We should all have the right to link ourselves more directly to the land

Jan Douwe van der Ploeg

Foreword

This article aims to reflect on the relations between ‘man and the land’ (to use an old fashioned turn of phrase). Today, the relations between people and the areas that feed them are almost non-existent. There are structural gaps between the two and an absence of physical and social relations. These relations have been replaced by exclusion, alienation, misunderstanding, fear, annoyance and ignorance. As consumers we are effectively (and often physically) excluded from the places where production takes place. Instead we are informed through advertisements and public relations campaigns painting rosy virtual images that are quite at odds with the realities in the fields, stables, slaughterhouses and food industries. Farmers are, in a way, equally excluded. When doing their work, they have to follow the script defined by the agro-industrial conglomerates that supply them with their tools and technologies and to whom they have to deliver the raw materials they produce. And they are mostly very well aware that in wider society there is not much comprehension of, let alone much appreciation for, their role. The consumer is an abstract entity for the producer, just as the ways in which the producer uses the land and living nature in order to produce food is a mystery for most consumers. ‘Man and the land’ are separated: the ties that once bound them together are broken.

For sure, this mutual abandonment has been convenient and many of us were not at all uncomfortable with it. There is no question about that. But increasingly this ‘separation of convenience’ is falling into disarray. Food scares, financial and ecological crises, unemployment, loneliness and dissatisfaction are all potential reasons for redesigning this relationship.

In discussing the relations between people and the land (or at least some aspects of such relations) this article builds on three modest points of departure. The first one is an Italian research programme on pluriactivity. This programme, designed and supervised by Flaminia Ventura and Pierluigi Milone from Perugia University (and funded by Rete Rurale) included two large surveys. One among was ‘part time farmers’ who work both on their own farm and in another occupation (the latter often generating the bulk of their income), the other was among farmers whose partner has a job outside the farm and whose income is, again, important for the overall family income. I played a role in this research, helping design the methodology. A second source is my link to China. Over the last years I have been
confronted here with a specific form of pluriactivity, which in China is mostly referred to as 'multiple job holding'. Thirdly, there are the discussions with my students: general discussions about the difference between commodities and non-commodities and the relevance of this difference. More specifically we discussed why it matters whether carrots are self-produced or obtained in the supermarket. Such discussions help, as I hope to show in this short contribution, to distinguish the things that matter in the overwhelming confusion of everyday life. They also help to see that radical steps forward may well be rooted in, and depart in a practical way from, that same confusion.

1. From deprived to privileged

For many decades, part-time farming has been overwhelmingly defined in negative terms. A part-time farm is not a full-time farm and by extension it is seen as a farm that fails to be a real (i.e. full-time) farm. Equally, a part-time farmer is usually perceived as a failing farmer: one who is unable to develop his or her farm into a ‘real’ full-time farm. As a result the part-time farm is viewed as a temporary phenomenon. A relic from the past, destined for extinction.

Nowadays, it is clear that part-time farming is a permanent and durable phenomenon, that it is not merely an expression of a transitional process towards an agriculture that is fully geared towards, and sustained through, the global markets for agricultural products - a market which has no place for so-called ‘uncompetitive’ farms.

Part-time farming is essentially about combining farming and doing another job outside of the farm. A part-time farmer dedicates part of his available working time to the farm, another part to another job. This might be done for many different reasons. The farms we are talking about might differ considerably, just as the outside jobs can differ substantially. Alongside highly appreciated jobs that generate considerable incomes (an army officer, university professor or lawyer), there will be seemingly modest ones (wage-labour on other, large farms; taxi-driving; etc.) with low levels of remuneration. Thus, there are at least four sources that produce heterogeneity among part-time farms: the farms differ, the outside jobs differ, the reasons why combinations are constructed differ. The fourth is the interactions between these factors that will further increase this heterogeneity.

In essence, part-time farming involves actively constructing a combination of different activities (farming activities on one’s own farm and the outside job). If we want to understand the background, meaning and dynamics of this combination we have to go beyond socio-Darwinist views that see the world as a place in which only highly specialized species can win the struggle for survival. Equally we have to look beyond purely economic dimensions.

When asked about their motivations, part-time farmers stress that their choice (of combining a farm and an outside job) are not determined by economic need. Thirty-eight percent argue that it is a “personal choice”, whilst 60% indicate that they wanted to “preserve the family farm” (only 2% refer to an “economic necessity”). Equally, part-time farming is generally not due to a lack of alternatives. It is remarkable that 41% of the surveyed part-time farmers finished secondary school and as many as 18% have a university education. These people will have
had (and probably still have) alternatives - but they make a choice for part-time farming. Admittedly, personal choice and the willingness to continue the familial patrimony might very well contain economic aspects. The point, though, is that the reasons given reflect consciously made choices. Part-time farming is not perceived, by the actors involved, as being economically determined. It is an actively made choice.

When asked why they do not dedicate all their (working) time to the farm, nearly all part-time farmers (78%) indicate that farming by itself would not render enough income. In a superficial type of analysis this could be interpreted as being the main, and economic, explanation of part-time farming. However, such an interpretation would be wrong. Because, if farming renders insufficient income, then why do these people not sell their property and dedicate themselves to the other job?

The part-time farmers were asked to compare their situation with that of non-farmers living in the same area. The part-time farmers see that non-farming rural residents enjoy the same range of benefits as they do but miss one crucial ingredient: they are not farming, and this has several aspects. This is linked to the quality of food consumed by the two groups. Forty eight per cent of the part-time farmers think the food they consume is of better quality than that consumed by non-farming rural dwellers. Twenty-nine per cent think that the two groups consume the same quality of food and only 5% think the quality of their food is worse (the rest were 'don't knows'). The gap between positive and negative responses to this question was 43 (48% - 5%). Part-time farmers also believe a farm is a better place for children to grow up on. Space for the children was the second-most mentioned difference with the difference between better and worse being 20%). This was immediately followed by 'the house'. Farming activities (and the associated contact with nature) provide extra value
to the part-time farm as a place to live (a difference of 19%). Next came the absence of stress: part-time farmers perceived farming as a stress buster (the difference here was 17%). Other factors were access to services and social contacts (both with a difference of 12%). Those involved in part-time farming do not feel isolated—having a foot in two different worlds opens more opportunities for them and allows them to relate to others.

The smallest difference relates to overall income. Most part-time farmers think that their own income is equal to that of non-farming rural dwellers. Some think it is better and a smaller part thinks it is worse (the difference is here just 4%).

Thus, the overall self-image of part-timers is far from one of deprivation or lack of choices. Part-time farmers see themselves as having equivalent (or slightly higher) incomes as non-farmers in the same area. Beyond these economic considerations they tend to think that they have a better place to live and to raise their children; they are in a more comfortable position when it comes to access to services and the possibility to relate to others (much research has shown that these are important ingredients of the quality of life); they are better able to deal with stress and, most of all, they consider that they eat better quality food.

### 2. The centrality of food quality

In a way it is remarkable that out of all these possible differences, the quality of food was the most mentioned. Yet, at the same time it is perhaps no surprise at all. It is a direct reflection of the deep distrust in the quality, security and safety of the food supplied by food industries and large retail organizations. Against this background being able to produce (part of) your own food can be seen as an enormous (and increasingly recognized) privilege. And this is not limited to Italy (or Europe) alone. In ongoing research in China we have found exactly the same motive. Although the small farms (there are 250 million of them in China) are only a part (albeit it strategic one) of the assets of multiple job holding families, the main reason used to explain the importance of the farm is the same as in Italy. The quality and safety of self-produced food is considered to be superior to food processed by agro-industries and distributed through large retail organizations. In China, preserving the family farm is also important for a number of other reasons: the farm is understood as buffer (as line of defence) strategically required in periods of crisis (e.g. when industrial employment is suddenly reduced); it is also part of a decentralized system that holds food reserves.

It is not just rural dwellers who are actively focused on food quality. The inhabitants of the large cities and big metropolises (such as Beijing, Shanghai, etc.) share the same aspiration and in some places this translates into a variety of new forms of urban agriculture. Some of these really represent novel ways of linking both people to people and people to the land. Little Donkey Farm (a cooperative located north of Beijing) is one of several examples. Here city people can obtain direct access to a piece of land and, importantly, to the required knowledge (which they often completely lack). Farmers (mostly elder ones) are part of the co-operative and they transfer their knowledge, through a variety of mechanisms, to the new ‘part-time farmers;’ city people wanting to produce part of their food. The co-operative also provides the basic infrastructure (access roads, demarcation of parcels, water, manure, seeds, etc.) and beyond this it also provides an important and friendly meeting place.
Equally, there are several new mechanisms for distributing food produced on small part-time farms in the countryside to the big urban concentrations. Glass-noodles are a good example. Produced from sweet potatoes (through a lengthy process of processing that requires a lot of labour and high levels of craftsmanship) these glass noodles travel from their villages of origin towards the cities (often through the circuits of migrant labourers). They are a highly appreciated gift during the Spring Festival. In short: the produce of part-time farmers has a reach that may extend far beyond the limits of the local.

3. Part-time farmers and the wider panorama

From these examples I argue that part-time farming is not about poverty and deprivation. Incomes are the same and beyond that there are considerable non-monetary advantages. Part-time farming often represents a choice for a more polyvalent life. In more general terms what we are witnessing here is a return of the 'link to the land'. Previously, an important characteristic of the peasantry (peasants were strongly tied to the land, because their land was what they had actively constructed: they loved their land because they had made it themselves into what it was), this link to the land is re-appearing here in a new form. Part-time farmers (at least many of them) are tied to the land, because it offers them a good place to live and to raise their children, because it offers them food that is far better than the food obtained through modern retail chains and a multitude of other reasons. This link to the land makes part-time farming into a continuous and resilient phenomenon. Young people raised on a part-time farm will be socialized in the values and probably opt, in the future, for a similar existence (if other conditions allow). Most part-time farmers do not see their way of farming as 'low grade.' When it comes to issues such as craftsmanship, innovativeness, access to credit, subsidies, services from professional organizations, etc. some 40%
of part time farmers believe that there is no difference between themselves and full-time farmers, although 45% to 50% indicate that full-time farmers are in an advantageous position.

Part-time farming might be a valuable option at personal level but how does it fit with broader constellations? Six per cent of the Italian sample of part-time farmers believed that they played a fundamental role in maintaining the territory in which their farm is located and 40% considered that they played an important role (equally 38% thought their role was of little importance and 15% that it was of no importance at all). The main contributions that they believe they make are related to the maintenance of the landscape (36%) and the health and quality of the produce products (28%). Twenty-two per cent consider part-time farming to be important for securing the volume of agricultural production and 13% consider it important for the development of other economic activities in the area.

4. ‘Full-time’ farming

The same research project also examined full-time farmers that are part of a pluriactive family. This means that at the level of the family part of the overall family income is earned from the farm, while another part is earned elsewhere. The man (or the wife) works in the farm (full time), whilst the partner works elsewhere. (The previous sections looked at the situation where the person who operates the farm combines farming and an outside job. Here the combination is at the level at the household as a whole).

Comparing these two groups is extremely helpful, I believe, because it shows that there is not a sharp boundary (neither conceptually nor empirically) between part-time and full-time farming. Semantically there may appear to be a clear division (almost a black and white division)- however, in real life there is far more continuity and the dissimilarities are quite gradual.

The first notable continuity is that these full-time farmers are almost as dependent as the part-time farmers on off-farm earnings in order to provide an adequate household income. The main data are summarized in table 1 win which the horizontal axis shows the contribution of the farm to the overall income at household level and the vertical axis the amount of time that the conduttore (the one who runs the farm) dedicates to the farm.

Table 1 clearly shows that there is no big divide between full-time and part-time farms when it comes to the contribution that the farm makes to overall household income. If we take all the part-time farms together (those in which the conduttore works for more, and less than, half his or her time on the farm), in 71% (the average of the lower two rows) of cases the farm only makes a marginal contribution to household income. On the full time farms this is 43%. Ironically, on the part-time farms where the conduttore dedicates more than half of his or her working time to the farm the situation is slightly better: in only 26% of these cases is the contribution marginal. Only 15% of full-time farms derive nearly all their income from the farm. In synthesis: the differences between full-time and part-time farms are only gradual.1 Most of these farms (be they full-time or part-time) can only be main-

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1 We may equally assume that over time there will be many changes to this configuration: part-time farms may become full-time, and vice versa. Such changes will depend very much on intra-household relations, work opportunities, administrative and fiscal regimes, etc.
tained (i.e. reproduced over time) through additional income generating activities located beyond the farm gate.

The argument that the differences between part-time and full-time farming are at best gradual is reflected in the opinions of full-time farmers themselves. On the whole they do not think that part-time farmers perform worse than themselves. Equally, 53% of them believe that part-time farmers play an important (or even fundamental) role in the area. They are seen as especially important for the maintenance of the landscape (37%), for the supply of high quality food (35%) and to maintain an acceptable level of production for the area as a whole (28%). It is telling that these full-time farmers are almost as likely to advice youngsters and/or family members to become a part-time farmer (17%) as to become full-time farmer (20%). Even more telling, probably, is that 38% would advice the next generation not to engage in farming in any way whatsoever. When it comes to the prospects for the future, 5% of these full-time farmers thinks that part-time farms have the best prospects compared to 24% for full-time farms. Notably 38% indicated that multifunctional farms have the best prospects (and 33% did not know). Thus, the essential choice is not between full-time or part-time farming (maybe this was the case in the past, but not anymore) - they are interchangeable expressions of one and the same difficult situation. The essential choice now, it seems, is about new ways forward, particularly the development of multifunctional farms.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contributo dell'azienda agricola al reddito familiare</th>
<th>Marginale</th>
<th>Significativo ma inferiore al 50%</th>
<th>Equivalente al 50%</th>
<th>Maggiore del 50%</th>
<th>Intorno al 100%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Full time</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;=50%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;50%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Table 1: Contribution to family income according to time dedicated to the farm.
5. The moral of the story

Having direct access to the land is increasingly seen as something of great value. It allows people to actively increase the quality of their lives. This can occur through many different mechanisms and results in a multiplicity of situations. However, the possibility of gaining such direct access is currently limited to specific minorities. Some grandsons and daughters might resettle in the small farm of their grandparents. They may take over their parents’ farm maintaining it as an attractive place to live, raise children, produce food and meet other people. Probably they will sell a part, maybe even a considerable part of their produce. This will help them to better face the harsh conditions that came with the economic and financial crisis. Others might be well-paid professionals, countering the stress of urban life by running a nice ‘hobby’ farm. And so on and so forth. There are many more social groups, though, who would also like direct access to some land, but they lack the mechanisms or resources to do so. I sincerely think this offers new opportunities for local politics (although the consequences will be felt at regional and national level). Local politicians should adopt policies of creating direct access to land for everybody who wants it. This will require tailor-made solutions – hence the need for local politics to find the most adequate local solutions. It will require creative new infrastructures (for accessibility, water, etc.). It will also require new patterns of cooperation and new meeting places. Farmers will be needed to show and teach to the others how to prepare the land and how to manure, plant and harvest it. A multiplicity of new Little Donkeys will emerge, adapted to other circumstances but always creating new linkages between farmers and urban people.

In synthesis: part-time farming carries the promise of an improved quality of life (especially when circumstances are difficult) and local attempts to bring part-time agriculture within the reach of everybody longing to engage in it, might well become an important lever in the wider processes of societal change that we are currently experiencing.

Abstract

The article reflects on the ‘link with the land’ which, once interrupted by the fordist industrialisation of production and life, is nowadays reappearing in increasingly new forms, lastly as the phenomenon of part-time agriculture. The latter, far from being just a passive consequence of poverty or lack of alternatives, represents a conscious choice towards a more plural life. The reflection starts from a survey in which part-time and full-time farmers have been asked about various aspects related to their work; it has emerged that there is no clear boundary between these two practices, whilst empirical differences are quite modest: the first important element of continuity is that the vast majority of full-time farmers, just as the part-time ones, need to earn money outside the farm in order to produce an income adequate to the household. In addition, there are many non-economic benefits of agriculture, recognised by both full-time and part-time farmers, but much more pronounced for the latter, strictly related to a direct link with the land and with the better quality of life it provides. The study
sheds light on how part-time farming is a continuous and resilient phenomenon, rather than a marginal one, which therefore deserves the attention of society and institutions, which should provide services and cognitive instruments for those who wish to come ‘back to earth’.

**Keywords**

Part-time agriculture, farm, countryside, back to earth, quality of life.

**Author**

Jan Douwe van der Ploeg
Wageningen UR
JanDouwe.vanderPloeg@wur.nl