

## **Farmer Autonomy and the Farming Self**

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### **Abstract**

Drawing on interviews in Switzerland and New Zealand, we explore the concept of autonomy as part of a farming self. The farming self encompasses the dialectical relationship of autonomy as both value and tool that help us understand farmers within a wider set of economic, environmental and interpersonal relations. Farmers describe autonomy as a value in three related but slightly different ways. First, autonomy invokes a particular lifestyle connected to farming. Second, autonomy is understood as the equivalent of being one's own boss. Third, farmers describe autonomy negatively by enumerating the constraints that limit the first two iterations of autonomy in their farming operations. Beyond the value of autonomy for farmer identity, the farming self captures autonomy as a tool: a tool of identification, a tool to mitigate, navigate and translate the experiences of being a farmer in a wider network of agricultural relations.

### **Keywords**

farmers, agriculture, autonomy, New Zealand, Switzerland, farming self

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*“ . . . everybody delights in recognizing in the peasant the archetype of the independent free man who is his own master and whom the world proposes as the model for the alienated man, the ‘stranger,’ of modern technological civilization.”*

- Henri Mendras *The Vanishing Peasant*, p. 192 (Mendras, 1970)

### **1. Introduction**

Discussions of personhood, agency, decision-making, (bio)ethics, freedom, citizenship, and independence intersect with autonomy in making sense of the individual within a confluence of economic, environmental and interpersonal relations. While the theoretical territory of autonomy is diverse, for now, our concern is articulating a theory of a relational farming self (Callero, 2003; Dunn, 1997) within a wider autonomy umbrella. We typically think of autonomy as a core value of one's identity (Hitlin, 2003). Is autonomy simply a core value of farmers? Or is there more to autonomy than just being an aspect of farmer identity? In a theory driven exploration of farmers in Switzerland and New Zealand we adapt the idea of the farming self (Burton, 2004a, b; Burton and Wilson, 2006) to confirm autonomy's

role as an important core value of farmer identity, but propose that autonomy is also employed as a social tool that dialectically reinforces that identity, while helping adapt to new contexts, realities, and practices. Thus autonomy is an integral part of being and (continuously) becoming a farmer. Our questions here revolve around how do farmers roll out autonomy in the service of not just maintaining their identity as “farmer,” but in order to maintain and build their relationship with the farm, the land, the animals, family members, neighbors, and all of the relationships connected to them? The value of examining how autonomy works in farmers lives tells us more about the interrelationship of self, identity and agency - not just for farmers, but the wider story of social life.

Autonomy is a key indicator of happiness for workers despite lower incomes or longer work hours (Helliwell et al., 2012). The value of autonomy (as control) is related throughout the sociology of work in many professions (Edgell, 2006; Grint, 2005; Lyness et al., 2012). Agriculture, that employs one of every three workers in the world, is no different (Bryant, 1999; Coughenour, 1995; FAO, 2012; Nettle et al., 2011). In Australia, researchers studied the retention of dairy farm employees and found that they valued autonomy, lifestyle, and decision making (Nettle et al., 2011). Farm owners found that the costs and shift in thinking to accommodate these needs were rewarded through more loyal and committed employees while also contributing to the (financial) stability of their operations. Autonomy provides meaning in farming regardless of scale (Gertel and Le Heron, 2011; Schneider and Niederle, 2010). While the large-scale/corporate and globally-engaged farming has increased (Cheshire and Woods, 2013), the inevitability of the loss of the peasants and family farms has not come to pass.

Our research experiences, in two different countries, revealed spontaneous discussions about autonomy. In this paper, we look at what leads to such similarity despite different milieus. We explore the use of autonomy as a tool that links farmers in Switzerland and New Zealand together. We develop the farming self in relation to three interrelated theoretical understandings of autonomy. This farming self *experiences* autonomy as a freedom to do things while also hoping for a freedom from other things. Autonomy is a tool to mitigate, navigate and translate the experiences of being a farmer in a wider network of agricultural relations. Thus, we expand the concept of the farming self, particularly as it relates to how farmers experience autonomy as both value and tool. To that end, we traverse the wider literature of the self and autonomy culminating in an extension of the farming self. We then illustrate a three-fold framework of autonomy that emphasizes the use of autonomy as a social tool to actively navigate the self and identity. We describe our methods and lay out the differences between the agricultural context in Switzerland and New Zealand, before exploring farmers’ experiences of autonomy. By expanding our understanding of autonomy as a political tool we can better grasp its rhetorical employment in agriculture beyond a narrow interpretation of equating autonomy with entrepreneurship countered by La Via Campesina and other groups working for a wider interpretation of what qualifies as authentic farming.

## 2. Relating autonomy to the Self

The self, as “a reflection of complete social process” (Mead 2004: 224), helps delineate what is unique about people in relation to others – how they see themselves and how others see them and the interplay between the two. Thus, to understand the self, the (generalized) other is necessary, as the self is a relational process. The farmers we met expressed autonomy as a central element of their self-definition. The reflexive nature of the self highlights the complex (social) interplay of selfhood, identity and agency within the wider understanding of the person (see also Goffman, 1974). The various interpretations and experiences of autonomy among farmers – as persons and occupying a role - in different contexts highlights an interplay between the structural and the individual or “a critical ontology of ourselves” (Vrasti, 2011 : 9, following Foucault 1997). As American rural sociologist Ken Wilkinson (1991) pointed out, “the self arises, has meaning, persists, and changes in social interaction” (p. 63). Thus the self is a reflexive construct both reflecting and shaping a person’s entangled relations (Callero, 2003; Dunn, 1997). This permeability (Hitlin, 2003: 121) of relations entwines values, agency, and identity with the self where “Values and personal identity are linked at the theoretical level through the concept of authenticity” (p. 123).

While values are not prime movers, they are important because they “hold meaning for individuals” (p. 123). Within this entanglement, the self is stable but unfixed and thus takes constant work and judgment to maintain one’s self regard (Rokeach, 1973: 216). The self is made and remade in the context of negotiating identity (one way of self-definition) and agency (via specific practices and performances) (constrained within those repertoires and possibilities afforded by the social context). Thus the identity, e.g. as a farmer, is a doing (Holloway, 2005), not a fixed sense of a role (Jenkins, 2008). In our formulation of the farming self, autonomy is one of the tools that people employ to maintain, adapt and express one’s sense of self regard as a farmer whether they are changing the kinds of farming (Forney and Stock, 2014) or they are adapting to new playing fields (Stock et al., in print).

What we show here is that the farming self is an example of the farmer pursuing (as a dynamic process) their own symbolic self-completion of their self-definition of farmer (Leary and Tangney, 2003a; Wicklund and Gollwitzer, 1982). Autonomy plays a peculiar role in this process as it is both a reference used to speak about what one is in comparison to the General Social Other (identification) (e.g. Weigert, 1991). Autonomy is also a dialectical tool of the self, a doing that works toward the expression of this agency. Autonomy provides room to manoeuvre in a context made of constraints. Thus, autonomy has to be understood as an important element of the self as a performative process in relation to agency.

The modern self embodies “the pressure to become what one is” (Elliott and Lemert, 2009: 68) and has become a defining feature of Western life. This “institutional individualization” (Beck, 1997) meshes with the responsabilisation (Foucault, 1976) that Emery (2013) disentangles with his discussion of individuality

and individualism in farming. Autonomy, rather than privilege one over the other, helps emphasize the dialogic (Peter et al., 2000) characteristic of farmer practice and identity in relationship to structural changes. This takes autonomy beyond solely a value or trait of farmers and into the realm of a tool of social negotiation between self, identity and agency. The self is made and remade in the context of negotiating identity. The farmer self blends a farmer's self as an experiencing subject (Leary and Tangney, 2003b: 7) and the identity of farmer. Autonomy connects these expressions of a farmer that we see explicitly in our interviews. Thus, autonomy serves as a critical addition to understanding the self particularly in agriculture or the farming self.

### **3. Autonomy in Farming**

Like the changing nature of the self, the literature on autonomy continues to wrestle with the changes to the person in modernity. To better situate a formulation of the farming self (section 4), we describe the importance of autonomy in farming. Farmers value their independence: this has been clearly stated in many national contexts (Dessein and Nevens, 2007; Droz and Forney, 2007; Emery, 2013; Kietäväinen, 2012; Niska et al., 2012). As a result, the independent farmer, with an emphasis on autonomy, remains a strong theme of peasant and agrarian conceptions of agriculture including for New Zealand and Switzerland. During the 20th Century, agrarian ideologists developed a description of the "Swiss Peasant" strongly connected to autonomy as a symbol of national identity and independence (Baumann, 1993; Forney, 2010). In former English colonies, the agrarian mythology focused on mentalities of self-help, independence and rugged individualism (Cheshire and Lawrence, 2005; Holowchak, 2011; Montmarquet, 1989). The ideology of freedom is equated with control - over nature, over the operation, and over success - typically affiliated with masculinity and its converse, the subordination or "housewifeisation" of women (Bell, 2004; Brandth, 2002; Mies and Bennholdt-Thomsen, 1999:98-100). The assertion of autonomy underlies assumptions of what comprises masculine and, therefore, authentic contemporary agriculture (Trauger et al., 2010). The idea of performing a masculinity involving control is particularly appropriate in New Zealand (Barlett and Conger, 2004; Campbell et al., 2006; Jay, 2005; Liepins, 2000). Independence and cooperation highlight a tension between individual success and the common good (Emery, 2013; Stock et al., in print). Where Rosin (2008) argued for autonomy as a rationale for farmers' adjustments to new social arrangements of agriculture, we argue autonomy serves as a bedrock notion of an farming self. Beyond simply a moral value, autonomy also represents "a positive project of self-constitution" (see Cleaver 1992: 129, quoted in Böhm et al., 2010: 20; Cleaver, 1992) (that parallels the room to manoeuvre) that serves to create, co-create and maintain a sense of one's self and the relations one is involved in. Generally, autonomy includes three elements: an "emphasis on independence ("others do not determine what I do"), on self-congruence ("I want to do my own things"), and power to decide ("I want to be the one that sets the rules")" (van Gelderen and Jansen, 2006: 26). The emancipatory, enactive and performative (Gibson-Graham, 2008)

value of autonomy comes from recognition of the sociology of the self as imparting meaning.

Farmer autonomy typically falls into the broad categories of the entrepreneurial farmer or the peasant (see Niska et al., 2012: 1-4 for a nice review of this literature). Autonomy, if connected only with entrepreneurship, connotes strategic economic positioning or “classical” commodity agriculture into a moral good; authentic farming is productivist farming. Discussing the US, Dudley (2002) argues that agriculture “has instantiated a system of morality which requires an . . . entrepreneurial self” (p. 176) predicated on “hyper-individualism” (Gammon, 2013: 512). Specifically, autonomy’s importance conceptually and theoretically within agriculture invites an exploration of a farming self. The argument that there is something called autonomy and that autonomy is not equivalent to the expectations of the person under neoliberal/constrained expectations leads to inherently normative assumptions about autonomy and the self. Yet, “[s]elfhood and morality [are] intertwined themes” argued Taylor (1989: 3). Autonomy in farming revolves around the creation and maintenance of an authentic farming self that is both personal (one’s self-regard as a farmer) and social with implications for identity, subjectivity, power, and social and ecological well-being (Bell, 2004: 115; Burton, 2004b, 2011; Clark et al., 2010; Dessein and Nevens, 2007; Droz, 2002; Forney, 2010; Haggerty et al., 2009; Maybery et al., 2005; Rosin, 2008; Stock, 2007; Sutherland, 2013; Sutherland and Burton, 2011; Sutherland and Darnhofer, 2012).

Neoliberalism in agriculture means farm families deal with the “scars of chronic economic dislocation” (Dudley, 2000: 162). That dislocation continually forces re-consideration of farm pathways (Ingram et al., 2013). This uncertainty, while assumed to be essential to doing farming, also leads to disrupted identities or hopelessness prone to neoliberal ideology (Emery, 2013; Kietäväinen, 2012: 12). How do they navigate uncertainty? A common answer comes back to the opposition of the entrepreneurial farmer and the peasant, the first buying into the rhetoric that wealth creation is the one and only way to value oneself and one’s community (Dudley, 2000; Franks and Emery, 2013; McElwee, 2008). Peasants, broadly conceptualized, value autonomy as a key to survival and resistance (van der Ploeg, 2008). These two categories reflect two contrasting understandings of autonomy (Stock et al., in print).

Just as Wittman’s (2009) work on agrarian citizenship with landless peasants in Brazil, “recognises the agency of rural peoples in challenging the traditional binaries of modernity/peasantry, landed/landless, and subject/citizen” (p. 129), a theory of farmer autonomy helps challenge the categories and assumptions that autonomy can only be for the elite gentleman farmer, peasant or entrepreneur. For example, Maybery et al. (2005) discuss the difference between entrepreneurial and thus economic farmers and peasant or yeoman farmers that value lifestyle issues more. In spite of typologies such as Davis-Brown and Salaman (1987), Austin et al. (1996) found the categories of “yeoman” and “entrepreneur” to be overlapping and not mutually exclusive

The categories of entrepreneurial and family/peasant falsely divide how farmers interpret their lives and farming experiences. Autonomy bridges these

categories. Further, as Niska et al. put it, when farmers say “that their farming is about autonomy, profit and well-being of nature and rural areas”, they generally emphasize that profit is related to a livelihood rather than profit maximization (2012:10). As the Niska et al.’s (2012) review shows clearly, autonomy and independence represent core ideas held by peasants and entrepreneurs alike intuiting a diversity of farmers rather than homogenous, coherent categories (p. 4) equating entrepreneurial attitude with profit maximisation.

Across disciplines, autonomy remains highly contested. The politics of autonomy can describe dominant power relations often presumed with increasing size and scale of agri-food relations or it can be relational and emancipatory (Whatmore, 1997). Within social movements, Böhm et al. (2010: 27-28) argue that though autonomy is a “potential site of struggle” and “an antagonistic political demand” opposing different interpretation of autonomy:

These different claims around what autonomy might be certainly open up a space of tension. But they also create a situation where there is debate and struggle around what autonomy might mean. This has the advantage of creating a new site for political struggle and a new way of thinking and doing politics. It also opens up the possibility for articulations between antagonistic forms of autonomy.

Autonomy is filled with tension because “autonomy constitutes a terrain on which both negation and affirmation coexist, interact and unfold” (Böhm et al., 2010: 28). Doing so they echo Stephen Lukes’ (1973: 55) connection of autonomy to Isaiah Berlin’s (1958) distinctions of freedom. For Berlin (1958), autonomy or freedom can be split into two categories that offer a useful distinction to comprehend farmers’ ideas about autonomy. Positive freedom involves the personal autonomy to make decisions about one’s life - this is a freedom to - a “freedom which consists in being one’s own master” (Berlin, 1958: 16). A negative conception of freedom or freedom from consists of “not being interfered with by others” (Berlin, 1958: 8). Extending the freedom discussion, Netting (1993:332, emphasis in original) argued that farmers, “emphasize their freedom to chart their activities and goals independently, to be their own bosses a point emphasised by Berlin (1958: 16) describing “the wish on the part of the individual to be his own master”. Mooney (1988: 8-9), drawing on Marx, illustrates the two-ness that comes from being a boss, but subject to external forces of the market. To experience or describe autonomy at work in the lives of farmers is to embrace its sociological nature at the intersection of the self and experiences of networks of relations.

#### **4. The Farming Self**

We draw on theories of the self (section 2) and the related literature on autonomy (section 3) especially as related to farming and the rural to extend the idea of a farming self. The farming self is an expression of someone’s self in relationship with the life on a farm that includes, among others, working with nature and animals,

producing food, managing family tradition, managing resources, government policies, and international markets. It does not equal a professional self, as for many farmers, it is more than a job – it is a way of life (Vanclay, 2004). The farming self is not reducible to one’s identity as a farmer; rather it captures the expression of this identity in the specific context of the farm.<sup>1</sup> By incorporating the idea of autonomy into a farming self we extend previous work on farmer selves (Burton and Wilson, 2006) that argues, “the structure of the farm has become incorporated within the farmer’s self-concept, as the farm restricts opportunities to express certain identities” (p. 110) or what Weigert (1991) would describe as the general environmental other. The pursuance of one’s self, one’s authentic self as emphasized by Hitlin (2003) occurs in relationship to others (cf. environmentality in Agrawal, 2005; Haggerty, 2007). Recent work has extended the other to include non-human actants especially the environment as process and place. This environmental self is shaped in relationship to a *generalized* other of the natural world and the environment. “Within the Meadian social psychological tradition, Bell (1994) has distinguished between the *natural other* - the sense of a realm free from the pollution of social interests - and, as a corollary to this, a *natural me* - a sense of a truer, more authentic self” (Brewster and Bell, 2009: 50). That authentic self is related to nature, the environment, and the farm itself. “[T]he natural self is seen as the product of a particular conception of and feeling for the natural environment as a refuge from society, providing a basis for decompression, regrounding, and defense” (p. 50). This environmental or natural self takes place within what Brewster and Bell (2009) call an “out-in-nature” frame where “we find a particular refuge from society, allowing us to loosen the social entanglements felt to impinge upon us at times. . . . we feel ‘away from it all’ - unencumbered by the expectations, evaluations, and the often hurried pace of everyday social life” (p. 49). “Out-in-nature framing not only shapes how we behave and experience our strip of activity (a ‘nature walk’), but also, in turn, who we feel ourselves to be (our more ‘natural self’)” (p. 50). Autonomy here represents a feeling that farmers are more themselves farming in their way - when they are more in control and resisting or lamenting what’s in their way (e.g., regulations, productivist expectations) from achieving autonomy or their farming self. This independence does not preclude involvement in cooperatives, sharing or even collective arrangements (Emery, 2013), but is a nuanced and delicate territory of self and communal negotiation. Further, the out-in-nature frame gives a place to cultivate a general social other (GSO) and a general environmental other (GEO) of agriculture that take shape in relation to one another.

Meaning, as a farmer, in our case, is tied up in relations involving (but not limited to) the farm, the family, the soil, animals, climate, industry, and audit systems. Concerning nature (or a farm), though we have two - intertwined others - the generalized social other (GSO) and the generalized environmental other (GEO) (Weigert, 1991: 357). Farmers express their autonomy and farming self through cultural scripts of what it means to be a farmer (Vanclay and Enticott, 2011) and in contrast to the city or the office worker (see also Mendras, 1970: 172). They also develop this sense of an other within a particular frame – within the frame of their

farm and within the sector of agriculture within certain contexts and relations. Where Burton and Wilson (2006) see the farm as a constraint, the idea of the farming self recognizes the farm as part of a system of relations that both enable (freedom to) and constrain (freedom from) farmers' performances, decisions, reactions, and perceptions of themselves, the farm and agriculture. Autonomy enables a farming self to make decisions and do as one pleases while providing space (like the room to manoeuvre) - both physical and psychological - to use one's self and identity to "adjust to new global conditions" (Elliott and Lemert, 2009; van der Ploeg, 2008). This farming self uses autonomy as a tool of negotiation to reinforce the identity as a farmer while also, by buffering against the multiple challenges of modernity particularly in agriculture.

Following from this formulation, autonomy, real or not, allows farmers to conceptualise to themselves and others how they see themselves fitting into the situation. "While I don't agree with the directions of productivist/multifunctional/etc. agriculture, I will go along with them, but at the same time I want you to know that you haven't fully contained me in the state of affairs." And these formulations are made within assemblages of relations that include regional variations, farm qualities, herd variables, water locations and the "destiny of ecology" (Lawrence and Campbell, 2014).

The farming self captures both a sense of identity as a farmer while simultaneously operating as a tool with autonomy to navigate the vagaries of international agriculture. This farming self encompasses both the narrow entrepreneurial pursuit of profit and the "peasant" pursuit of livelihood. Our theorization of the farming self provides a framework to examine the contrasting understandings of autonomy in agriculture that also provides theoretical tools to explore the normative values attached to agricultural practices. While not asserting an authentic farming self, we recognize the network of relations of agricultural identity involves individuals' identity and practices, but also other people, crops, animals, land, water, nationality, etc. We explore some of these relationships through interviews with farmers in Switzerland and New Zealand.

## **5. Comparing Switzerland and New Zealand**

The discourse of neoliberalism's efficiency permeates the entire agricultural structure of New Zealand (Larner, 2000; Lawrence and Campbell, 2014; Liepins and Bradshaw, 1999), whereas Swiss farmers juggle multiple regulatory audit systems (Forney, 2010, 2012; Mann, 2003). Even if both countries' systems are based on family farming, the realities on the farm are deeply different, as briefly illustrated in Table 1. Differences in costs, size and geography help explain these related, but distinct systems. The major differences between the two countries' agricultural production systems revolve around three areas: market destination/orientation (export v domestic or value added v low cost), amount of state financial support, and the agri-environmental regulatory structure (for other comparisons see Aerni, 2009; Aerni et al., 2009). While these are the major areas of contrast, these differences stem from larger structural differences.

<Table 1 here>

Agricultural products represent 40 percent of exports for New Zealand, while in Switzerland the proportion is only 2.8 percent. Over ninety percent of New Zealand's meat (sheep, beef, and venison), fruit (kiwifruit and apples), and milk are exported.

These contrasting market orientations developed in the 1980s when the global agricultural system shifted dramatically toward neoliberal policies (McMichael, 1994). The thirty years following restructuring in New Zealand encouraged many sheep farmers to convert their operations to dairy (Forney and Stock, 2014; Lawrence and Campbell, 2014; Stock and Peoples, 2012).

Subsidised agricultural countries like Switzerland connect production, farmer livelihoods, and environmental protection via multifunctionality (except the US) (Potter and Burney, 2002; Schenk et al., 2007; Wilson, 2007). New Zealand, on the other hand, divorces agricultural and environmental policy. The Resource Management Act of 1991 decentralizes environmental decision making to regional councils in New Zealand (Davies, 2009; Lawrence and Campbell, 2014; Valentine et al., 2007). The new governance structures combined with liberalised economic rules shift the governance power into industry hands like the audit schemes governed by supermarkets (Campbell et al., 2012) and the dairy cooperative Fonterra's a voluntary anti-water pollution document (Blackett and Le Heron, 2008).

## 6. Methods

Our interviews (almost 200 interviews conducted between 2002 and 2011) originated in five previously unrelated research projects. Only after we began collaborating on the larger Rural Futures<sup>ii</sup> project in New Zealand did the theme of autonomy emerge as something cross-cultural. We then re-examined the interviews with an iterative, qualitative approach to explore expressions of autonomy. In a sense, we simply asked, What is going on here?

In Switzerland, Forney conducted 64 interviews with full time dairy farmers (including a few beef farmers in the French speaking part of Switzerland) over four projects between 2002 and 2009 (the interviews are designated as "CH xxx" - CH is the international abbreviation for Switzerland).<sup>iii</sup> While focused on specific topics and independently developed, all four projects explored aspects of farmer's identities. In Switzerland, the focus was on farmers' ethos, self-representations and adaptation to a new political framework (Droz and Forney, 2007; Droz et al., 2009; Forney, 2010, 2012). In New Zealand, we used a targeted snowball sample drawn from election rolls of self-identified farmers; we conducted 113 interviews involving 134 people and 185 farm properties in five New Zealand regions between 2009-2011 (designated as "NZ xxx").<sup>iv</sup> Our interviews focused on land use change in New Zealand over the last thirty years. For the most part, we interviewed sheep, cattle, and dairy farmers.

All interviews were conducted with the head(s) of the farm, sometimes including spouses, family members, or others involved in the farm management - in

some cases these were not the owners of the land including leaseholders, sharemilkers<sup>v</sup> and managers.

While a diverse and large data set, this paper benefits from a bricolage quality given the diversity in scope and geography of projects included. In point of fact, this article derives as an almost after thought of the intended projects. Yet, the parallels (and divergences) around the idea of autonomy overwhelmed concerns of bringing them together. The role of autonomy as employed by food sovereignty and other peasant organisations in agriculture as a force for authentic agriculture prompted us to investigate those same narratives in our own interview data. While we recognize that the combination of disparate research projects brings its own issues (rigor, different project objectives) we adopted the bricolage attitude and aimed to “construct our research methods from the tools at hand” (Kincheloe, 2005: 324). For us those tools at hand were the opportunity to work together collaboratively, previously completed research interviews on related projects, and a shared interest in autonomy.

The Swiss interviews were already coded according to the initial research aims. For this paper, this coding has been re-examined and re-interpreted in order to identify subcategories of autonomy. For the New Zealand interviews, the first coding focused on adaptation of farm strategies to shocks (economic, political, geographic and environmental). This initial coding has been reexamined, looking for the diversity in the expressions of autonomy. After developing a working theoretical idea of autonomy in farming, we reanalyzed the previously collected interview data according to the themes outlined below.

## **7. Farmer Expressions of Autonomy**

Farmers, regardless of national context, emphasized autonomy (as an expression and a kind of performance) as an important virtue and tool. While autonomy’s importance may not hold everywhere we explore the comparisons between farmers in a highly regulated context (Switzerland) and a highly unregulated context (New Zealand). In essence, New Zealand’s and Switzerland’s agricultural policies privilege different practices of farming as real farming. Do farmers’ expressions of autonomy and their farming selves indicate what real farming is to them? When asked about what they like and value in being farmers, 74 percent of the Swiss farmers mentioned their autonomy (being one’s own boss, freedom in time management) (FOAG, 2005). In a 2002 survey of New Zealand dairy farmers, “The most highly ranked reason for being a farmer was to achieve a “high cash surplus” (91.1%), with “being their own boss” at 87.7 percent” (Pangborn, 2009:2). Given that New Zealand assumes government regulations only interfere with productivity, the simple interpretation of this data might describe farmers as economic entrepreneurs. But, given our interviews, we argue that farmers interpret that cash surplus as a way to insure autonomy - they farm to retain autonomy and farming for cash surplus helps maintain that autonomy (Niska et al., 2012).

Drawing on Berlin, Illich (1976, 1978) and the farming self (section 4), we explore three interpretations of autonomy - two illustrating Berlin's positive freedom – *freedom to* – or Illich's interpretation as the desire and ability to govern oneself (Christman, 2011), and a third that provides negative evidence for the first two. The third category illustrates Berlin's *freedom from* in dialogue with *freedom to*. The first explores how farming allows a good lifestyle with access to the outdoors ("outside in New Zealand"), planning their schedules and organizing their work and rural livelihoods. The second describes autonomy as "being one's own boss" - especially in opposition to non-farming work that is often conceptualised as "the office" or inside. These are the *freedom to* categories and Swiss and New Zealand farmers sound relatively similar. Lastly, we discuss the contradictions of some farmers' expressions of autonomy, what they would like *freedom from* and the obvious constraints related to (environmental) regulations, banks, debt and industry demands. Here we compare and contrast the experiences farmers in both countries.

### 7.1. *Autonomy as Lifestyle*

When farmers discuss autonomy, they often refer to an expression of freedom and independence to structure their own life often with a celebration of living closer to nature and more rurally (Niska et al., 2012). Here they emphasise their everyday life and practices (e.g., scheduling a holiday or choosing to do more fencing versus knocking off for the day). After the obvious expressions of making a profit or enough to maintain a proper livelihood (that often resembles Western middle class expectations) farmers like the control over their daily and bodily schedules. Above all, these expressions of autonomy privilege the flexibility that a family business in farming provides.

Said one sheep and cattle farmer in New Zealand, "[W]hat I enjoy about it is that there's no, that you can, to degrees, organise your time... yeah, you can organise your time. I enjoy being outside... [I] wouldn't enjoy being in an office or if I was in an office I'd want to make enough money that I [had] the whole weekend off" (NZ033, Sheep, North Canterbury, 62, male). This farmer's sentiment is of valuing a freedom to do something - farming allows him to be free where an office job would have been a constraint on that freedom. He also illustrates that the pursuit of money equates with the pursuit of leisure or autonomy. This farmer sees farming as the only way he can have such autonomy - only if a non-farm job could offer a guarantee of similar freedom of schedule and leisure would it even be worth considering. One sheep and beef farmer from New Zealand mentioned, "I'm getting maximum enjoyment out of what we're doing now by being flexible, by, you know, simply having kids the age they are and us having the flexibility, we've done a bit of travel with them in the last few years and... It's just bloody brilliant" (NZ081, Sheep, Hawkes Bay, 52, male). The ability to create a spontaneous family day resonates as an important key to farmer autonomy. Similarly one Swiss dairy farmer valued his ability to take free days to go skiing with his daughter that an office job could never accommodate. "On the other hand, in a factory, on Friday night you're finished... You wouldn't go to work on Sunday, would you?vi" (CH002, Dairy, Fribourg, 30s, male)

So farmers emphasise the ability of spending time with children and family afforded by farming. On the other hand, farming often requires uninterrupted work with few holidays. Working a Sunday is not a constraint, though - it's part of the job - a job and lifestyle that does not constrain certain behaviours to certain columns of the Gregorian calendar. This middle-aged Swiss beef farmer, a former factory worker, compares the two conditions:

I did both: I worked in town, the factory, so, and have been a farmer. The one who didn't do both can't know. He'd say 'He's got holiday! He's got...' But when the bell rings and you've got ten minutes for your lunch and the bell rings again and you've got to go back to work... You've really got to go, you can't say: 'I'd rather do that this afternoon.' You've got to be there, no discussion. It's a crazy life the one of the workers today.<sup>vii</sup> (CH109, Beef, Neuchâtel, 40s, male)

For most of the farmers – and not just owners - autonomy was characteristic of the lifestyle of farming. Even in split ownership situations common in NZ dairy, farmers express the importance of independence. As a young Southland dairy farmer mentioned, “[T]he majority equity partner . . . well, just leaves me to it, which . . . is why I took it [in] the first place because they said to me ‘I’ll just leave ya to it’, and that’s what I liked” (NZ001, Dairy, Southland, 26, male). In his case, he moved from a part of the country he loved and never anticipated leaving (the North Island) to a part he had previously considered off limits because of the colder temperature. The pull of autonomy broke both of those preconceptions. In the specific case of sharemilking in New Zealand, the experience of autonomy in the day-to-day work is central as well. The fact that the sharemilker is accountable to a landowner doesn't alter those feelings: “[Y]eah, things are slower to happen, but you don't get that feeling of someone hanging around looking over your shoulder, you know... [S]omeone picking and niggling at you” (NZ051, Dairy, Waikato, 38, male). Constraints and limitations to this liberty are generally despised. In contrast, New Zealand sheep farmers perceive the daily routine of milking cows negatively. As a New Zealand, female sheep farmer put it,

[A]t that stage we had the choice, we could have borrowed lots of money and convert [our farm] into dairy. We had three little kids and both [of us] had worked on dairy farms as part of our university degrees. I quite like cows and he likes cows[, but] we don't like the time table of dairy-farming dads away early in the morning and when you have got little kids – we... thought, *No we are not going to convert*, we don't, I am not keen on the lifestyle. (NZ104, Sheep, Southland, 46, female)

For those sheep farmers, dairy farming's day-to-day life would have been a constraint on their freedom to. Sheep farmers and many non-farmers view dairy farming, particularly the daily milking, as monotonous. Most dairy farmers wouldn't agree and don't see the specific tasks as a problem or a constraint on their day-to-day

enjoyment. This apparent opposition between sheep and dairy definitions of autonomy show that in different contexts, with different farming practices, the ideal of control in the work is deeply rooted in farmers' subjectivity

Beyond the divergences related with contextual existing structures, farmers from both countries interpret similarly their autonomy as something unique among professions. This Swiss dairy farmer articulates a more nuanced interpretation:

I have the feeling that farmers are a very special kind... they don't easily fit into the system, because they are independent, but... Yes, we're independent, but it's really different, even from others who are self-employed or the boss in a factory, don't you agree? We're independent while having very strict obligations. But, we can still allow ourselves some liberties....<sup>viii</sup> (CH118, Dairy, Neuchâtel, 50-60, male)

This Swiss dairy farmer echoes "farming as a way of life" (Vanclay, 2004) or what Newby (1979) wrote over 30 years ago, "farming never can be just another job – [but] an inimitable life experience" (p. 101).

The experience of liberty is essential in Berlin's and Illich's definition of autonomy, as they characterize a specific type of the freedom and control over one's work, which lead us to a second aspect of farmer's autonomy.

## 7.2 To Be One's Own Boss

The phrase: "to be one's own boss"<sup>ix</sup> sums up a second major experience of farmers' freedom to. This dairy farmer said it best: "I like being my own boss. I can't work for anybody else. I don't enjoy working for anybody else because I think I can do things better ... So I don't like working for other people, I don't like being told what to do" (NZ014, Dairy, Southland, 45, male). To be "one's own boss" refers to the sense of control and responsibility to make decisions concerning the farm both in the normal running of the business and at a more strategic level:

Being free to make your own decisions I guess and in my case, I... I like the challenge of planning and changing the farm from sheep or whatever to another land use, the challenge, I like a challenge probably of developing things" (NZ006, Dairy, Southland, 68, male).

This strong valuation of being "one's own boss" echoes the ideal of the individual family farm that characterizes modern western agriculture (Gasson et al., 1988; Servolin, 1989). In this, and despite deep cultural differences and huge geographical distance, the two countries followed a related, if not identical, historical evolution.

Self-employment often presumes the ability to decide, but not always. Even those with bosses, as long as it's not a relationship of domination, perceive that empowerment enables a sense of autonomy as illustrated by this couple (emphasis ours), the male speaking:

[B]oth my partners live in Wellington. And ...they don't have close supervision of me. I'm very answerable... in terms of the accounts and cash positions. But day-to-day I do whatever I like. I mean... in the big picture I'm always answerable to 'em. But...but actually...I control information to quite a large degree. . . . And ... I'm quite different to your average dairy farmer in that way. You know, I...*I haven't got a hook-up about owning the whole thing myself. I don't give a rat's. So long as I got control ...I actually don't care. I wanna farm, but actually I don't care whose name's on the ownership paper.* (NZ030, Cattle, North Canterbury, 45, Male)

Thus autonomy is relatively unrelated to actual ownership of the land and/or of the farm business, but also highly dependent upon the personalities involved and the particular situations of the property. Those that have a boss or board of trustees often emphasize the level of independence they do have in their position - they *feel* like their own boss to some extent and that's enough to preserve a feeling of autonomy. The example of a male New Zealand sheep farmer who sold his farm and now has to report to a board is illustrative:

And I'd say...whereas before you wouldn't have to...not answerable to anybody before...but now I just need to let people know...they need to know what I've done...and why... But...well, they've got some trust in me. And they basically do...they leave me to it (NZ066, Sheep, Manawatu, 61, male).

By selling to a board, the farmer gained security at the cost of the ability to make all decisions outright. His brother, on the other hand, insisted on keeping his half of the family farm and continues to run it independently. These remarks can be verified in both national contexts. However, Swiss farming offers very few examples of farmers being not self-employed. If land and farm structures leasing is common, farm managers generally own their business. New Zealand farming however can be characterized, with more diverse repartitions of ownership and responsibilities, as illustrated by "sharemilking" contracts.

And it's not just being one's *own* boss. A Swiss dairy farmer discusses the limitation to his autonomy that would result from having staff, although he would still be "the boss": "No! No staff! I'd rather give some work to contractors. I'm not the kind of person to work with staff. ... I know what I do, I know how it's done. I'm not good at... delegating... I know... Having staff, I'm still the boss, but it's not the same anymore"<sup>x</sup> (CH012, Dairy, Fribourg, 30s, Male). Like Nettle et al.'s (2011) research in Australia, the idea of controlling staff or working for someone else without autonomy are difficult propositions.

Expressions of being one's own boss often come through using the word "control", which is another way to address the issue of self-determination, so important in Illich's (1976, 1978) understanding of autonomy. The corollary to that, of course, is not being in control or what Berlin terms *freedom from* - the freedom from constraints on autonomy or freedom.

### 7.3. *Challenges to Autonomy*

The ideal of farmers' autonomy is often addressed in a negative form, when farmers speak about what gets in the way, the limitations to their freedom and ability to control their farm or what Berlin might describe as what farmers want freedom from. These challenges to farmers' autonomy can be divided into three categories of relations with: the state and regulations, banks and financial organisations, and the industry or firms.

#### 7.3.1. Negative Autonomy - Regulatory Constraints

Swiss farmers spoke clearly about the tension between their aspirations and control. In many instances, the farmers said, "*they decide*", obviously frustrated because they would have liked to say "I". Farmers had no real control anymore; others did. The banks, policy makers, environmental agencies, auditors. They. Agricultural policy rules can be very detailed and constrain farmers' room to manoeuvre. Farmers describe the regulations as annoying, and government overreach because there are so many that they have become relatively meaningless. As a result, the regulations move away from their intent - environmental protection - becoming an unnecessary bureaucratic control mechanism: "Ok, we'll have to see how the agriculture evolves as well... Eventually, I don't know, they might cut something again, or... They almost lay a new law every other week! So, eventually they will set a new law that forbids us to pee in the garden!"<sup>xi</sup> (CH013, Dairy, Fribourg, 30s, male).

The substantial payment received by Swiss farmers from the State increases feelings of dependency and challenges the ideals of autonomy (for a French example, see Hervieu and Purseigle, 2008). Among Swiss farmers, the reception of state support bears the unofficial titles of "landscape civil servant" or "landscape gardener." Those names are moving from derogatory insults closer to a resigned reality. Furthermore, and on a more pragmatic level, the sanctions that could come from a mistake related to certain regulations could result in a stiff fine leading to an income shortfall, as this farmer says:

We're controlled, totally. And when the regulation inspector comes, we have to pay him. ... If you want to compare... a self-employed guy does not have a Damocles sword hanging over his head, ready to fall if... he didn't do something. For us, it is like that... Because we entered this direct payments system.<sup>xii</sup> (CH012, Dairy, Fribourg, 30s, Male)

In New Zealand, this kind of pressure from regulations is far weaker, but still increasing with the development of environmental standards by regional councils and an evolving audit culture (Campbell et al., 2011). Obstacles to farmers' autonomy related to the state or public offices are then often expressed when talking about dairying and the conversion to dairy. Numerous farmers mentioned the strengthening of environmental regulation.

No well they keep changing the rules, since I've been dairying they . . . we used to pump into something about the size of this table . . . and we had a floating pump and it would go straight out in the paddock and . . . that was good as gold, perfect. . . . [A]nd now you don't have to have something quite as big because the rules have changed again. . . . [Environment Southland's] trouble is, they don't actually know and they're making it up as they find out more and more. (NZ105, Dairy, Southland, 48, male)

And while there are changes to policy, for some there is a resignation about the necessary evil of regulation.

I mean we're all here to look after the land. We don't want to wreck the place. We don't want to have these streams green with muck and pollution so they [the council] have to be the watchdog control. There's the odd [farmer] who doesn't give a stuff and they ruin it for the rest of us but they're like the local police force, they, Environment South[land]. They've got a job to do and yeah, but you know dairying is intensive. . . . They can be little Hitlers though... (NZ106, Dairy, Southland, 39 y.o., male)

Similarly to the Swiss, New Zealand farmers tell stories about farmers who got fined for environmental misconduct, often related to their effluent management system. Besides, they evoke the potential for public condemnation that could result through noncompliance. No one wants to be in the local paper as a bad farmer.

### 7.3.2. Financial Constraints

In New Zealand, the strongest expression of dependency (a desire to be *free from*) is related to credit access and banks. Large scale, modern farming relies on large (primarily borrowed) capital investments. Another limitation to autonomy results then from the need to have credit; not only to pay existing interest, but also to be able to get new loans for new investments. In New Zealand, the high debt levels, especially among dairy farmers, result in clear pressures (MPI, 2013: 14). As one New Zealand dairy farmer (NZ114, Dairy, Southland, 48, male) explains, any imbalance between financial investments (shares in the co-op)<sup>xiii</sup> and the necessary equity can result in "knocking the banks' confidence."

In a more general way, another New Zealand farmer, after explaining everything he likes in farming, makes clear that his debt is a limitation to his autonomy (with a laugh): "Oh, yeah... living on the land's fantastic. An environment out here... is incredible, you know, it's nice and quiet. We're our own bosses... [S]ometimes I look around, everywhere I look I own it... [S]o it's good, it's a good feeling. Mmm, well, the bank owns it, I manage it" (NZ036, Sheep, North Canterbury, late 40s, male). This resignation to the bank's control could be explained in different ways. First, the New Zealand farmers do have bigger mortgages and more debt due to the scale of production (land and stock). In contrast, there are legal limits to farmers' debt levels in Switzerland. Secondly, New Zealand farmers well remember the

interest rates skyrocketing to more than 20 percent in the 1980s. Finally, because of the tax system, to have a mortgage on properties and houses is the norm in Switzerland. This is not the same in New Zealand where there is a historical expectation to have the chance to eventually own the farm outright. Altogether, these elements are indicators of two different contexts related to debt and mortgage.

### 7.3.3. Industry Constraints

Large scale, modern farming necessitates industrial integration. When you produce thousands of litres of milk or hundreds of lambs, you rely on an industrial system that implies constraints to farmers' autonomy. Many studies have described this process in relation to subsumption (Bowler, 1992; Friedmann, 1978; Woodhouse, 2010). The case of the dairy industry in New Zealand offers a puzzling example for the analysis of the relationship between farmers and the industry. New Zealand dairy's prosperity and Fonterra's complex identity characterize its international reputation. But New Zealand dairy farmers seem happy with their industry. The co-op nature and the success that allows good payouts result in a rather positive attitude toward their "dependency" (though a recent vote to erode the coop structure may change these feelings). Thus, the limitations to autonomy are seen as a commitment and a way to work together for the common good, rather than a form of submission. Thus, autonomy is constrained, but also enabled by the primary dairy company in New Zealand just as Fallon (1994) describes with paternalistic regulations. As an example, a New Zealand farmer who converted his sheep farm to dairy refers explicitly to the unity of the dairy industry as a strength:

[Y]ou know, the sheep farmers to my mind, in my experience, they think that they're... having a win if they sell their lambs for fifty cents more than the neighbour... You know that's the extent of the vision of getting ahead, um where as you know the Fonterra is just so, well you know when we converted it was just Southland Dairy Co-op so it was a smaller entity, but the ethos was the same and I mean it was all about a co-operative effort... (NZ115, Dairy, Southland, 51, male)

The implication in sheep farming in New Zealand is dominated by competition. And yet, many sheep farmers see the lifestyle of farming as far more beneficial and fulfilling than dairy at the farm level while the competition exists beyond the farm gate. Again we are confronted by the ambiguity of autonomy. At the same time that the dairy industry is a constraint, it paradoxically provides a freedom to by ensuring continuity in farming (Forney and Stock, 2014).

Farmers mention many limitations to their autonomy. While for some the possibility that milk might not be picked up was a huge industry (prior to Fonterra's formation) struggle toward financial viability, others mentioned the disorganization of the sheep and beef meat industry as a major flaw in the system. One farmer who shifted from sheep to deer production within a small co-op, when asked what the biggest crisis in farming they had faced, replied, "The [sheep] meat industry, mate..."

You have never met such a selfish, degenerate bunch of bastards in my life. They are, they're bordering on criminal" (NZ073, Deer, Manawatu, 63, male). And that was a sentiment expressed by many, being paralysed by things off the farm or wanting to be free from certain things. This New Zealand farmer answers what the most stressful part of farming is: "Probably the things that you've got no control over. Like the weather, the exchange rate, the markets – the three biggest areas of your farming you've got no control of any of them so you're basically living under the control of someone else really. You've got to be able to handle that" (NZ007, Sheep, Southland, 48, male). The ability to "handle that" is this back and forth of autonomy between *freedom to* and *freedom from*.

Autonomy is not an either/or proposition. As someone who quit farming described, the quality and benefit of farmers' autonomy is relative with many challenges:

Farmer: Many told me [after I quit], 'But you're not independent anymore.' I'm not... and why should I give a shit? Now, ok, [if you quit] you lose status, you're not self-employed, you lose the ability to make your own decisions...

Interviewer: Could this be some kind of illusion for the farmers?

Farmer: It is! Anyway, even if you've got the choice of being self-employed, you have to produce a specific amount of milk. You can do other things, but you're governed by laws, constraints from the state, constraints from the production as well... Somewhere it's an illusion, right... But [when you quit] you've lost your status. But on the other hand, you win in life quality; you'll be able to be with your family every week-end, you'll have your six weeks holiday.<sup>xiv</sup> (CH114, formerly Dairy, Neuchâtel, 30s, male)

## 8. Autonomy as a Social Tool

We have highlighted autonomy's value in understanding farmer identity, but also as a tool of navigating the relations of agriculture. This farming self involves the formation and evolution of an identity as a farmer in the midst of changing social, economic and ecological contexts. Farmers expressing the importance of autonomy in their work and livelihoods ranged from the 20s to 70s. While we cannot say x number of these kinds of farmers express this version of autonomy, it would be unfair to conclude that these expressions of autonomy resonate because of age or type of farming or size of farm; the same with farm ownership. Sharemilkers and farm managers enjoy autonomy in decision-making that we associate solely with farm ownership. Expressions of all three flavors of autonomy emerged from every region we interviewed in both in Switzerland and New Zealand. In New Zealand, those farmers expressing autonomy as an important virtue of farming did not come solely from one type of farming nor did one particular kind of autonomy predominate.

In conjunction with the farming self, autonomy serves not just as a value to protect and strive for, but as a way to become what one hopes to be. Autonomy, also,

we argue is a tool of social navigation – that autonomy is employed to help navigate changing social and economic contexts. Autonomy is used as a tool in three ways.

### 8.1 *Tool of identification*

Our farmers use and experience autonomy by taking the other - either from being the other (one who worked in an office building) or based on perceptions of the other (often the office worker). Thus, our farmers reinforce the notion of autonomy as a core value in farming. Inherent in this comparison to the other lie normative assumptions over what authentic or good farming is. Is a productivist farmer actually autonomous or simply captured by hegemonic models of agriculture? The contested notion of what is *actual* autonomy draws on Emery's (2013) discussion of actual independence. The individualism inherent in neoliberal understandings of entrepreneurship in agriculture conflates autonomy with profit. The farmers we interviewed, by emphasising concern and doing for their own bodies, their own schedules and time with their families and what they value privilege relationship including with their selves that demonstrate freedom (within constraints) - the ambiguity of autonomy (Böhm et al., 2010). Their doing of farming that privileges actual autonomy (Holloway, 2005) resists the expectations of the systems of productivism, of typical conception of good farming and make them moral actors in small, but important ways. The larger issues of agriculture, environmental health and care, etc. stem from these kinds of moral action that broaden solutions beyond technological and productivity measured only in commodity sales.

### 8.2. *Tool of navigation*

Autonomy becomes a tool to navigate and often disrupt the status quo. By articulating their decisions in a language of autonomy – “I’m doing this because it’s good for me, my body, my family, my land” - autonomy is doing, in Holloway’s (2005) conceptualization. This doing – doing in the face of freedom from makes autonomy a distinct tool to navigate the social world particularly in agriculture for these farmers. For Holloway, like van der Ploeg (2008), through work and doing – any doing and practice that resists the forces of the neoliberalisation project or Empire – farming “resists” productivist measures of success. These farmers are doing – embracing the practical negativity outlined by Böhm et al. (2010) - they are active and it is resistance, but in a positive self-constitution of living in a way they want to - creating room to manoeuvre. This interpretation and mobilization of doing agriculture “Seeks to transform life itself, not just the closed circuits of state power” (Böhm et al., 2010: 22) thus enacting a certain illustration of a farming self that is understood to be better than other ways of doing agriculture.

### 8.3. *Tool of buffering*

Farmers often complain about the changing rules or the changing playing field - that their inability to act stems from a culture of unknowing - what Sandra Steingraber (2010) might describe as the “confines of ambiguity.” That

impermanence, felt in other walks of life, but rarely as acutely as in agriculture, gives light to the use of autonomy as a tool that helps navigate and buffer one within the ambiguity of regulatory, audit and market fluctuations not to mention changing tack based on shifts in climatic and political winds. This female farmer summed it up well:

I think, it's asking a lot to the farmers. Every 4-5 years, they're asking us to make shift on one side or the other... There is no other profession where you have such radical shifts. We are not master of our destiny at all. We are at the mercy of what the politicians want. My husband tells me: We are lucky because we didn't invest in our buildings. We didn't build a new farm, we didn't invest... [You do not have a lot to pay...] No we don't... we're very flexible. (CH214, Dairy, Jura, 30s, female).

She is saying something pretty interesting regarding autonomy as a tool to buffer change. The farming self both values autonomy and can use autonomy to navigate these often contested and difficult relationships – like the NZ farmer that struggled with staff that came with shifting to dairy farming.

### *9. Conclusions: Autonomy and the authentic farming self*

The farming self is that part of a farmer's identity that allows them to evolve with those changing contexts. It explains why farmers in Switzerland and New Zealand sound familiar for they are employing autonomy as a tool that takes in the changes in time and place, yet allows them to, over time, continue to find solace in calling themselves "Farmers." Thus whose name is on the paper can not matter in one's identity and it's not the particular farm it's the entirety of farming. The farming self mediates the farmer as person with the field of agriculture that is contextual based on geography, industry, market indices, politics, and community dynamics. As our interviews show, the farming self lies at the heart of autonomy – both are negotiated and serve as tools of negotiation. Autonomy, its perception, utilization, and value thus help weather storms both literal and financial and help farmers retain a sense of farming self. Despite challenges and ambiguity, one can still call oneself a farmer, proudly at that. Though there may be significant constraints on both decisions and practices (Emery, 2013) – challenges can be met.

The everyday doings of farming for farmers is a political act with moral consequences for how they see themselves and their farms. Thus the doing, the enactment of autonomy to preserve dignity as a farmer, can also lead to "better" farming – that allows creativity and tinkering – between the tension of freedom to and freedom from (on tinkering see Winance, 2010). The notion of a more authentic farming self that recognizes a natural me as well as a generalized environmental other, like Emery's analysis of independence in farming, reveals autonomy as relational and embodied (Whatmore, 1997). While the farming self is shaped by the other of productivism, it also revels in the (im)possibility of a pure autonomy thus exhibiting in this context the ambiguity of autonomy (Böhm et al., 2010). But as Nettle et al. (2011) show, when autonomy is taken seriously as a trait to be fostered, a

relationship, not just for the worker or employer, but the farm and the wider relationships of satisfaction, well-being and autonomy in action can improve people's lives. By farming in a way that privileges the wholeness of self, rather than succumbing to the destructive tendencies of neoliberal selfhood, the farming self strives for agricultural dignity in a world defined by commodification.

We hope to have demonstrated that autonomy as a tool opens new avenues of research in the understanding of localized farming selves facing global challenges. Farmers' autonomy in practice takes many shapes, including resistance to market logics, agri-environmental schemes, and checklist auditing, the embrace of cooperative mobilization, or the prioritization of non-economic goals in farm strategies. However, autonomy as a tool is related to authenticity in farming, as an aspiration to balance an ideal self and the actuality of the farm. While this connection can lead to contrasting outcomes, our work suggests that the possibility of autonomy is a key element in farmers' readiness to engage new pathways in their practices. In this sense, researching autonomy might contribute, as a performative academic practice (Gibson-Graham, 2008), to the enactment of autonomy as a way of creating room for consciousness and responsibility in the development of a more sustainable agriculture.

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<sup>i</sup> Our discussion of the farming self also brings to mind a recent internet trend of the farming selfie or the felfie (See both <http://farmingselfie.com> and <http://blog.oup.com/2014/02/felfie-farmer-selfie>). While humorous at one level, the images of farmers around the world hint at strong issues of identity and relations discussed in this paper.

<sup>ii</sup> The Rural Futures project, directed by AgResearch aims to create tools for policy makers on how farmers make decisions in response to crises in the form of a computer model. The authors both participated in one aspect of the project charged with interviewing farmers about their responses to various shocks.

<sup>iii</sup> The four projects were on 1) farm succession (Canton of Fribourg); 2) farmers' professional reconversion (Canton of Neuchâtel); 3) landscape representations (Cantons of Vaud and Neuchâtel); 4) farmers' adaptations to political and economic change (Cantons of Vaud, Fribourg and Neuchâtel).

<sup>iv</sup> The regions were selected intentionally to represent five different types of challenges experienced in New Zealand agriculture over the last 30 years with an emphasis on recent experiences of weather crises. The five regions were (with reason for choosing that region in parentheses): Southland (Conversion from Sheep to Dairy and Good climate); North Canterbury (Conversion from sheep to dairy and Irrigation); Manawatu (Sheep and Flooding); Waikato (Dairy and Flooding); and Hawkes Bay (Drought and Inability to convert). All interviews were recorded and transcribed by professional transcriptionists and coded and analyzed via Nvivo.

<sup>v</sup> Sharemilkers in New Zealand own their herd of cows, but do not own the land or milking sheds required to milk those cows. Sharemilkers often enter multiple year contracts with dairy farm owners that split the profits in some way depending on the experience and track record of the sharemilkers.

<sup>vi</sup> The Swiss interviews were done in French. The quotations have been translated to be as close as possible to the original expressions. We are very aware though of the difficulties posed by translating such an oral and localised language. The biggest problem lies in the translation of the French word *indépendant* that means both independent and self-employed depending on context. The original quote is: « Voilà quand même... Nous les gros jours, on fait plus d'heures qu'un autre, mais l'hiver si on a... Je suis allé skier avec la petite-là, une fois que tu devais venir. Je dis, celui qui est à l'usine... rien à foutre qu'il fait beau tant et qu'il y ait un voyage de neige... Tu vas bosser et terminé, donc... Tandis qu'en usine, le vendredi soir on a fini, quoi... Tu ne vas pas bosser le dimanche ou bien... »

<sup>vii</sup> Originally in French: "C'est une volonté... (...) d'indépendance. J'ai fait d'autres espèces de boulot en ville moi. J'ai jamais aimé les chefs. (rire) On est indépendant ou on ne l'est pas. C'est tout ça qui... Des fois on se dit : » On aurait mieux fait de bosser là. Lui il a fini, il a déjà les vacances... Moi j'ai fait les deux, j'ai bossé en ville, l'usine, tout et bossé paysan. Celui qui n'a pas fait les deux, il ne peut pas dire. Il dira : « Ouais, il a ses vacances, il a... » Mais quand ça sonne et puis 10 minute pour manger et ça re-sonne et puis il faut aller bosser... faut être là, j'entends. On ne peut pas dire : 'ouais je vais vite...' cet après-midi là. Il faut être là et c'est prêt. C'est aussi une vie de fou un ouvrier aujourd'hui."

<sup>viii</sup> Originally in French: « J'ai l'impression que les paysans, c'est une matière bien à eux, c'est des être bien en eux... Ils ne seront pas facile à mettre dans le système, parce que c'est des indépendants, mais... Oui on est indépendant, mais vraiment à part des autres, même d'un indépendant, d'un patron d'une usine, vous êtes d'accord ? On est indépendant en ayant des obligations très strictes, mais on peut se permettre des choses, des libertés... »

<sup>ix</sup> In Switzerland and in French, the word "chef" (boss) is frequent, but the saying "être le maître à bord" (to be the master aboard the ship) is common as well.

<sup>x</sup> Originally in French: "Non pas d'employé : je préfère donner du travail à faire à des entreprises. J'ai pas le caractère à travailler avec un employé. (...) Je sais ce que j'ai fait, je sais comme c'est fait. Je ne suis pas assez... déléguer... (...) J'aime bien être maître sur le bateau quoi. Je sais bien qu'un employé, c'est encore moi le maître, mais ce n'est plus la même chose."

<sup>xi</sup> Originally in French: "Bon, il faut aussi voir comment l'évolution de l'agriculture tourne... Tout d'un coup, je ne sais pas, ils nous coupent de nouveau quelque chose, ou bien... Ils nous pondent bientôt tous les 15 jours une lois, donc... Alors... (...) Je ne sais pas, tout d'un coup ils nous instaurent une loi qu'on a même plus le droit d'aller pisser au coin du jardin..."

<sup>xii</sup> Originally in French: "On est contrôlé pour tout, complètement tout et quand le contrôleur il vient, c'est nous qu'on le paie. (...) Si tu veux comparer les choses... un indépendant il a pas une épée de Damoclès au-dessus de lui qui est prêt à tomber si... si un jour il n'a pas fait quelque chose. Nous c'est comme ça... Parce qu'on est rentré dans ce système de paiements directs."

<sup>xiii</sup> Farmers' commitment to the industry takes a very concrete dimension through the purchase of shares in the co-op that give you the right to supply a related amount of milk.

<sup>xiv</sup> Originally in French. Again the meaning of "indépendant" challenges the translation (see note 8):

"Agriculteur: Parce qu'il y en a beaucoup qui disent, ouais, mais toi tu n'es plus indépendant. Ben non... et qu'est-ce que j'en ai à foutre ? A moment donné, c'est clair, tu perds un statut, ta profession d'indépendant, tu perds ton choix de prendre des décisions..."

JF Qui ne fait pas aussi un peu partie d'une certaine illusion chez le paysan ?

Agriculteur: Mais bien sûr. De toute façon, même que tu as le choix d'être indépendant et tout, tu es tenu à livrer une certaine quantité de lait. Tu peux aussi faire autre chose, mais tu es régis par des lois, des

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contraintes qui sont étatisées, des contraintes par la production aussi...Quelque part c'est aussi illusoire, c'est juste... Mais tu dis tu perds ton statut, en revanche tu vas gagner en qualité de vie : tu vas pouvoir être avec ta famille tous les week-ends, tu vas pouvoir te payer tes 6 semaines de vacances.”