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'Neo-productivist' agriculture: Spatio-temporal versus structuralist perspectives

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ABSTRACT

Critical commentators of agricultural/rural change in advanced economies have begun to refer to 'neo-productivist' pathways of change. However, conceptualizations of neo-productivism have so far largely failed to provide a robust analytical framework for understanding the propelling forces, processes and characteristics of complex modern agricultural pathways. This article analyses two key approaches used to conceptualize neo-productivism: an actor-oriented spatio-temporal perspective (the AOST approach) which focuses mainly on geographical and temporal-historical characteristics in the adoption of neo-productivist actor spaces, and structuralist interpretations which see neo-productivism predominantly as a response to macro-political regime change. There is an underlying assumption in both that productivist and non-productivist pathways of agricultural change can be identified in different guises and that the notion of neo-productivism can be situated in relation to productivist/non-productivist concepts. However, they differ in their temporal conceptualisations of agricultural change (i.e. neo-productivism as productivist resurgence versus productivist approaches adapted to match the new political realities of an era influenced by non-productivism), processes (i.e. non-productivist pathways forced by events 'back' towards productivist-dominated pathways versus neo-productivism as a shift from a state-led system of support responsible for driving state productivism, to market-based drivers enabled by the gradual withdrawal of the state), and spatial differentiation (i.e. complex geography of actor spaces in the adoption of neo-productivist pathways versus locked-in productivist pathways working alongside multifunctional agriculture). The article concludes with some critical thoughts about the utility of the term 'neo-productivism', but also argues that the term allows researchers to further nuance conceptualisations of the complex spatial, temporal and structural changes that characterise modern agriculture in any area of the globe.

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1. Introduction

Since the early 1990s, a key debate in rural geography in the English-speaking world has revolved around a possible shift from 'productivist' to 'post-productivist' to multifunctional agricultural and rural spaces. Partly in response to Cloke's (1989) incisive criticism of rural geography as a relatively atheoretical field of research prone to borrow theories from other fields, critical commentators

such as Lowe et al. (1993), Marsden et al. (1993) and Ward (1993) theorized a postulated transition from an agriculture characterized by globalization, profit-maximization and intensification (the 'productivist' era) to an agriculture shaped by relocalisation, conservation and extensification (the 'post-productivist' era). While some authors have more or less accepted this possible shift as a fact (e.g. Ilbery and Bowler, 1998; Mather et al., 2006), many others have criticized the implied temporal linearity, spatial homogeneity and global complexity that underpins assumptions surrounding the 'post-productivist transition' (e.g. Wilson, 2001, 2007; Evans et al., 2002; Walford, 2003). As a result, some have suggested that productivist and post-productivist pathways occur simultaneously with a 'multifunctional' territory as a 'middle ground' characterized by hybrid agricultural and rural pathways with both productivist

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and post-productivist tendencies (e.g. Wilson, 2001, 2007; Brouwer and van der Heide, 2009) – notions that also apply in a developing world context (e.g. Wilson and Rigg, 2003). As a result, and based on Wilson's (2007, 2010) deconstruction of the term 'post-productivism' as an inadequate linear term that implies something following on temporally from productivism, we will use the more neutral notion of 'non-productivism' which allows for hybrid, parallel and simultaneous productivist and non-productivist pathways.

Recently, a new conceptual notion of 'neo-productivist' agricultural spaces has emerged mainly among English-speaking academics (and here mainly in Europe and Australia/New Zealand) that builds on above-mentioned debates, although with different definitions, meanings and processes depending on the perspectives of the authors. This has led Burton and Wilson (2012: 54) to argue that "the notion of neo-productivism itself is poorly defined in the literature." Slee et al. (2011: 57), for example, have equated neo-productivism to multifunctional objectives in observing that "neo-productivists argue [that] the pursuit of on-farm income stability through livelihood diversification is key to the future of agricultural livelihoods", whereas Brunori et al. (2012) contended that neo-productivists are those who are reasserting the productivist argument while deriding alternative food systems such as organic production as 'not safe' and catering for the upper classes. Mitchell and de Waal (2009: 165), on the other hand, use 'neo-productivist' to describe "a particular type of post-industrial landscape of accumulation" where, despite evidence of multifunctionality, a dominant discourse of profit has resulted in a landscape that is heavily commercialised – i.e. akin to a strongly profit-driven commercial multifunctionality.

None of these interpretations, however, are in keeping with the notions of renewed productivism (not always referred to as 'neo-productivism') as they appear in wider debates. As the concept of 'productivism' is closely aligned with the productivist era, those describing a continuation of productivist forms have introduced prefixes to distinguish between old and new. In particular, in the 2000s the concepts of 'market productivism' (Tilzey, 2000; Potter and Tilzey, 2005), 'competitive productivism' (Dibden et al., 2009), 'cooperative productivism' (Burton and Wilson, 2012), and even a more 'sustainable' form of productivism referred to as 'neo-productivism' (e.g. Evans et al., 2002; Marsden and Sonnino, 2008) emerged. Whatever the most suitable approach to understanding neo-productivism may be (see below), the apparent need for another 'ism' describing contemporary agricultural pathways emphasizes the fact that agricultural change continues to be complex and dynamic, and that theoretical assumptions about agricultural (and other) processes developed in the 1990s may no longer be sufficient to explain agricultural processes in a rapidly globalizing world.

In this article we analyse two perspectives aimed at understanding neo-productivism and its possible interlinkages with productivism, non-productivism, multifunctionality and other concepts of agricultural change. We focus mainly on debates in Europe and Australia/New Zealand, where discussions of neo-productivism have been most pronounced (e.g. Mitchell and de Waal, 2009; Burton and Wilson, 2012). Although the analysis will have particular relevance for academic debates on agricultural change, it is also increasingly important at a time of intensifying pressures on global agricultural systems through climate change, rapidly increasing demand for more and new types of food (population growth; shift in food consumption patterns towards meat in transition economies with implications for agriculture in the developed world; etc.), and continuing pressures for the

protection of remnant wildlife habitats threatened by agricultural expansion. The first perspective can be described as the agency-oriented spatio-temporal (AOST) perspective which has roots in sociological, human geography and anthropological interpretations of agricultural change. It primarily focuses on understanding how individual actors and actor spaces are shaped by, and in turn shape, neo-productivist spaces through changing attitudes, identities and land use management approaches over space and time. This approach builds on, and is closely interlinked with, work by authors such as Ward (1993), Winter (2003), Ilbery and Bowler (1998), Wilson (2001, 2007, 2008) or Walford (2003), and is also associated with approaches in the 1980s and 1990s which focused on individual agents in agricultural and rural change processes (see in particular Long and van der Ploeg, 1995; van der Ploeg, 2003). The AOST perspective also intersects with meso-level actors and processes, for example through a range of localised and personal networks around the farmer ranging from the family to social movements through which individual farm actors are often part of wider networks of farmer organisations (Van der Ploeg, 2003).

The second, structuralist perspective, is rooted largely in political economy interpretations of agricultural change, with a focus on the role of macro-scalar, institutional, and policy-driven processes that influence neo-productivist pathways (hereafter referred to as the 'structuralist approach'). This approach argues that neo-productivism is an adaptive response by entrenched productivist systems to the political changes following the collapse of global productivism. This approach builds on, and is closely interlinked with, work by commentators such as Marsden et al. (1993), Lowe et al. (1993), Potter (1998), Potter and Burney (2002), Marsden (2003), Potter and Tilzey (2005) or Marsden and Sonnino (2008), but has also been given particular impetus through recent critical studies from a New Zealand/Australian perspective where, it is argued, more 'traditional' European productivist/non-productivist models may not apply (e.g. Holmes, 2002; Dibden and Cocklin, 2005; Dibden et al., 2009).

We argue that the timing is particularly apt to scrutinize these debates for four reasons. First, sufficient time has now elapsed since the first conceptualizations of productivism/non-productivism in the early 1990s to test the robustness of the concept both empirically (e.g. through evidence gathered in various published case studies) and theoretically (e.g. by analysing in detail the wealth of critical academic publications on the subject). Second, the concept of neo-productivism is strongly associated with neo-liberalism (e.g. Potter and Tilzey, 2005, 2007; Burton and Wilson, 2012) and, as debates about the relationship between neo-liberalism, agriculture and the environment have developed (e.g. Higgins, 2001; Potter, 2006; Wilson, 2007), a poorly conceptualized terminology could hamper progress in these debates. Third, since the world food crisis in 2007/08 and with projections for a world population exceeding 9 billion in 2050, many governments have taken the opportunity to reopen the Malthusian argument (Horlings and Marsden, 2010). This has given voice to protagonists for the development of a technologically based and corporate driven 'bioeconomy' to push for a renewed 'sustainable' intensification of agriculture. Fourth, as the impact of globalization on rural areas has accelerated across the globe (Potter and Tilzey, 2007), agricultural systems are becoming correspondingly more complex and, consequently, require more subtle conceptualizations than the original relatively linear productivist/post-productivist model suggested. Indeed, the world in the 2010s is different from that of the early 1990s when notions of productivism and non-productivism were first mooted.

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