



Choosing Self-Exploitation? Motivations for Taking Up Farming in Switzerland Coming from a Non-Agricultural Background¹

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¹ Cover picture: A young farmer explaining to an aspiring farmer some challenges, technicalities and tricks in taking over and managing a farm in Switzerland. Photo taken by the author in Meinier, October 2021.

Introduction

Farmers in Switzerland, as elsewhere, work more hours with less holidays and lower income than people in any other occupation with similar levels of training and education (OFAG 2020a). Especially since the market liberalisation turn of Swiss agrarian politics in the Nineties, the prices farmers are able to fetch for their products are often below production costs. The federal direct payments conditioned by the farm's contribution to the promotion of biodiversity and ecosystem health provide financial support to continue farming, but still many Swiss farmers also work outside their own agricultural business. Given the strenuous working conditions, added to the pressure of expanding farms for their rentability, it is no surprise that roughly one out of three farms, particularly smaller ones, have stopped their operations between 2000-2020 (OFAG 2020b). The financial problems affect mental health adversely, while the hard labour puts a strain on physical health (See for instance Droz, Miéville-Ott, and Jacques-Jouvenot 2012).

Provocatively, Yvan Droz and Jérémie Forney pose the question if farming in Switzerland is an occupation without future (2007), its sustenance relying on the farmer's willingness to engage in self-exploitation (Droz 2001, 3). The continued performing of this self-exploitation can be explained through a farmer or peasant ethos, which largely consists of the myth of the peasant as free entrepreneur, as an incarnation of the Swiss myth of self-sufficiency and as the family emblem, continuing the patrimony (Droz 2001).

However, despite the strenuous working conditions and economic pressures that generally characterise farming, there are some people who have become, or are seeking to become, farmers even without having grown up in a farming family. While continuing the family emblem and patrimony of the farm both for past and future generations is a core motivation for most farmers (Forney and Sutherland 2021, 74; Forney and Droz 2018, 66), this should be less the case for farmers without previous agricultural background. What is it then that motivates these new entrants to take up the farming occupation?

I conducted six semi-structured interviews with people who have become farmers or aspire to do so. Far from being a representative sample, I am curious whether and how the gathered data confirms, troubles or expands the peasant ethos outlined by Droz (2001). A similar research has been done in the Japanese context (Osawa 2014), offering a point of comparison. The discussion is situated in the small, near to absent (Forney 2013), body of social scientific literature on farmers in Switzerland.

New entrants' motivations; the peasant ethos revisited

Osawa researched the motivations for new entrants into agriculture in Japan, expecting them to pursue this lifestyle based on nostalgic ideas of the rural similar to the movement of solidarity communes and back-to-the-land tourism emerging in the later decades of the twentieth century (Osawa 2014). However, what he found was that new farmers' motivations were connected to a more individualistic path. Osawa grouped the farmers' reasoning under the desire for independence, an orientation to the present and future, and the pursuit of a simple lifestyle. Rather than comparing the motivations of the new entrant farmers in Switzerland to the neo-rural communes movement, I compare them with the dominant motivations, the ethos, of the general Swiss farming population, retrieved from the contemporary social science literature on Swiss farmers. What meanings and satisfactions does farming provide, or at least promise, to the new entrants?

The interviews lasted between 10-90 minutes and were conducted in various settings - drinking a coffee, sharing a meal, working on the farm, or calling over the phone. The interlocutors were diverse too: Sabrina² is doing a bachelor in agronomy and has the prospect of taking over a farm of a befriended farming couple together with her partner. Markus is in the process of taking over the farm of his newly-wed wife's parents, planning its transition to organic and regenerative agriculture. Also Fabian has taken over the farm from his wife's parents 25 years ago, and has been managing it biodynamically. Furthermore I talked to three young farmers at a collectively managed farm. Sandro has the status of employee but wishes to have a farm of his own one day. Léo and Salomé are both associates of the farm, engaged in the vegetable branch and the goat branch respectively. I furthermore had the chance to interact with two aspiring farmers from France who visited the farm at the same time as me to gather insights on the process of finding and managing a farm in Switzerland. All statements in quotation marks are translated from the Swiss German or French originals.

"You have to really want it!" Money is not the motivation

When asked what made him choose the farming occupation, Léo promptly answered that it was for the money. Everyone assembled in the farm's communal kitchen set into laughter, knowing this was a joke. The opposite is the case; most interlocutors stress how money is not the motivation, but farming is a deliberate choice and even wish for a simple lifestyle, as Osawa

² For privacy reasons, all names have been changed.

also found among Japanese new entrants (2014): “For these farmers, engagement in agriculture is an enactment of their personal beliefs” and they are consciously anti-capitalistic (2014, 79). Fabian expresses that “taking over a farm is a question of lifestyle, not of income”. Sabrina explains how, especially when you do not inherit a farm, which adds huge financial pressures, “you have to really want it [to farm], be in it a hundred percent. [...] In agriculture you make your hobby your job - otherwise you do not even have to start it”. The need for a simple lifestyle without “crazy holidays” or going out is also mentioned by Salomé and Léo. Léo adds that he does not even like holidays, they would make him feel impatient as he rather spends the time improving the farm. This statement relates to Fabian’s description of the ‘farmer type’: “they have this extreme bustling, active nature. It’s the type of people who would not be able to work less, that’s part of the lifestyle. Yes, the workload is so high that if you don’t want it, you stop.” Because the workload, which to Fabian is inherent to the farming lifestyle, is taken up voluntarily, even compulsively by the farmers due to their active character, he regards it as acceptable that farmers earn similarly to other skilled workers despite working double the hours.

Studying poverty among Swiss farmers, Contzen and Crettaz find that there is a disparity between farmer’s self-evaluation and an outsider view on farmer’s wealth (2019). Although more than a third of Swiss farms are experiencing financial difficulties over the years, most farmer families do not regard themselves as being poor (Contzen and Crettaz 2019; Contzen 2015). It is a part of the farmer’s ethics, a socialised phenomenon, to need less money because of a way of being in which there is no time for holidays or expensive hobbies (Contzen and Crettaz 2019, 410). The voluntary simplicity and adaptive preference can be regarded as a strategy to cope with the low financial returns, and as such even a prerequisite to not just enduring but enjoying the occupation. Farmers do not count their hours (Droz and Forney 2007, 69), and neither are they financially remunerated for them, requiring another system of validation. What are the (aspiring) farmers’ convictions, and what validates these convictions for them to be motivated and adapt to a lower income?

Being outside, diversity and the haptic component

In the Japanese context, new entrants to agriculture regarded their choice as a compromise between the necessity of earning a living and the wish to spend much of their time outside (Osawa 2014, 81). Rural life and the ability to experience the changing seasons are perceived as healthier and more humane than an urban life. A similar reasoning is found across the Swiss

interlocutors. What is valued in farming is being outside, working practically with nature which yields tangible results, and the diversity of tasks linked to the occupation. Additionally to expressing an affection for nature, the fascination with natural processes, animal and plant science, and the relationship between food and health are central motivators for choosing farming.

Salomé's story is illustrative of the longing for the haptic and practical elements that are satisfied by farming. While pursuing a Master's degree in the field of international agricultural development, she was increasingly disenchanted with her career prospects. She found herself too removed from the sites of development projects abroad and questioned her role as a Swiss privileged outsider. She reoriented herself to Switzerland and started a job in a local agricultural consultancy. After two months, she quit. She dreaded the full days sitting inside an office and in front of a screen and was longing for something even more practical and applied. In farming "you see what you do" which provides sense to the activity. Furthermore, Salomé deeply values "the soil-skin connection", which makes her feel grounded and alive. However, not everything people promise themselves from being a farmer comes true. Salomé is engaged in goat rearing and cheese-making, and spends more of her time inside the sterile, dark cheesery than outside. She expressed her disappointment about this several times during my visit on a sunny day, and rushed through lunch to be able to enjoy a coffee in the sun.

Due to his interest in health, Sandro first considered studying medicine, but understanding food and nutrition to be a fundamental component of human well-being, coupled with a love for plants and a wish for working outside, he enrolled for agronomy. Although Fabian chose to study agronomy primarily because of its usefulness for a humanitarian career, also he had a "fascination with knowing the laws of nature and applying them to cause an effect for something in life". Fabian recounts the societal outrage against pesticides during his youth in the Seventies and how he was interested in the biological know-how a shift to the emerging integrated pest management would require. After many years working in Yemen and East African countries with the International Committee of the Red Cross, Fabian experienced the emergence of fatigue and disappointment with the same problems repeating themselves across countries and years. Farming would give him an opportunity to change scenes, recharge, but also observe and control the impact of his actions more directly. Understanding natural processes and experimenting with them through farming are a means for the interlocutors to have a tangible impact in the world, mainly in relation to human and environmental health. It is this impact that gives them meaning.

For Sabrina, the fascination for agriculture and specifically animals was lit when, around 14 years old, she spent a summer at a calf rearing farm. She likes working with animals because they are tangible, interactive, and at the same time individual and independent. However, what attracts Sabrina the most to agriculture is its multi-layered nature. An agricultural business is made up of managing plants and animals, but also machines, accounting and marketing, all of which she enjoys. The diversity of tasks in farming is repeatedly mentioned by the interlocutors as a desired element. Researching on women in farm management positions in Switzerland, Contzen (2004) presents comparable findings. Even those women who are from a farming family have often not been socialised into the profession of a farm manager, as it was regarded as a male job. Instead of farming for reasons of preserving patrimony, their main motivation lies in a fascination with agriculture, a joy in being outside and appreciation for working independently.

Entrepreneurship and autonomy

Entrepreneurship through individual hard work is an essential part of the peasant ethos. Being a good entrepreneur means being a good farmer, because a successful farm pays homage to previous generations and allows leaving the offspring with better conditions (Forney and Sutherland 2021, 74; Droz 2017). A widespread view among farmers is that all their wealth lies in the assets, mainly land and animals, and it is the farmer's responsibility to create something from these assets through hard work (Contzen and Crettaz 2019, 404). The entrepreneurial logic of farming was fostered by Swiss agrarian politics and discourse after the Second World War and latest in its neoliberal turn in the Nineties, reflected in a productivist focus in agricultural education (Droz and Forney 2007, 71). The liberal spirit is, however, accompanied by state protection through direct payments for environmental protection (Forney 2011, 18), creating a tension with farmers' autonomy, another pillar of the identity of a farmer (Stock and Forney 2014). Despite these tensions, both autonomy and entrepreneurial elements were mentioned by the new entrants as reasons for choosing farming.

Entrepreneurship mainly featured in the interviews as the exciting challenge to managing a farm business. Markus's interest in agriculture got sparked with a social project around collecting, processing and selling walnuts from abandoned trees. He calls himself an innovator and engaging in new fields of business unleashes creativity in him. He has started and worked in several projects, but never had he experienced such a passion thematically as with the walnut project. Markus, as well as Salomé, express how in agriculture, all resources

are scarce and the profit on the products is meagre, which demands the farmer to optimise the business. Markus, an economist by training, thrives in drafting a business plan for the farm he is in the process of taking over together with his wife. Similarly, Sabrina stresses that “farming is often underestimated. A farm is a multi-layered business. You only have one chance or you are out”. While there is a recognition that managing a farm business is tough, this is a challenge that a number of the interlocutors seek and the process of meeting the challenge seems to provide excitement and an invigorating feeling.

Léo’s inspiration for pursuing farming stems from the days spent at his ex-girlfriend’s family farm during his youth. Her father, the principal farmer, left an impression on him; he seemed to always be happy. Léo explains his happiness as having come from choosing a simple life and being his own boss. Being one’s own boss, compared to being an agricultural worker, also means a freer choice in how to produce and experiment, which is why Sandro is interested in having a farm of his own one day. The desire to be independent from other farmers, who might not produce organically, is also one of the main motivations by the Japanese new entrants in Osawa’s study (2014, 77). Being one’s own boss is one of three elements in farmer autonomy as described by Stock and Forney (2014). A second one, resonating with expressions by the interlocutors, is related to a particular lifestyle connected to farming, including a flexibility in the governance of the family business, in the organisation of one’s own bodily schedule, and the time spent with the family. Another factor constituting the autonomy as lifestyle emerging from the interviews is the ability to grow one’s own healthy food which provides a degree of sovereignty. The third way farmer autonomy features prominently in discourses is negative, characterised by the constraints to farming that limit the first two elements of autonomy.

Several aspects can reduce the desired autonomy. Léo, for instance, mentions how the responsibility for employees and their salary can be straining. Global market forces and national politics also push farmers to take unwanted decisions on their farm management. The federal direct payments, a bolster against the market pressures, create state-dependency (Droz 2001). Due to the low profitability of farming, most farmers depend on income from outside the farm, earned by themselves, their partners, or both. Indeed, three of the interlocutors have taken the decision of taking over a farm as a communal project, while all of the interviewees are, have been, or are planning to earn money through other employment at least for part of their time as farmers. While the dependency on partners or other jobs can be seen as limiting autonomy, it can also provide a feeling of security and even freedom from another type of

dependency, the dependency on the farm. Being able to go abroad for missions in the winters motivated Fabian to take over the farm in the first place, not least because it provided security for the case the farm would not work out. The new entrants expressed further ways to gain more independence from the farm. Sabrina mentioned technologies such as milking robots which would allow them to be more flexible with their time. For the farmers at the collective farm, the ability to be replaceable and thus freer both in taking holidays or also leaving the business were main motivations for organising the farm as a collective, rather than individuals or individual families.

Autonomy and entrepreneurship do not always come hand in hand. Fabian expresses how he enjoys the freedom in farming, and how his work in the humanitarian sector also prepared him to adapt to new situations and problems. The need to be flexible and resilient to adapt to ever changing socio-economic as well as environmental conditions is the other side of the coin of the freedom of farmers (Stock and Forney 2014, 162). However, Fabian acknowledges that he is not the “salesperson type” - an entrepreneurial farmer would find many ways to make his farm business more successful - which complicates farming in Switzerland: “I would need to adjust myself, but I prefer the freedom”. Interestingly, where others see constraints, namely in the Swiss conditional direct payments, Fabian finds freedom. Choosing to farm and live in a way to mainly sustain himself through the income from care for biodiversity and land-health offers him the freedom not to economically optimise all processes on the farm. Stock and Forney (2014) therefore warn from a narrow interpretation of autonomy, equating it with entrepreneurship and profit-seeking, but rather regarding it as a tool for survival and resistance in order to preserve peasant livelihoods.

Sustainability as patrimony

Rather than a nostalgia for a romantic rural past, Osawa found the new entrants in Japan to be present and future oriented (2014, 79–80). This orientation manifests in a concern for food security and the environment. Farming is perceived as a meaningful activity through which responsibility for global environmental protection is assumed. Contributing to sustainability, biodiversity, healthy and tasty food for body and soul is regarded as “idealistically rewarding” also by the Swiss new entrants. Overall, the new entrants’ peasant ethos seems to be less driven by an image of the farmer as a backbone of the Swiss nation, as outlined by Droz (2001, 5), but nonetheless as a moral figure for society at large, even the global society.

While sustainability at large may be a way for these farmers to act out patrimony, the family still plays a role. In the Japanese case, the farmers expressed a motivation for the farming lifestyle for their children to have safe places to play freely and in nature (idib, 80), which was also mentioned explicitly by one interviewee in Switzerland. Still, the logic of farming for future succession is less present. However, other than in Osawa's description, I do find several elements among the Swiss new entrants that are past-oriented.

Firstly, although the new entrants did not grow up on a farm, the childhood or family history of some linked them to farming. Salomé loved spending time at her great-uncle's farm. Both Fabian and Sabrina had grandfathers who were farmers, however the contact was very limited. Nonetheless, Sabrina was socialised into a rural life by growing up with a large garden with chickens and being encouraged to spend her summers working in farms. Choosing farming may be a way to reconnect to sometimes obscured sides in their family history.

Secondly, although they are not continuing their own heritage, both Fabian and Markus are working on the farm inherited by their partners. Their partners were and are glad to have husbands willing to manage the farm with them, as they feel a strong connection to the farm and the land. Considering the roles these husbands take on raises questions on the definition of a farmer. Traditionally, the husband would be the principal farmer for the outside, working for his lineage, while the wife would perform domestic, less visible work, or also earn money outside the farm, both oriented to sustaining the farming business and upholding its centrality for the family (see for instance Contzen and Forney 2017; Forney and Sutherland 2021). In Fabian's case, though his wife inherited the farm, he became the farm manager because his wife did not have the agrarian education and has been enjoying her job outside the farm. Markus and his wife want to manage the farm together, but in the initial years, Markus will continue to work outside full time for financial reasons. Does this make him less of a farmer? Markus himself acknowledges that he takes on the role of the *Bäuerin*, the farmer's wife or female farmer, which is a position of insecurity and dependency. The *Bäuerin* is at once crucial for the farm's functioning, while not owning the assets of the farm. Because a farm is mostly sustained by a unit, be it a couple, family or group, a peasant ethos should go beyond the identity and motivations of the male principal farmer as in the archetypal image. This includes an awareness that the patrimony and heritage that is upheld may be only from one part of the farm unit and thus not equal motivation for farming, even in more traditional farming couples.

Continuing the farms that previous generations had built up comes with its own complications (see for instance Häberli 2021). Markus is experiencing a conflict-laden relationship with his stepparents in the process of farm succession related to diverging visions for the farm, as well as complex financial agreements. Referring to the succession process he states: “We come and mess everything up for them. [...] Had I known it would be like that I would maybe not have done it”. Due to value differences, Fabian only started being involved in the farm when his stepfather left, and the farm, otherwise unaffordable, was gifted. Their partner’s ability to inherit a farm made farming possible, and even a realistic option, in the first place. For the other (aspiring) farmers, finding and financing a farm is or has been the main barrier to farming. Although the farming identity is linked to simplicity, a sought-after element by new entrants, if farming was more accessible, mainly by improved financial situations in the farming occupation, more people’s motivations for farming could turn into fruition.

Conclusion: Choosing self-exploitation?

Swiss farmers from non-agricultural backgrounds interviewed for this research show high levels of intrinsic motivation for farming, regarding it as creating value not just for the environment and society but also for themselves through the satisfaction of interacting closely with nature, working for tangible products and meeting the challenge of managing a complex business. Furthermore, they regard farming as a way to be autonomous. In most regards, these new entrants share a peasant ethos with the wider farming society, constituted by working hard, living simply, and being independent. However, the idea of a farmer as the backbone of the nation, as well as the guardian of the family heritage did not feature dominantly in the interviews. Patrimony seems to be enacted through sustainability practices for a society and environment that is not defined by the nation. While farming can be regarded as self-exploitation, this view is not necessarily shared by the new entrants who find motivation outside of money. Like farmers’ adaptive preference to deal with what would be regarded as poverty by outsiders (Contzen and Crettaz 2019), also the peasant ethos can be seen as a coping strategy with the rough conditions in terms of finance and working hours in agriculture. The peasant ethos is therefore largely adopted because without it, becoming a farmer and being happy with that choice may be impossible.

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