

## **Identities on the family farm: agrarianism, materiality and the 'good farmer'**

*(preprint version)*

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### **Abstract**

The symbiotic nature of family farm production has been central in the way that the social sciences have framed research on agriculture and farming. In this chapter, we discuss how agriculture as an activity affects and is impacted upon by families' and households' identities from three angles: the idealization of farming life, with associated political ideologies; the materiality of farming and agriculture; and the socio-cultural definition of what it is to be a 'good farmer'. We focus particularly on family labor – succession and gender – as integral to the definition and resilience of the family farming form, and how the materialities of this labor both feed agrarian imaginaries and lead to negative patterns in mental health. As an opening and conclusion, we argue that those interactions between ideologies, self-representations and the materiality of farming call for new theorizations of identities in agriculture that would look beyond a classical, human-centered, and representational framing of farming households' identities.

### **Key words**

Identity, Farm succession, Gender, Non-commercial farming, Farmers' mental health; Non-representational theory

## **Family farming in perspective**

The United Nations proclaimed 2019–2028 the Decade of Family Farming, after a successful International Year of Family Farming in 2017. The UN Resolution<sup>1</sup> demonstrates the importance of 'family farming' on the international stage, and makes explicit links between family farming, multiple types of sustainability, cultural and natural heritage, and other positive attributes. These recent political mobilizations echo historic agrarian imaginaries: notions of farming as a highly moral and societally valued activity, which underpins environmental sustainability and rural economic development. Bunce (1994) traces nostalgia for agricultural life to writings in writings on Mesopotamia, Egypt and Greece; adding that in ancient Chinese culture, agriculture was regarded as superior to commerce. Wolf (1987) described the efforts of Roman scholars and poets from 150 – 50 BC to revive agriculture through improved knowledge and encouragement of an agrarian mentality, promoting the ideal that farming was the only respectable occupation for a Roman gentleman. In the Augustan age (Rome, first century AD), the state encouraged scholars and poets to promote agrarian sentiments, which linked family-led farming with virtue, pleasure and profitability, in an effort to combat the increasing trend of large estates farmed by slaves (Ibid). Montmarquet (1989) similarly identifies the positive social and moral value of agriculture and farm work embedded in the writings of Virgil and Cicero. Basic to these ideologies is the idea that land should be held – and ideally owned – by the people who work it.

More recent – and perhaps more familiar to the reader – is Jeffersonian agrarianism. Thomas Jefferson wrote in the late 1700s about the fundamental right of people to work the land, enshrining liberty, equality and freedom in the American Declaration of Independence (Kloppenburg and Geisler 1985). Jefferson specifically associated moral values with agrarian life, arguing that farming was the basic profession on which all other businesses depend. Flinn and Johnson (1974) describe four further tenets of American agrarianism: the virtue of hard work, the 'natural' and moral nature of agricultural life, the economic independence of the farmer and engagement in agriculture as important to the successful maintenance of democracy. From an agrarian perspective, farming is thus the economic and social backbone of society. This agrarian definition of the values of farming has multiple roots, which go back to the French

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<sup>1</sup> Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 20 December 2017, United Nations Decade of Family Farming (2019–2028); A/RES/72/239.

physiocrats, amongst others (Albertone 2016). Similar ideologies can be found in many different contexts, with diverse political implications. In continental Europe, including Eastern Europe, agrarian movements allied with anti-democratic forces are said to have contributed to the fall of early democracies in German-speaking countries (Eellend 2008).

There have been a few attempts to highlight the interactions between political and ideological representations of the farming population with farmers' self-identification, notably through their enactment in national policies, farmers' training programs, and the institutional organization of agriculture. As an illustration, Hervieu and Purseigle (2008) discuss three variations of the image of the French farmer (the Republican Peasant, the Individual Farmer and The Solitary Entrepreneur) and their reflections in the farming population. As detailed for the Swiss case (Forney 2011), contemporary rendering of farmers' self-representations present striking similarities with agrarian narratives developed in the early 20th Century, which articulate an ideal of modern farming with a clear moral conservatism (Baumann 1993). Entrepreneurialism has also been associated with the ideological idealizations of agriculture, notably resting on an individualistic interpretation of farmer autonomy (Emery 2015; Niska, Vesala and Vesala 2012).

Overall, however, agrarianism has been primarily studied as a moral and political program (Holowchak 2011) or in relationship to agrarian movements and political parties (Eellend 2008). Limited research has dealt with the relations between the agrarian idealizations of farming and processes of identity making among farming populations, or how the materiality of farming shapes identity formation. The literature on farmers' identities has primarily explored how political and economic models of agriculture, such as productivism (Burton 2004) and organic farming (Sutherland 2013) shape the definition of the symbols of the 'good farmer'. Few connections have been made to date with a moral sociology of farming (Burton et al. 2021) and its relation to political idealization of farming.

The mid 20<sup>th</sup> Century saw the emergence of a new form of 'critical agrarianism', challenging traditional (that is, Jeffersonian) applications of agrarianism which largely supported modernization and increasing farm size. American writers like Wendell Berry and Rachel Carson actively profiled the environmental and social damage caused by agri-business, revisiting the roots of agrarianism (that is, the close connection between people and land). Their agrarian stance was countercultural, linked to protests against the Vietnam War, environmentalism and

back-to-the-land movements (Carlisle 2014). It was here that farming became positioned as a political act – staying or starting a farm became understood as a form of protest against conventional farming practices. New and alternative (such as organic or direct marketing) farmers became positioned as part of a social movement, a new 'critical agrarianism' which re-situates farming as a public good, responsible for environmental protection (Wittman, Dennis and Pritchard 2017) and re-interprets classical agrarian values, notably autonomy, as basis for change (Coolsaet 2016). In Europe, agrarian studies heavy weights like Terry Marsden and Jan Douwe van der Ploeg have emphasized the importance and opportunity of the revival of direct connections between people and land – the 'bioeconomy' and 'repeasantisation' (respectively) - as essential to correcting the negative externalities of industrialized agriculture (for example, Marsden and Farioli 2015; van der Ploeg 2014).

The relevance of agrarianism to this chapter is the deeply embedded cultural linkages between farming and family, and between farming and virtuous life. Farming as a profession is understood to be inherently wholesome, reifying the value of family – 'family farming' is positioned as a moral good – as the way that farming should be practiced. In this chapter, we start from this close connection between family and agriculture to discuss how agriculture as an activity affects and is impacted by families and households' identities, both through its socio-cultural dimensions and its very materiality. Identities on a family farm articulate the individual and the collective. Questions such as *What makes a farm? What does it mean to farm?* find answers in the dialogical encounter between the individual identities of its human and non-human elements. At the same time, how a farm is organized and works as a whole influences the roles and identities of its parts. Furthermore, identities on farms are always specific to place and time. The social and cultural dynamics of identification in farming develop in the interplay between a farming community, power relations in the food systems, the role of agriculture in the wider society as well as daily practices of farming in specific geobiological contexts. Consequently, we approach these complex processes of identification from three angles: the idealization of farming life, with associated political ideologies; the materiality of farming and agriculture; and the socio-cultural definition of what it is to be a 'good farmer'. We focus particularly on family labor – succession and gender – as integral to the definition and resilience of the family farming form, and how the materialities of this labor both feed agrarian imaginaries and lead to negative patterns in mental health.

We begin our chapter with a short summary of the definition of family farming in the academic literature, highlighting the centrality of questions of ownership, labor, and lifestyle. We then emphasize the material dimension of farming households' identities, which has been so far neglected in the dominant theorizations within rural studies. On this basis, we then go back to the characteristics of family farming identified in the literature and consider how the three dimensions of idealization, materiality, and the socio-cultural definition of farming meet, clash or merge in households' identities around, first, issues of farm succession, family labor and gender, and second, farming as a lifestyle that not only has a particular appeal, but can also sometimes result in high risks to mental health.

### **The definition of family farming: ownership, labor and lifestyle**

Family or 'peasant' style agriculture has been the historical norm in a huge majority of countries across the globe, reflecting (in part) issues around labor, land tenure and ownership and management (van Vliet et al. 2015). The symbiotic nature of family farm production underpins response to the 'Agrarian Question' – the unanticipated persistence of 'family farming' under capitalism (for example, Chayanov 1927; Kautsky 1988). Harriet Friedmann (1978) argued that there is no single 'natural' capitalist form of farming. Transition to capitalism is ultimately imperfect; different forms are viable under different conditions. What would now be termed the 'materialities' of farming – the specific labor requirements of livestock husbandry and crop production; the volatility of commodity markets; and risks associated with changeable weather patterns - were recognized as giving family-based farms a competitive advantage against 'corporate' style farms (Alston 2004; Magnan 2012), although there is ongoing debate over whether these advantages have been overtaken by corporate style businesses and vertical integration in the 21st century.

The wide diversity and changing nature of farming – particularly the penetration of capital – raised substantive debates in the 1980s on the definition of a 'family farm'. Sarah Whatmore et al. (1987) drew on Marxist thinking to consider the degree to which market capitalism had 'subsumed' the farm business, both in terms of the means of production (land, labor) and the surplus value (profits). The authors clearly centralize the ownership and control of family (versus external companies) of the various resources. Moran et al. (1993) up-date these arguments by emphasizing the commodification of labor, integrating the concept of pluriactivity:

the recognition of farm labor deployment on and off-farm, into agricultural and non-agricultural activities. They thus shift the emphasis to considering the actions and deployment of the farm household. Definitions of family farming had implicitly privileged 'full time farming' – part-time farming (with household members employed off farm) – had been considered a transient state, while the family secured the resources necessary for full time farming. Substantive evidence had been growing that pluriactivity had been common amongst farming families for generations (see Fuller 1990). At the same time, Gasson and Errington (1993: 18) offered a general definition of the farm as family business. They drew attention to what they saw as the key features of family farming – the ownership of the business (although not necessarily the land), the primacy of the farm family as the decision-makers, laborers and investors in the land, and their residence on the land they work. Notably, intergenerational transfer – that is, farm succession – is included as a defining criterion. Beyond the discussion on the economic strength of family farms, contemporary farming is also understood as a way of life, lodged within this history of agrarianism. As an example, seminal work by economist Ruth Gasson (1973) identified the multiple goals and values of farmers, notably including the importance of gaining recognition and prestige, belonging to the farming community, continuing the family tradition, working with other family members, pride of ownership, opportunities for creativity, enjoyment of work tasks, preference for outdoor tasks and independence (to be your own boss).

Other authors have addressed the binary aspect of classical studies of family farming which have opposed it systematically to industrialized and modern farming. Marsden (1984), in his North Humberside case study, highlighted the synergies between strategies related, on the one hand, to modernization, industrialization and capitalization, and on the other hand, to the family dimension of the farm, most notably the desire to ensure farm succession and to keep control over farm activities. As an example, expansion of the farm is generally related to capitalist logics but can also be understood as an attempt to establish sons in the family business as well (Marsden 1984: 215). Similarly, Pritchard et al. (2007) propose the concept of 'farm family entrepreneurs' to describe the situation where the family dimension remains at the heart of the ownership of farms, which, at the same time, draw on legal and financial structures characteristic of corporate structures. Their conclusions are consistent with research into family farms in Southland New Zealand, where conversion from sheep to dairy farming certainly moves the farm business toward a more capitalized system, but, at the same time, relates to farm

succession strategies and sometimes lead to stronger involvement of family members in the farm work (Forney and Stock 2014).

In retrospect, this scholarship has been criticized for framing family farming as an 'imagined site of resistance to industrialization' (Bronson, Knezevic and Clement 2019: 104). with strong assumptions about the values involved, and the outcomes in terms of sustainability, often overlooking the large diversity of arrangements in terms of labor and farm practices. 'Family farming' remains a highly diverse category, into which holdings ranging from subsistence-oriented vegetable plots to ten thousand acres crop farms fall. Rather than leading to an alternative definition of what is or is not family farming, as a fixed category, this initial exploration of the relation between agriculture and families points towards the three central aspects of ownership, labor and lifestyle, which we develop in this chapter.

### **The materiality of farming households' identities**

The importance of farmer identity to farming practice has been assessed as part of the cultural turn in rural studies, and social science more broadly (Cloke 1997). The shift away from behavioral approaches, common in rural sociology of the 1970s and 1980s, moved academic interest towards a more relational perspective on how farmers behave. Although it was well recognized that farmers are not 'rational economic actors' in the economic sense of being solely profit driven (Gasson 1973), their persistent productivism, particularly in light of broader policy movements towards multifunctional agricultural policy (in Europe) became an important academic puzzle. Solving this puzzle was expected to answer questions about farmers' apparent resistance to engaging in the broader policy trajectory towards environmental protection and public goods provision.

Burton's (2004) seminal work formalized the concept of the 'good farmer': locally embedded standards of farming practice, through which farmers gain social prestige, self-worth, and identity. Burton's initial paper was grounded in Stryker's symbolic interactionism – Burton demonstrated the symbolic importance of farming symbols such as weed-free fields, observed and evaluated through 'roadside farming' – the standard farming practice of evaluating other farmers' practices while driving by, making note of their performance, or the evidence of it embodied in their fields and livestock. Burton argued that loss of valued cultural symbols – as would be required by agri-environmental participation (Burton, Kuczera and Schwarz 2008) or

planting trees (Burton 2004) – came at both a cultural and social cost to farmers, which was not outweighed by the economic compensations of the associated schemes.

Burton's subsequent work (Burton, Kuczera and Schwarz 2008; Burton and Paragahawewa 2011) drew on Bourdieu to demonstrate the interaction of different forms of symbolic capital exchange (cultural, social) in the formation of farming identities. Bourdieu argues that symbolic wealth is transferred intergenerationally and instilled in childhood. Farming succession is thus a process which begins early, as farmers pass cultural capital (farming skills and the ability to recognize them when performed by others) to their children through practical on-farm experience. Social capital – access to resources embedded in social networks – is similarly instilled in farm children, through their routine interactions with neighbor farmers and at farming events (for example: shows, sales, breed society meetings). This early socialization is later reinforced in adulthood through roadside farming and interpersonal interactions with other farmers – apocryphal stories, jokes and gossip about farming practices.

Burton's work has largely emphasized the persistence of good farming ideals in the face of socio-political transitions. Recent research has demonstrated that good farming ideals can change, and are increasingly contested. Sutherland (2013) and Sutherland and Darnhofer (2012) demonstrated that active reflection – triggered by changing 'rules of the game' (such as, reduced commodity prices, disease outbreaks) – can lead to a renegotiation of cultural capital. Sutherland argues that the failure of the established mental equation that good farming = profitable farming, has led to a fragmentation of farming identities. Symbols once emblematic of a profitable farm become devalued when their profitability reduces; farmers seek to renegotiate their identity in relation to maintaining a profitable farm, which may mean venturing into organic or alternative production. Recent work by Cusworth (2020) has demonstrated that parallel symbols, specifically in relation to environmental standards, can also develop, but the productivist orientation remains primary.

The negotiation of farming identity has a materiality seldom considered in the good farming literature (Burton et al. 2021), focusing instead on cognitive and social practices. However, the good farming literature recognizes the consubstantiality of farms – land, livestock and farm family are mutually constituted through farming practices (Gray 1998). Van der Ploeg's (1994) conceptualization of farming styles similarly recognizes the distinctions in identity resulting from farming practices and land capabilities of the locale. The specific symbols

of farming which are inscribed in the good farming identity are derived through practices of farming in the local farming area. Farmers who produce beef cattle value symbols associated with quality livestock (such as, related to conformity to breed type and animal health), whereas arable crop producers develop symbols relating to crops (such as evenly growing, weed-free fields). They produce these symbols through practices: working the land and/or managing their livestock. Symbols are thus negotiated, and reflect the potential of their land holding and its biophysical capability.

A farm is first of all made of fields, paddocks, pastures, meadows, that belong to the same unit in the long term. The land and the work to physically shape it and turn wilderness into good farmland are the fundamental material basis of agriculture. The quantity and quality of land determines many of the possible activities and developments on that land. The materiality of farming practices continues to be reflected in contemporary agrarian formations. 'You cannot unplug the cows' or similar phrases are very common among animal farmers and highlight the daily constraint related to the physical need of animals to be fed, watered, cleaned, watched over, milked, treated, etc., depending of the type of animals and the organization of the farm. The demands of livestock care lead to long workdays and do not stop for weekends or holidays, as physical and biological cycles never really pause. The activities on the farm are largely dictated by the material needs of its elements. Farming practices thus reflect the land capabilities of the farm – a relationship Gray (1998) termed 'consubstantial'. Land capability limits the potential for different commodities to be produced, and thus shapes the parameters of farm business development: farmers with hill or upland farms are largely limited to grazing livestock; farmers in more arable areas have more diverse opportunities but may come to identify themselves with the opportunities they pursue, seeing themselves as 'cattlemen' or 'grain producers'. Farmer identity is wrapped up in the skills that are learned while working the land or developing their farm business, and the cultural value placed on being good at what they do. Symbols of good farming thus become symbols of being a good person (Burton et al. 2021). The diversity of these material relations of farming has spawned numerous farming typologies, largely in order to understand differential behavior of farmers (Sutherland et al. 2011).

### **Farm labor and materialities: gender and succession**

It is this intrinsic material relations that link land tenure, secured ownership, and succession over generations in family farming. To be able to work, a farming household must have a secured access to land, because farming is about place and also time. You need time from the seed to the harvest, from the calf to the milking cow. But you need even more time to turn a rough piece of land full of stones and weeds into a fertile and well-maintained field, or to breed a herd of excellent cows carefully selected over generations. The history of agriculture has been built on clearing forests, removing stones, draining wetland, building watering systems, genetic selections... all of which require long term investments in the ideal of improvement of the land, plants and animals. In contemporary family farming the social obligation to pass on the farm goes with the duty of improvement, to pass it on in a better shape than it was before (see Emery 2010). In addition, modern farming implies important material and financial investments in buildings, machinery, and other infrastructures, which amplify the necessity of thinking about its viability in the long term, often anticipating for the next generation, in tension with an economic context favoring short term profitability (Darnhofer 2006).

These materialities of farming are reciprocally shaped by labor relations on the farm. Farming identity is typically considered to be 'born into' farmers, that is, farming is thought of as being 'in the blood' (Fischer and Burton 2014). In a farming household, children are socialized to agricultural work from a very early age, and to the idea that someone will have to take over the farm (Brandth and Overrein 2013). For a son, or sometimes a daughter, the identification as a potential successor results from a continuous socialization process that starts as a child and becomes quickly naturalized.

Although the importance of 'family' to farming is clearly well recognized in the literature, the image of farmers thus remains resolutely male (Shortall 2016). There are few (if any) legal barriers to women becoming farmers in the global North, or being identified as the 'primary' farmer, but they remain in the minority, ranging from 5 – 45% of farm operators in European countries and only 14% in the US (Hoppe and Korb 2013). When women do lead farms, these tend to be smaller in size, a reflection of strongly gendered inheritance patterns (Shortall 2010). In many studies, male identity is the reference point against which gender differences are evaluated (Charatsari and Cernic Istenic 2016: 392). Female identities are thus entwined with male identities, particularly within family farm relationships. Smyth et al. (2018) found that women who are involved in traditionally 'masculine' activities on-farm tend to see

themselves as more masculine. Pilgeram (2007) similarly found that women who are actively involved in ranching tend to act and dress in more typically 'masculine' ways.

Women on farms are traditionally positioned as helpers – farm wives, rather than farmers in their own right (Sachs 1996). Indeed, women themselves may be reluctant to claim the title of 'farmer' (Bell 2004). This reflects in part the integration of productive and reproductive labor on family farms – women traditionally take greater responsibility for reproductive labor (for example, rearing children, providing meals – the immediate needs of the family). The modernization of contemporary farms, and resultant mechanization has not directly led to more active engagement for women – instead, large, powerful farm machinery has become associated with large, powerful male bodies and therefore the territory of men (Brandth 1994; Heggem 2014). Saugerer (2002) argues that mechanization has led to the reduced visibility of women on farms, because they are less likely to be seen driving tractors – an important symbol of masculinity and farming. Particularly for women who marry into farming, management of large machinery can be intimidating; offering an experienced driver access to expensive machinery represents a major financial risk to the business. As a result, self-identification in family farming remains largely gendered, with very different definitions of the 'good farmer' associated with men and the 'good farm wife' with women.

Even in lower input farming, gendered division of labor appears 'natural'. Wilbur (2014) points to the materialities of farming – particularly the requirement for manual labor – that contribute to ongoing gendered division of labor even, or particularly strongly in 'alternative' farming households. Lower levels of mechanization and the demands of weeding without pesticides, for instance, have been identified as reproducing the classical gendered distribution of labor, where the larger, stronger household member appears to be the most logical choice for farm labor, and the female the logical choice for domestic and reproductive labor. Although women tend to be more visible in alternative agriculture, there is debate on whether this reflects the stronger role of women on these farms, the more people-facing activities involved in direct marketing (which are traditionally associated with women's work, EIP Agri Focus Group Report 2016) or the de-legitimising of alternative agricultural production (that is, casting organic farming as 'pretend farming') with which there is no prestige to association (Silvasti 2003). Som Castellano (2015) similarly argues against the notion that alternative agriculture is empowering for women; she sees it instead as a perpetuation of traditional gender roles.

Women's roles on farms tend to be associated with particular forms of diversification – that is, people-centered forms like direct marketing and agri-tourism – as opposed to more technology-based forms such as renewable energy production (Trauger 2004: 63). Studies of women's roles in agri-tourism have demonstrated the processes through which identity shifts more broadly, from that of farmer, to that of business person. In essence, practices and identity are intertwined – it is through the practices of farming that farming identity is developed. When practices shift to become more focused on tourism, then the identity similarly shifts to being one of a tourism operator or a business person (Brandth and Haugen 2011). This can lead to women becoming more highly valued within the farming business (Heggem 2014), but there are also cases where women actively continue to promote their husband's identity as the primary farmer, to maintain his self-esteem and mental health. Women who work off-farm and contribute (quantitatively) more income to the farm household may still subordinate themselves within the household in order to maintain the presentation of the farm as the primary family occupation (Kelly and Shortall 2002). Gendered identity is thus relational, in other words, it is developed and enacted in relation to others.

The role of women in agriculture thus links to the evolution of agrarianism presented earlier in this chapter. The recognition and making visible of women's roles on farms is embedded within critical approaches to agrarianism. However, to date, that literature has continued to emphasize heteronormative family relationships. The privileging of 'family farms' also privileges traditional family structures, where marriage customarily provides an heir to the farm (Little 2007). There is a small but growing literature which addresses LGBTQ farmers. This literature identifies the historical establishment of separate spaces for production, that is, lesbian collectives, which intentionally redefined the family farm (Leslie 2019). Lesbian collectives were embedded in the 'back-to-the-land' movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Work on more recent agrarian forms points to the quest for identity of LGBTQ farmers, and their adoption of – and attraction to the 'androgynous' (arguably) male dress of farmers (Leslie 2017). The practices and materialities of farming offer opportunities to a range of 'others' – gender, color, sexual orientation – to renegotiate symbols and farming in line with the practices they adopt.

## **Imaginarities and practicalities of the farming lifestyle**

When asked about why they farm and what they enjoy in their profession, one aspect that is very often mentioned first by farmers is related to a specific way of life. Being a farmer implies the adoption of a lifestyle which differs significantly from what is perceived as the majoritarian everyday of the rest of the population. This particular farming life is characterized by a freedom to organize one's daily routine (Stock and Forney 2014), by a direct relation to nature, a diverse and always stimulating work (Gasson 1973), and hard but satisfying labor. At the same time, having inherited a farm places the farmer in symbolic debt to its forbearers who fought to be 'good farmers', with the related pressure not to be the one who will fail and break the generational legacy. Farming as an occupation can also be seen as a source of multiple pressures on the whole household in order to maintain a shared farmer identity. Pressure to find a successor, to take over one's parents' profession and business, to stay in farming even in difficult situations. When farm succession is compromised, for instance because of the absence of a successor and heir, families tend to disinvest from the farming activity (Inwood and Sharp 2012). In this section we explore two examples of how the imaginaries and materialities of farming intersect to produce very different outcomes: non-commercial farming and mental health issues.

### Recreational farming and the appeal of the farming life

Non-commercial or recreational approaches to farming have long been recognized in the rural studies literature, frequently within farming typologies (Bowler et al. 1996; Pike 2008; Shucksmith and Herrmann 2002). Open land markets in many countries across the global North enable would-be farmers to pursue farming lifestyles without the need to establish viable farming businesses. The appeal of farming to farmers themselves also leads to accepted practices of semi-retirement, whereby formerly commercial farmers continue their farms at reduced levels. The United States Department of Agriculture (2015) differentiates 'retirement farms' (29%), and 'off-farm occupation farms' (39%) from 'mid-size family farms', 'large-size family farms' and 'non-family farms', thus demonstrating that these less than commercial approaches form the majority of farms in the agricultural census, and occupy over half of the agricultural land<sup>2</sup>. Gosnell and Travis (2005) have demonstrated the growth in recreational ranching in the Rocky Mountain regions, a practice that was already well established in Texas (Friedberger 1996,

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<sup>2</sup> Although these farms are smaller than family and non-family farming types, they still occupy some 55% of the agricultural land base.

Sorice et al. 2012). In Europe, Sutherland et al. (2019) demonstrated that at least 13% of the land in their Scottish study was occupied by self-proclaimed non-commercial farmers (in other words, farmers who were not seeking to make a profit). Heley (2010) and Sutherland (2012) identified the establishment of new 'estates' in the UK more broadly, based on historic notions of landed nobility. Bohnet (2008) similarly differentiated 'hobby farmers' and 'lifestyle' farmers in her qualitative study in rural Australia.

The existence – and potential growth – of hobby or non-commercial approaches to farming demonstrates the embeddedness of agrarian ideals in both popular culture<sup>3</sup> and in farming households. Inheritors of farmland, and those who are unsuccessful at maintaining a financially viable business, transition to part-time, non-commercial farming as a means of retaining farming identity (Sutherland 2012; Sutherland and Darnhofer 2012). Newcomers to rural areas seek the affordances of farm life, such as the opportunity to interact with livestock or horses (Sutherland 2020b), without the associated risks of farm business development. The term hobby farming itself can be pejorative – a term which is applied to someone else's farming identity. In her (2019) study, Sutherland found that full-time farmers referred to part-time farmers as hobby farmers, whereas, part-time farmers referred to smallholders and people with horses as hobby farmers; small-holders and people with horses did not see themselves to be farmers at all.

The growth in non-commercial farming demonstrates both the culturally embedded ideologies of farming and its materialities. Non-commercial farms are typically located in areas of high visual attraction but lower agricultural productivity, such as smallholdings in Europe's periphery (Pinto Correia et al. 2015) and ranches in and near the Yellowstone National Park (Gosnell and Travis 2005). Amenity migration to rural areas, by definition, reflects the particular cultural and environmental appeal of those regions (Gosnell and Abrams 2011). Once located in those regions, incomers' identities are shaped by the practices and affordance of their land holding. Newcomers integrate previous life experiences, networks, labor, skills and economic investment into their holding, reconfiguring it and adjusting their new identities to the potentials and cultural history of their land base (Abrams, Bliss and Gosnell 2013). However, as part-time

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<sup>3</sup> Sutherland, L.-A. 2020a. The 'Desk-Chair Countryside': affect, authenticity and the rural idyll in a farming computer game *Journal of Rural Studies* forthcoming, has recently demonstrated the popularity of farming computer games, which enroll millions of players world-wide in farming practices, through the medium of their computer systems.

farmers, these new identities are typically layered, also reflecting their professional and other identities.

#### Farming as suffering: health issues in agriculture

The characterization of life on a farm as the 'good life', close to nature, down to earth, and in adequation with the 'real' values is reflected in some statistical empirics confirming that farmers do have 'a more conservative and "healthy" lifestyle' (Sanne et al. 2004: 98). However, a family farm can be a dangerous place, and agriculture has also been proved to be a risky activity in terms of physical health. Accidents, injuries, respiratory diseases, musculoskeletal disorders, and various cancers, among others, have been clearly associated with practices such as exposure to pesticides and other chemicals, use of powerful and dangerous machinery, or other aspects related to the materiality of farming (see, for example, Alavanja et al. 2004, Jacques-Jouvenot and Laplante 2009, McCurdy and Carroll 2000, Schenker et al. 1998, Walker-Bone and Palmer 2002). Moreover, research in occupational health has also shown in many contexts that farmers and their families face many factors of physical and psychological stress, including economic pressures and uncertainties, the potential for disabling injuries and divorce, and the loss of crops to weather (Freeman, Schwab and Jiang 2008). Failure to achieve the expectations of masculine farm leadership as 'good farmers' can be damaging to men's mental health (Haugen and Brandth 2017). This can lead to anxiety, depression and burnout (Jones-Bitton et al. 2020; Reissig 2017, Sanne et al. 2004). The impact can build on itself: exposure to multiple stressors also translates into higher risks to professional injuries or illnesses, mental health, or even suicide (Droz et al. 2014; Fraser et al. 2005; Jacques-Jouvenot and Laplante 2009; Sanne et al. 2004; Torske et al. 2016). Economic pressures and the general trend of increased farm size, also amplify the already high need of labor on the farm, often causing an overload of work for the farmer (Booth and Lloyd 2000; Gray and Lawrence 1996; Kallioniemi et al. 2016).

This economic insecurity relates also to the dependency of agriculture on uncontrolled natural elements, climate change and animal and crop health. In countries highly exposed to extreme weather events, such as Australia, climate variability, often combined with lower socio-economic conditions and reduced farm production, produces insidious impacts on the health of farmers (Alston 2012). Beyond direct impact on crops and productivity, extreme weather and climate change impacts farmers' on sense of place and self-identity (Ellis and Albrecht 2017). In

livestock farming, there seems to be a complex relation of interdependence between human and animal well-being. A Norwegian study shows that higher farmer well-being and a low level of stress have a direct positive association with animal welfare, while highly stressed and unhappy farmers have a negative impact on animal well-being (Hansen and Østerås 2019). Similarly, in Denmark, the correlation between convictions for animal neglect and financial difficulties, divorce and psychiatric problems have been identified (Andrade and Anneberg 2014). While these studies seem to indicate a unidirectional impact of humans distress on animals, animal health and disease also cause emotional distress to farmers with socio-psychological impacts related to the disease management which disrupt farmers relation to animals and the local farming communities in which they are situated (Crimes and Enticott 2019).

The family dimension of farming is often seen as a positive feature – notably in the agrarian ideal – underlying mutual support, solidarity and well-being. However, when problems occur within the family, in the couple or between generations, they have a major impact on the farm business. Consequently, family conflicts, and notably divorce or succession related problems, are clearly identified among the most important factors of stress on farms (Booth and Lloyd 2000; Fraser et al. 2005; Freeman, Schwab and Jiang 2008; Gray and Lawrence 1996; Louazel 2016). This can easily be explained by the structural role played by family relations in the division of labor, land and business ownership, income formation, as discussed above.

These multiple aspects, while being clear risk factors for the farming household's well-being and mental health, also come in into play with farmers' identification with the ideal 'good farmer'. Excessive numbers of working hours are of course related to economic pressure and to the materiality of farming activities, with the never-ending list of tasks to do on the farm. Farming is therefore related to a work ethic that leaves little room for leisure and rest. This not only impacts the life of the farmer himself/herself, but of the whole family. On family farms, family members, including children and the elderly, are often essential sources of additional labor for accomplishing all of the tasks. This hard work ethos that characterizes farmers' self-identification acts here as an amplifier, as an impetus to endure pressure and work more, rather than pausing to recover. Alston (2012) related this stoicism in the face of adversity to a masculine hegemony qualifying Australian farmers' identity (see also Berry et al. 2011). Similarly, Roy et al. (2014) identify a fear of stigma, and rigid, traditional masculine ideals among Canadian farmers as barriers to help-seeking, and therefore increasing risks of

breakdown. In a similar way, the moral duty of passing on the farm to the next generation can be a source of additional pressures and suffering in already difficult situations, notably when the farm profitability and viability is in question. A strong attachment to maintaining the identity of farmer makes it difficult to see stopping farming as an option, even in very difficult situations (Alston 2017; Droz and Forney 2007; Riley 2016).

### **Conclusion: thinking farmers' identities beyond the farmer?**

In the history of rural studies, farmers' identities garnered more attention in the context of the cultural turn that occurred in the 1980s and 1990s (Cloke 1997). One of the major contributions of the scholarship on farmers' identities has been to offer a critical response to rational models and behavioral approaches that have been (and partly still are) prominent in the study of farmers' decision-making strategies (Burton et al. 2021). In this perspective, households, family farming and identities were generally studied primarily from a representational perspective. In addition, the focus has generally tended to be on the farmer, as the male head of the farm. In this chapter we have proposed an extended framing to discuss identity formation by articulating the ideological, the material and the socio-cultural dimensions of family farming.

Through this lens, we have explored some of the primary aspects of family farming, according to the classical definition in the literature. We have highlighted the entanglement of natural rhythms and cycles, a moral duty for farm continuity, and political supports in the constitution of the family farm succession. We described how gendered identities in farming were formed in relation to socialization practices and the materiality of agricultural production. Finally, hobby or non-commercial farming demonstrates the on-going appeal of agrarian imaginaries, and how these are reconfiguring less productive rural spaces. However, this positive side of farming identity is contradicted by the high risks to farmers' mental health related to the interplay between the material constraints of farming, the pressure to fulfil the requirements of the 'good farmer' identity, and broader ideological controversies around agriculture.

We argue that those cross-influences between ideologies, self-representations and the centrality of the materiality of farming call for new theorizations of identities in agriculture. Such renewed and innovative ways of thinking will have to look beyond a classical, human-centered, and representational framing of farming households' identities. They may gain inspiration from what has been labelled 'non-representational' or 'more-than-representational' approaches, which

regroup approaches that seek actually to go 'beyond': in other words, 'more-than-human', 'more-than-textual', and beyond active cognition, to consider multiple senses and the relations between human and non-human (sentient and otherwise) actants (Lorimer 2005). Non-representational thinking offers the opportunity to rethink identities by assessing the intersecting roles of place, animals, land and objects, and emphasizing the negotiated and embodied nature of social interaction. Non-representational approaches also draw particular attention to practices and performances, opening new ways of integrating technologies and ideologies as more than simply 'rules of the game' to which farmers must respond, but as actants which have specific properties and attributes participating in the creation or reinforcement of meanings.

Related to non-representational approaches, assemblage thinking also opens new pathways for a renewed conceptualization of identities by expanding the analysis to non-human actants and paying more attention to how complex sets of relations are constitutive of the worlds which farmers inhabit. Assemblage thinking has been contributing to theoretical renewal in many fields of social sciences, including urban studies (see McFarlane 2011) or the anthropology of globalization (Ong and Collier 2005; Tsing 2015). A first important element of assemblage thinking to bridging the existing representational approaches of identities with novel, relational and more-than-human theorizations, is its focus on the articulation of the materiality of the social and its expressive dimension (which includes 'representations'). Woods (2015) offered an application to rural places, defining them as changing assemblages of both 'material' and 'expressive' components. Such a framing allows better understanding of the dynamics of the current restructuring of the rural, characterizing them as the interplay of material and expressive components. In addition, assemblage thinking locates the farm and the farmer in a wider set of relations and calls for a broadening of the scope of analysis. Another interesting path to explore in the future would be to look for 'echoes' or 'resonances' of farmers' identities in other places (material and symbolic) within the agri-food system: in consumption practices, rural policies, re-organizations of the food chains, etc. Such widening approaches might enrich our understanding of who and what participates in the creation of identities, beyond the local interactions at the farm level.

This chapter has, we hope, laid some further foundations for a more-than-representational approach to farmers' identities. Further developments should go deeper into the integration of the negotiated and embodied nature of social interaction in farming households. Boundaries could

usefully be redrawn to better include 'beyond human' relations with animals, plants, soil, technologies, and other non-human elements in the co-production of identities.

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