legal ways of renting or letting out land nowadays, have been developed through the long-term evolution of farmland leasing practices in history, practices that have roots in Roman law (Wästfelt, 2014). The whole-farm lease, which includes buildings and stable houses, has a strong long-term protected tenancy. The lease period is often five years, the lease contract is inheritable between generations, and the costs in land investments and buildings are paid by or shared with the landowner. The side lease, which is the lease of agricultural land without buildings and stable houses on it, has a minimum period of one year and can continue if neither party gives notice of termination; historically, the rent was calculated based on estimated yields in the region where the land is located. These two different forms have had different types of landowners. Normally institutions such as churches, universities, or noble families leased out

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