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Back-to-the-house? Gender, domesticity and (dis)empowerment among back-to-the-land migrants in Northern Italy

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A B S T R A C T

Contemporary back-to-the-land migrants in Italy embody a wide spectrum of personal and professional backgrounds, complicating attempts to generalise their motivations for adopting farming and their later experiences in rural areas. Certain commonalities persist, however, including a dissatisfaction with city life and the hope of greater freedom in the countryside. Generally this desire for personal liberty is expressed as the ability to control one's environment, a power that undergirds values such as self-reliance and care for natural resources and animal welfare. There is evidence to suggest, however, that the experiences of back-to-the-landers can differ significantly between genders. This study, conducted in four regions of Northern Italy, reveals that some back-to-the-land women find that their transition to an agrarian lifestyle has resulted in the adoption of more traditionalist gender roles, including a greater domestic burden and diminished recognition of their labours. Other women undertake an equal if not greater share of agricultural work, and derive a significant sense of worth from the increased self-sufficiency and ability to project ethical values that such work allows. This paper argues that an apparent regression to traditionalist gender roles is not inevitable in back-to-the-land households, nor must domestic work be seen as a repudiation of women's progress. On the contrary, the diverse experiences and perceptions of gender and back-to-the-land migration might challenge more rigid feminist readings of home, work and domesticity, given that in back-to-the-land households, these concepts often unfold in novel and unpredictable ways.

1. Introduction

Back-to-the-land migration is most commonly associated with Western countercultural trends of the 1960s and 70s. Increased self-sufficiency, a disengagement from formal employment, rejection of consumer technology, communal living and environmental stewardship have all been cited as factors that originally drove idealistic people from the cities to the countryside (Jacob, 1997, 2003; Belasco, 2006; Agnew, 2004; Wilbur, 2012, 2013). In light of contemporary concerns regarding economic instability, climate change, food security and peak oil, a new agrarian transition is taking shape in many developed nations, creating a new back-to-the-land movement inspired by, but distinct from, its predecessors. Today's back-to-the-landers carry the ethos of environmental stewardship and self-reliance bestowed by the 1960s counterculture, but have adapted their practices (and politics) to more contemporary social and economic conditions. Recent scholarship has addressed the political dynamics of contemporary back-to-the-land (e.g. Halfacree, 2007a,b; Wilbur, 2013) as well as the practical dimensions of converting to an agrarian lifestyle (Mailfert, 2007; Trauger, 2007), casting back-to-the-landers as a diverse group motivated primarily by a dissatisfaction with urban work and consumption patterns, as well as opportunities for more experimental and autonomous ways of living. This paper, based on fieldwork conducted in four regions of north-central Italy, aims to explore how back-to-the-land can be understood as a gendered phenomenon, and the different experiences that it may portend for men and women. In particular, I question whether the traditionalist gender patterns that may follow back-to-the-land migration reflect a patriarchal power imbalance or greater autonomy and practical reasoning than feminist perspectives might conventionally acknowledge. I also attempt to demonstrate how a blurry conception of home and work on back-to-the-land farms can complicate assumptions about women's opportunities as they unfold through migration to rural areas.

As I will argue throughout the paper, conceptions of home and work are fundamental to academic interpretations of women's migration to the countryside, and to the decision to migrate itself. As McDowell (1999: 123) comments, the literature interrogating

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gender and waged work 'has been one of the key areas of feminist scholarship and perhaps the most significant focus of feminist geographers, at least until relatively recently.' These debates have prompted a critical examination of the home, particularly its role in spatially separating public and private life. An early feminist argument contends that the home can act as a form of 'spatial entrapment' for women, a condition of physical distance from public life and power concentrations, most evident in the suburbanisation and associated 'cult of domesticity' of post-war America and Europe (Mitchell, 2000: 204). However, feminists such as Gibson-Graham (1996) and McDowell (1999) argue that unwaged domestic work *does* constitute legitimate economic activity and its omission from standard econometrics can be interpreted as the enforcement and extension of patriarchy through capitalist processes. Dedicated research on women in farming families (e.g. Whatmore, 1988, 1990, 1991; Trauger, 2007; Trauger et al., 2008; Farmar-Bowers, 2010) has made some progress toward rectifying this exclusion by identifying the valuable roles that many women play in the economic life of farms, such as communications and accounting, in addition to ordinary domestic chores. Yet it remains the case that these roles are often regarded as 'background' or 'support', within families and more generally in the wider culture, even if academic studies have repeatedly sought to highlight their necessity.

Although feminist perspectives on women's participation in farming households have offered critical insights into the gendered economic organisation of contemporary farms, there is arguably more work to be done into how these arrangements influence perceptions of home. Issues surrounding 'spatial entrapment', for instance, are complicated by the economic importance of women's contributions to farm operations, particularly when their responsibilities extend beyond 'background' work. Back-to-the-landers generally represent a counterpoint to the idea that women's choices are restricted by spatial isolation, since in most cases they elect to leave the supposed freedom of urban lifestyles for responsibilities more closely bound to a single location. Rather than a space of constriction, for many back-to-the-landers home represents a site of liberation, closer to hooks' (1991) notion of 'homeplace' as a site of resistance, where values and practices that defy the competitive or exploitative norms of the public sphere can germinate and be nurtured. The counter-cultural origins of back-to-the-land suggest that farms fitting this description should offer a more liberatory experience for women, since their choice to relocate to the countryside typically aligns with ideals related to more ethical, self-sufficient and cooperative lifestyles (see Jacob, 1997; Belasco, 2006; Wilbur, 2012, 2013). However, research on the gendered dimensions of counter-cultural practices, as well as agrarian lifestyles, has been somewhat staggered and piecemeal. This paper does not present a comprehensive attempt to fill the gaps and bridge all theoretical divides between these subjects; rather, through a critical focus on home and work, and the ethics of alternative agriculture, I offer some insights into the complex and occasionally contradictory experiences of back-to-the-land migration, in the hope that they can stimulate further conversation about the gendered dimensions of farming and alternative lifestyles.

In 2010 I spent ten weeks working on nine organic farms run by back-to-the-landers and interviewed members of another nine households, facilitated primarily through the volunteer network Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms (WWOOF). Conversations with men and women on these farms revealed that back-to-the-land migration can – but does not necessarily – prefigure the adoption of traditionalist gender roles, in which women are responsible for a greater share domestic duties while men perform the majority of publicly visible farm labour. However, the extent to which this represents patriarchal subordination, rather than active choice and necessary compromise, is open to question. That said, on other back-to-the-land farms women take an equal or dominant role in the physical graft of plant cultivation and livestock rearing, countering any assumption that female migration to the countryside necessarily follows retrograde social patterns. Instead, it can open opportunities for self-reliance and autonomous provision in a manner less afforded by structured employment, as well as increased potential for the performance of ethical values. To support these arguments, I first consider the literature on gendered aspects of urban to rural migration, followed by a summary of existing research on women and 'alternative' (or small-scale, independent or organic) farming, especially the purportedly gendered ethics that influence different farming practices. I then draw on empirical research to reveal the sometimes contradictory experiences of female back-to-the-land migrants, who variously adopt a more traditional 'housewife' role or take an active lead in the manual farmwork. Their accounts express a complex array of views concerning gender, (dis)empowerment, ethics and personal freedom, suggesting that back-to-the-land migration provides liberatory potential for some women, but not without compromise.

2. Gender and urban to rural migration – the rural idyll and beyond

A common argument among rural geographers (e.g. Halfacree, 1993, 2004, 2007; Little and Austin, 1996; Halfacree and Boyle, 1998; Woods, 2005) maintains that rural in-migration patterns have been contoured in large part by collective cultural inscriptions on the countryside, with population reconfiguration often directly linked to the pursuit of the 'rural idyll'. The rural idyll, writes Woods (2005:13) 'presents an aspirational picture of an idealized rurality, often emphasizing… pastoral landscape and… perceived peace and quiet'. Bunce (2003: 21) characterises 'the essence of the rural idyll' as the 'imagery of nature and of natural yet domesticated settings.' Little and Austin (1996: 102) describe it as conveying

> an uncomplicated, innocent, more genuine society in which traditional values persist and lives are more real. Pastimes, friendships, family relations and even employment are seen as somehow more honest and authentic, unencumbered with the false and insincere trappings of city life or with their associated dubious values.

Woods (2005: 177) suggests that a 'further feature of the "rural idyll" is nostalgia and the sense that the countryside has been less changed and corrupted by modernity than the city.' This perception, as theorists of the rural idyll argue, forms a significant push factor in driving urban dwellers toward new lives in the countryside. Such is the influence of idyllic rurality on popular consciousness, writes Browne (2011: 14), that it 'has dominated rural studies' engagements with social difference' and 'has been used to explore dominant and hegemonic constructions, imaginaries and representations, lending important insights into the power laden and often hegemonic production of "the rural".'

Halfacree (1993, 1997; 1998; 2007) has frequently argued against a homogenising view of the countryside and its inhabitants, however, and presciently claimed in 1993 (p.34) that 'the problem in literature seems to stem from a failure to distinguish between the rural as a distinctive type of locality and the rural as social representation – the rural as space and the rural as representing space'. The risk in this conflation is evident in the suppressed heterogeneity of rural incomers' voices, and the result has been the casting of urban to rural migrants as a largely conservative, middle-class social group, owing its collective understanding of rurality to imagined nostalgia (Wilbur, 2013). This stereotype occasionally