The Local Culturalisation of Pro-Environmental Policy: Cultural responses to organic farming in Sardinia and Finnish Kainuu

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Abstract

This article explores responses of farmers and other agricultural experts to organic farming in two cultural spheres as examples of the cultural adoption of pro-environmental innovations. The data is based on semi-structured interviews with agricultural actors conducted in Kainuu, Finland, and Sardinia, Italy, and it was analysed using qualitative content analysis. The research's analytical approaches are based on a regional and professional division of collective identifications, that is, on division by their spatial location and industrial sector. The local perception is derived from identities shaped by local environmental capital and cultural landscapes. In both cases, the peripheral territories belong to the contemporary capitalist arena, and their representatives aspire towards social mobility through isomorphism with respect to the centre. Organic farming provides a platform with which to analyse the peripheral regions, showing that unidirectional and diffusionist modernisation schemes do not always work similarly. The separation between organic farming as a neutral technical concept and as a symbol indicates that similar criteria and official requirements vary according to local realities in different cultural spheres. In such situations, formal environmental standards meet centuries-long traditions, with all their implications. Sometimes these implications ease pro-environmental diffusion. Sometimes they may expose a lack of local knowledge and cultural sensitivity in formal standards.

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Introduction

The idea of 'just transition' is currently manifested in many international environmental initiatives (e.g. the European Green Deal 2020). It aims to ensure fair burden sharing between people and regions when it comes to the socio-economic costs of a sustainability transition. Just transition has so far been seen primarily as an income transfer mechanism to compensate for the disadvantages of economic upheaval. The socio-cultural dimension of the transition has however received less recognition. Moreover, as the traditional role of industry (agriculture) and its change vary between societies, what is considered fair or unfair in transition presumably also varies.

This article explores responses to organic farming in two cultural spheres as examples of the cultural adoption of pro-environmental innovations. The data is based on interviews with agricultural actors in Kainuu, Finland, and Sardinia, Italy, which are often considered to represent quite different cultural contexts in terms of tradition and political behaviour (see, Galland & Lemel, 2017; de Borms, 2005). They do nevertheless have in common the fact that they are peripheries with respect to the nation-state in which they are located.

Why choose organic farming as an example? It is a multifaceted and strategically important concept for environmental policy. Although the roots of organic farming trace back to the early twentieth century, its societal importance increased at the end of the century when awareness of the environmental problems caused by intensive agriculture led to resistance to such methods (see, Barton, 2018). Officially, organic production is assumed to combine a high level of biodiversity, the preservation of natural resources, the application of high animal-welfare standards, and production methods in line with the preference of certain consumers for products produced using natural substances and processes. The method suggests a dual societal role: it provides for a specific market, responding to varying consumer demands, and it delivers public goods that contribute to the protection of the environment and rural development (OJEU, 2018). Detailed regulation is a crucial element of organic farming. Inspection covers all the stages in the production process, including primary production, storage, processing, and packing. All organic farmers who sell their products must be registered with the competent and accredited inspection body (European Union 2018a, 2018b). As strong and formalised top-down regulation by supra-local or transnational institutions is highly likely to provoke a reaction among people who have a close interplay with their immediate environment, it is crucial to analyse how they usually adapt to strict control.

Organic farming is an interesting example, as it has developed as its own production system, separate from conventional agriculture. The pioneers were neither key players in agriculture, nor professional farmers. Thus, the first organic farmers were from outside traditional farming or agricultural bodies such as farmers' unions, and often had an urban background. One of the most researched topics has been organic farmers themselves, their motives and their identities. This focus was especially popular in the 1980s and 1990s. Comparing and even clearly contrasting organic and conventional farming and farmers have also been popular themes. Organic farmers can be roughly divided into two groups: environment and health-oriented small-scale pioneers whose values were not material. Their organic production is small-scale and artisanal, and they operate according to the so-called organic principle. When talking about newer organic farmers, we mean primarily farmers who switched from conventional to organic farming in the 1990s, and especially after the mid-1990s. Their perspective is primarily economic, and their farms are often large and market-oriented. They are professional farmers. The motives for switching to organic vary, and it is quite difficult to name a single comprehensive criterion or motive for this change. In addition to the motives of organic farmers, the decision-making process in the transition to organic has also been examined. It is generally stated that the decision to switch to organic is the sum of a great many factors, as organic means different things to different people. (Mononen, 2008.)

Research on organic farming has expanded beyond the world of values, identity, and organic farms. Researchers

nowadays are particularly interested in organic consumption and the development of the organic food industry. A range of studies (e.g. Michelsen, 2001; Mononen 2012) have shown that organic farming can be framed differently. Organic farming is part of the global food issue, but it is also linked to rural development policy. For example, in Finland, organic farming became a major rural development strategy and a survival method for farm families at the end of 1990s. The bases for advancing the organic cause have changed, from agricultural policy through environmental policy in the direction of food policy as well as climate policy. Climate change has activated a discussion of what in the future would be the best way to produce food and at the same time limit climate change, reduce greenhouse gas emissions and guarantee the global food supply. Since organic yields are smaller, it has also been argued that a large-scale shift to organic production would only aggravate the global hunger problem (Stolze & Lampkin, 2009: 243). Many research reports have shown clearly that organic production has gone through a process of institutionalisation and is clearly both globalised and conventionalised (e.g. Michelsen, 2001; Mononen, 2008; Osterveer & Sonnenfeld, 2012). Its expansion has been affected by economic and political actions, mainly common legislation, subsidies, and definitions of organic farming.

Less attention has however been paid to the fact that, in addition to a technical concept, organic farming also symbolises the largely accepted aims of more sustainable ways of life (see, Guthman, 2004; Kings & Ilbery, 2010), which in some cases implies moral superiority (Horton, 2003). Yet the strict criteria for organic farming may entail global pressures on traditional farming methods and therefore possible threats to local ways of life and traditional environmental capital (Wilson, 2012: 65–68). This shows the ambivalence of the concept of 'organic' and raises the question of uneven power relations and polarisations between global centres and rural peripheries. Thomas Eriksen (2017: 152) has pointed out that *the increasing predominance of large-scale systems has created clashes of scale where the local level repeatedly conflicts with uniformisation and standardisation from above*. The more locked sustainability solutions are, the more they erase patterns that are local and based on a specific ethos, and this may cause cultural resistance.

Here, the separation between organic farming as a neutral technical concept and a more culturally constructed symbol is a crucial analytical distinction between the rational and the emotional aspects of environmental concerns, as well as in the process of cultural acceptance and rejection. Different cultural landscapes produce different expectations and political representations with regard to the standards of organic farming generated at higher decision-making levels (Häyrynen & Hämeenaho, 2020). These expectations and representations are largely connected to the farmers' traditional ways of life. Based on this, our question is: how do responses to organic production reflect local cultural environment? How are cultural elements capitalised on with respect of organic farming, and how is the process of capitalisation linked to the social institutions of Kainuu and Sardinia at stake? Do Sardinian farmers base their expectations more on the traditional discourse, and Finnish farmers more on official discourse?

Cultural dynamics of being an organic farmer

The cultural perspective has often been applied in the studies that evaluate and plan individual municipalities (Tabara & Ilhan, 2008; Stevenson, 2005). Our purpose is to fill the research gap resulting from a relationship between people and a particular local condition of human/nature-relations, rather than from what is understood as a purified, decontextualised system of general formalities (Boillat & Berges, 2013). We apply three central concepts in this exploration: differences in cultural impact, place attachment, and periphery.

Cultures are collective cognitive processes, relevance structures which individual members of a group use to assess various value questions and simultaneously to be identified by others (Geertz, 1973: 312–313; Kahan, 2008). An important definer of a culture is how it faces modern and previously unknown ideas and

phenomena. It is our understanding that people use their contextual cultural habits and traditions to manage and soften the blow of change.

It follows that the local response to organic farming does not merely depend on the biophysical capacity to meet formal standards (Fish et al., 2016). The local perception is also derived from identities shaped by local environmental capital and cultural landscapes. Identity is mutually formed through lived experience and a sedimented history of contacts with the surrounding nature and society. Farmers generally have a strong professional identity and other globally shared characteristics. Their fundamental relation to the land, the weather and typical cycles of nature may strengthen dedication and commitment to traditional ways of life and methods of farming. Cultural lags may reinforce community resilience and accelerate path-dependent behaviour.

The starting point here is however that *differences in cultural impact* become more apparent when different cultural spheres and local realities are dealt with in parallel. Understanding the variation between different local reactions requires a convergence of research from multiple field sites (Loloum, Abram & Ortar, 2021). Such a meta-analysis would not aim primarily to provide generic knowledge about local reactions but rather to illustrate the variety of ways in which local people use traditions with local, often anecdotal knowledge to cope with the challenges of life. The social science interest in this diversity is above all between Southern and Northern Europe, which is in many ways a heated question in the EU.

We therefore approach culture here through the concept of place-specific collective identity. If people use their cultural heritage to manage and soften the blow in the face of change, as we assume, place-specific identity would turn into a contextual, culturally dependent element of social capital. To verify this, our analytical approaches are based on a regional and professional division of collective identifications, that is, on their spatial location (peripheral rural areas) and industrial sector (agriculture). Place attachment entails collective action and social mobilisation across disparate social and economic groups that can be brought together in a common endeavour in the name of the region as a shared community.

Place attachment is based on practical and emotional bonds as individual identity processes (Farinelli, 2020). Practical bonds include, for example, political-economic institutions, climatic systems, and natural habitats. Emotional bonds arise from familiarity, a sense of belonging that plays a role in motivating individuals to care for places (Devine-Wright, 2012). Peripheries are often defined statistically by how sparsely populated the areas are, or how far away they are from given centres. They are also measured by how dependent the region is on income transfers or what the region's geopolitical position is. An inability to meet the centre's assumed economic or political standards may result in an inherent lack of self-confidence (Keating et al., 2004: 27; Harvey, 2006, pp. 72–73). Communities imagined as peripheral are thus generally driven by their attempts to get in from the margins. As is common in contemporary environmental strategies, one way to achieve this is to emphasise the positive features or 'different strengths' (Gloersen, 2009) of being outside the mainstream and densely populated areas. This highlights the dual meaning of modern sustainability strategies as both a sign of upper-scale subordination and an option to get rid of such subordination.

The *periphery* can thus be a state of mind, socially produced for various societal interests. It may translate into a bitter attitude towards the imagined or real subordination included in modern ideas, or into a bluster about having a better connection to local problems than outsiders (Eriksen, 2017). Yet the peripheral state of mind may also strengthen community resilience against directional concepts that are unable to capture local reality (Wilson, 2012; Häyrynen & Hämeenaho, 2021) or regulation that seems to go too far (O'Riordan et al., 2015). Such a peripheral attitude depends on a cultural environment that is embedded in social institutions and standard behaviours. The dialogue between familiarity and unfamiliarity determines cultural evolution and, at the same time, the cultural capacity to cope with change.

New formations contain inner dynamics that appear in the gaps between the official discourse and the popular response to it and that cause tensions between, for example, local knowledge and scientific rationalisation (see, O'Riordan et al., 2015: 130). According to Galland and Lemel (2017: 275), Italians emphasise traditional and family values, whereas in Finland, individual activity and voluntarism are both cherished (de Borms, 2005; Inglehart, 2000, 3). Value differences are often regarded as nuances; however, such nuances may be amplified in response to unknown phenomena (Kahan, 2008). They clearly show confidence placed in and distrust shown towards various societal institutions (Galland & Lemel, 2017). By seeking someone on whom to rely, people simultaneously choose the quality criteria in which they most trust and believe.

Methods and data

Our data are based on several studies providing culturally different views on the modernisation of agriculture in Kainuu, Finland, and Sardinia, Italy. Both regions are classified as *peripheral* due to their principal socio-economic statistics, based, for example, on labour market indicators, income levels, depopulation, and the usability of public services compared to national averages.

In Finland, 10 semi-structured interviews were conducted in autumn 2018 for the purposes of this article: three were with conventional farmers, four with organic farmers, and three with experts in agriculture and organic farming. There were eleven questions in total in the interviews (Appendix 1) based on professional identity, perceptions about agriculture and organic farming, values, and agricultural policy. The interviews were funded by the Academy of Finland.
The Italian data were collected in a large research project on changes in agropastoralism and sheep-dairy chains in the Sardinia region, considering that sheep farming is the most important agricultural activity there. This project benefited from different funds over the years (by the Sardinian Autonomous Region, the University of Cagliari, and the European Commission) and was based on mixed methods. For the purposes of this article, we focused on 20 in-depth interviews with sheep farmers, both conventional and organic. Some of the questions were similar to those of the interviews conducted in Finland (Appendix 2). The in-depth interviews were held during the main part of the qualitative field research, between February 2016 and August 2017.

Although our samples do not match, they amply reflect general attitudes to organic farming in their respective groups. We analysed the data by means of qualitative content analysis. This allowed us to organise various research materials into a compact form in order to draw conclusions about the variation of cultural responses (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2011). The parts concerning the main themes (future expectations of the profession, the hierarchy of social circles and ideas on regulation) were extracted from each interview for analysis. The answers were categorised as professional identities, place attachment, and the peripheral factor. However, the discussions overlapped in many respects.

Letters and numbers like 'I9Fex' after citations are coded, where 'I9F' means 'interview nine in Finland (I=Italy) and 'ex' means an *expert* ('of'= *organic farmer*, 'cf'= *conventional farmer*).

Case studies: Finland/Kainuu and Italy/Sardinia

Kainuu's outward image is filtered through the idea that the region is backward and lacking progress. Even the provincial anthem of Kainuu is mostly about hunger and misery (Lyricstranslate, 2019). Yet organic production has created great expectations of keeping rural areas economically viable and reducing climate change. In Finland, the desire for organic farming to combine quality, quantity and environmental friendliness

was criticised at first. EU membership however changed the societal condition and role of agriculture in Finland dramatically. Organic farming became a major rural development strategy and a survival method for farm families (cf. Mononen, 2012). Subsidies have been crucial for its expansion and legitimacy. In the past, when only conventional farming received subsidies, farmers defined it as legitimate. When subsidies began to be paid for organic farming, it turned from hobby and nonsense into a legitimate form of farming for various actors (Mononen, 2012).

The organically cultivated area in Finland accounts for 13.5% of the total cultivated area, and the share of organic farms of all farms is 10.7%. In Kainuu, the development of organic farming has been steady since 1990. In 2019, there were 115 organic farms (18.3% of all farms) and 25.4% of all farming land was under organic cultivation. The average size of organic farms was 54.8 hectares, a little less than the Finnish average (60.9 hectares) (Ruokavirasto, 2019). Agriculture in Kainuu has traditionally been small scale and specialised in dairy and cattle farming, with milk production being the main activity. Part-time farming has been a significant feature. Climatic conditions limit plant production to a few species and fields are small and scattered. The corporatist Finnish milk model has ensured centrally organised decentralisation; peripheries have been taken care of, especially when the influential agrarian party has been in power, but strictly under the control of central government (see e.g. Jokinen, 1997).

Like Kainuu, Sardinia is often stereotypically defined as one of those peripheral and backward regions of southern Italy characterised by a socio-economic gap from the centre-north (Farinelli, 2019). In 2017, 14.5% of Italy's agricultural fields were under organic crops and 22.1% of all farms were involved in organic cultivation (RRN, 2019). More than 70% of the surface area under organic farming is located in Southern Italy, specifically where intensive agriculture is not feasible (CREA, 2017: 17). Organic farming suits the Mediterranean agropastoral model, which is mix of peasant farming and pastoralism. Since the 2000s, Sardinia has been one of the regions with the highest percentage of organic surface areas and farms, though recent years have seen a slight decrease in this trend. In this region sheep breeding is the most important agricultural sector and based on extensive grazing: in 2016, 49.9% of organic farmland was employed for permanent grassland. There were more than 12,000 sheep farms producing almost 70% of Italian sheep milk (Istat, 2016). Sheep milk is used in the industrial production of Pecorino Romano, a low-cost and standardised cheese for export, specifically to the US where the food industry uses it as grated cheese to flavour industrial foods. Pecorino Romano is not a typical local product; it was imported to the island in the early 1900s because there was cheap milk available. High demand for Pecorino Romano has driven the growth of sheep farming in Sardinia, though shepherds have become dependent on the global market price. Profitability is low, and the price for milk is highly volatile, with recurrent periods when the price of milk goes down (Farinelli, 2018; 2020; Simula, 2019).

Results

Professional identity and the future of organic farming

Our first round of questions concerned the interviewees' professional identities as agricultural actors and their perceptions of organic farming. We also wished to discover what the interviewees thought about the future of their farming. Farmers in both regions based their understanding of agriculture on the traditional way of life. They also used the words 'profession' and 'entrepreneurship', especially in Finland.

> *…I'm proud that I'm able to produce Finnish, strictly inspected, clean food.* (I10Fof)
> *It's so different. It's meaningful and challenging work. It's a tradition. There's a chain of generations, and it's also a solution for climate change.* (I4Fof)
> *It means producing food, the tradition of generations, a way of life. Nowadays it also means being an entrepreneur.* (I6Fcf)

For Sardinian people, shepherding is not only a 'profession' but a way of life that is learned and understood from a childhood spent in the countryside. It involves tiring manual labour, characterised by continuous mobility herding the flock, exposed to the weather and harsh conditions and with limited time for leisure. Being a shepherd means understanding the sacrifices related to the job, and it involves the whole family:

> *At the age of five I was here* [sheep farmer]*...I went to school but in the evening, I came back to the countryside. And that's how it is for our children too. We take them to school, and we introduce them to the basics of the work.* (I2Icf).

> *I started working when I was eleven. ...In the early years I went to middle school, which I didn't even finish…Then I did five years as an apprentice shepherd. ...That experience…was useful for me and for my business. My parents were shepherds. I was born a shepherd!* (I1Iof)

Farmers were also asked if they considered the transition to organic farming necessary. In Finland most interviewees regarded organic production as an important food production method as it was free of pesticide residues. More interestingly, it was perceived as important for the quality of farmland and many believed that, instead of converting to organic farming, adopting some of its techniques was important and useful:

> *Organic farming is an alternative to conventional farming. It's safe and cleaner in a way for the welfare of farming land and animals. I don't think every farmer should convert to organic farming, but it's important for the quality of farming land that some organic techniques are used to reduce the need for pesticides.* (I10Fof)
> *It's a good and well-functioning way to produce food. It would be good if others also adopted some organic farming techniques, not only in Finland but globally. For most farms, organic farming would be the most rational approach.* (I4Fof)
> *It's interesting. There are lots of good things in it. We have an integrated farming system, meaning we use some organic farming techniques. But we have no intention to convert to organic farming.* (I8Fcf)

In Sardinia the transition to organic farming is considered unnecessary, especially for conventional farmers. The organisation of breeding through extensive pastoralism and grazing is considered a guarantee of authenticity and naturalness. A constraint to organic farming is thus also represented by the land available. Both conventional and organic farmers pointed out that organic farming could only be feasible if land were available, whereas industrial organic production, despite being certified, was not very natural:

> *We've chosen organic because it's our future. …For almost 30 years I've been doing organic, since the birth of the organic movement. There is great potential for organic farming, but we must all believe in it! ...Some are convinced it's a sort of organised scam! ...But that's not true!... It's a natural thing – organic farming is a natural evolution! ...My sheep graze in the pasture, eat lentisk and other herbs from Mediterranean scrub. It's a 'supplement' of natural things – they can't always be shut in the barn! There's a difference to other 'organic' products: battery hens eating organic fodder produce organic eggs...it's clear! These eggs are organic, but they aren't natural! In my opinion we need to be 'organic' but also 'natural', like my raw milk cheese, made by grazing sheep!* (I7Iof)

Sardinian farmers do not value the organic concept highly; something being natural, genuine and healthy are more important concepts. As these are linked to the shepherd's work, there is no need to certify them. Conventional farmers producing only milk to sell to industry perceived organic farming as a technical issue. They said a complete transition to organic farming would be difficult because of the strict rules and lower

yields. In some cases they preferred to adopt certain organic practices without certifying the farm. It shows the concept of organic farming was mostly perceived positively. However, it was more perceived as synonymous with natural or wild growth and not linked to any general ideological or formal sustainability.

Some of the respondents who no longer sell milk to the industry and directly process cheese from their own milk have been inspired by agricultural multifunctionality. Although the Mediterranean agropastoral model is traditionally based on multifunctionality and complementarity between agriculture and pastoralism, since the 1970s sheep farms have become monocultural, that is, specialised in the mass and low-cost production of sheep's milk to sell to the Pecorino Romano industry. This has generated heavy dependence on the market and high milk price volatility (Meloni and Farinella, 2015). Following the suggestions of Ploeg and Roep (2003) and Ploeg (2008), many Sardinian pastoralists have been rediscovering multifunctionality as a way to increase their autonomy from the global market and to enhance cultural and ecological biodiversity. They are producing their own artisanal cheese and offering local collective goods and services such as agritourism, renewable energy production or social agriculture (Nori, Ragkos and Farinella, 2017). Multifunctional farms in our study also admitted many difficulties in getting organic farming certification because of the high costs and excessive bureaucracy involved. At the same time, they were unsure about the potential outlet market, while in local markets they could still sell their products because they had created relationships of trust through direct knowledge. Therefore, they preferred to remain in the natural and uncertified organic system where consumers' trust in genuineness and naturalness stemmed from the material reputation farmers built in their daily work:

> *For me, organic is too disgraced by scandals. People no longer believe in it. I tried to get an organic certification, but they asked me for €2,500 for the paperwork alone, with no certainty of obtaining certification. So, I didn't bother. I think it's trust that makes your product organic. It makes us known to the customer. We even bring the customer here to show them how we work. In that way we earn the customer's trust.* (112Icf)

These multifunctional shepherds deliberately focused on the quality of the milk and grassland. They had rediscovered the importance of extensive pastoralism, wild grazing and paying attention to the animal feed. They produced cheese manually, following traditional methods,although they also experimented with raw milk cheese, or cheese with vegetable rennet or without lactose:

> *I was determined to use raw milk processing, with natural fermentation, without any kind of treatment, just our farm milk ...to use a process that is not registered as organic but basically is.* (110Icf)

Meanwhile, certified farmers emphasised that they wanted to see their product recognised as organic:

> *The choice for organic comes from the idea that by making a natural product, making raw milk cheeses …To gain a value for this it's better to have it certified as organic...so that you have recognition. But it's very difficult…Many here are convinced that 'we all do organic so we don't need certification'! But they're wrong!* (171of)

The expectations of farmers in the Finnish periphery seemed a little gloomier. It was believed that agriculture would concentrate on the productive areas of southern Europe. When asked how this would affect Finnish agriculture, interviewees were unanimous: it would create difficulties, it would finish Finnish agriculture off and ruin the country's food security. The interviewees shared the opinion that agriculture should stay in Finland, but that this was unlikely. Agriculture would concentrate anyway, naturally. There was therefore a need for serious discussion on which products should be produced in Finland, and then for final decisions to be

made accordingly. The mitigation of and adaptation to climate change should hold sway in this respect. One interviewee hoped that generational changes would be easier. Another one said they would not prevent their children from becoming farmers, but they would not encourage them either. Similar points of view can be seen in the following extracts:

> *I personally think we should be self-sufficient with food, but the areas here are empty and the farm structure is changing. There will be big farms and these little ones will disappear.* (I9Fcf)

> *Of course, we need to maintain a high level of self-sufficiency and maintenance, and specifically in those products that are easy to produce under these circumstances...livestock products, dairy products, beef – these suit our conditions.* (I1Fex)

> *It's just the beginning of the end. It makes no sense. Even the most productive regions will no longer produce at their best. You can already see that more input is needed to get the same harvest as before, and food will be so impregnated with chemicals that there'll be some real problems ahead.* (I7Fof)

Only one of the Kainuu interviewees expressed a desire to move away from the farm. However, her husband's relationship with local nature was too strong. The answers about the future of farms suggested there was serious concern about the continuance of production and traditions. One farmer said that however optimistic he tried to be, there was no one to continue farming after him. Another one hoped a family member would want to continue. On one farm, plans were being made to increase production in order to remain in business. The worst fear for one interviewee was that the farm would have to be sold.

Interestingly, two interviewees were worried about the level of education concerning the relationship between human beings and nature. They explained that young people's perceptions of the origin of food were weak, and that there had to be a balance between human beings and nature. Humans needed nature to survive, and they had to exploit it. However, this needed to be based on sustainable development and *respect* (H5Fof). Everyone respected nature in their own way, because they were all part of it:

> *In agriculture the relationship with nature is very close.* [We are] *at the mercy of nature, but we enjoy it. We are surrounded by nature all the time and can go into nature any time.* (I9Fcf)

> *Wellbeing, of course. My environmental philosophy is that human beings belong to nature and can use it as a basis for their own lives. I don't consider human beings a threat to nature.* (I8Fcf)

Farmers in both regions had quite similar professional identities and were genuinely rooted in their traditional homelands. Sardinian agriculture has such a long tradition that farmers rarely wondered if agriculture had a future, but they underlined the difficulties of generational renewal due to aging, the poor birth rate, and land abandonment. The only guarantee for a Kainuu farmer was that there remained a strong public will for food to be provided in the immediate area.

Professional networks

To disentangle the structures of interest groups, we asked which organisations were at hand if interviewees encountered problems or insurmountable obstacles. Who were the most trustworthy people, and what organisations could they turn to in case of need? In the Finnish interviewees' responses it was clear that the Central Union of Agricultural Producers and Forest Owners (MTK) played a central role. It was seen as promoting farmers' interests. Only two interviewees (both organic farmers) failed to mention it. They were

doubtful if there was any support but answered that the Finnish Organic Food Association should be the one to offer it. Organic farmers stressed that the MTK was a powerless organisation that had failed to take organic farming seriously. Yet the attitude seemed to be changing:

> *Our interest organisation, the MTK, isn't on our side, and it's quite toothless with all these central stores and…it has no power in the face of the EU.* (I9Fcf)

> *MTK raised their hands a couple of years ago, and no one talks about organic farming any longer. The organic association is probably the only one, and perhaps to some extent the Green Party, but I cannot identify with their mindset even though I'm a greenie.* (I7Fof)

> *MTK is the only one we've got.* (I8Fcf)

> *Of course, the organic association is strong, and it's good that it exists. But then perhaps it's a little difficult to say anything about the advisory system – Pro Agria, for example.* [It] *obviously wants to drive everyone's interest.* (I3Fex)

Insurmountable obstacles in Finland mainly resulted in financial problems or mental problems like depression. The advisory organisation Pro Agria was considered the primary actor in offering support for these problems. The farmer's social insurance institution, Mela, and especially its *Välitä viljelijästä* (Take Care of the Farmer) project, was also mentioned. The importance of the Finnish stand-in scheme (Mela, 2019) was mentioned in two interviews. It was also said that it was difficult for individual farmers to ask for help, and that when they did, it was often too late. One expert said there were no networks to help individual farmers when problems arose.

There was great distrust of trade associations, cooperatives and producer organisations in Sardinia. Most shepherds were members of a trade association (many of Coldiretti) but stressed that membership was linked to the fact that many bureaucratic procedures for obtaining CAP payments were assigned to these associations, forcing them to belong. Many said that such organisations were too bureaucratic, often corrupt, and subject to a patronage that was careful to protect the interests of certain farmers:

> *Coldiretti and all the other associations still exist because they've hijacked all the CAP payments ...If they hadn't, they'd have long since ceased to exist … You can't look after this stuff yourself, because they* [CAP payments] *are all diverted to trade associations … It seems to me that I pay €90 for an annual membership, and then I pay extra for each bureaucratic practice they do for me!* (I1Iof)

Despite some informal mutual assistance networks, all the Sardinian interviewees stressed that the main problem was a lack of unity, extreme individualism and a lack of confidence. This was expressed by a Sardinian saying 'a hundred heads for a hundred hats!' In contrast, in Kainuu the network was much more organised and hierarchical.

(Dis)belief in regulation and the EU

The next group of questions concerned the prevailing culture of conventional agriculture and the role organic farming played in agricultural policy. Most Europeans appear to trust organic products, but many still hope for improvements in the control system (European Union, 2018a). Farmers, processors and traders must comply with strict EU environmental and animal welfare regulations in order to use the EU organic logo. An equally strict control system provides for checks to be carried out on these operators at every stage of the organic chain. Each operator must be checked at least once a year, based on a risk assessment (European Union, 2018b). There was a clear consensus among the Finnish interviewees that inspection was important

for consumers' and farmers' trust, as well as being important for transparency. Without inspection there would be many kinds of 'entrepreneurs', as one interviewee put it.

> *The marketing point of organic food is that it is precisely controlled production. So yes, I like the control system. It's justifiable.* (I10Fof)

> *Control is what makes organic farming organic farming. It should not be considered a burden, but it requires a certain attitude and systematic approach in everything one does.* (I5Fof)

> *Consumer confidence is maintained through the control system…If it were* [less strict], *it would be embarrassingly vigorous. An example of this is that in most countries there have been scandals related to organic products, which is really bad for the organic market…It is just like...control is essential.* (I1Fex)

In Finland, trust in and the need for – and even taking pride in – the strict inspection of organic farming was clear. It was considered a precondition for being genuinely organic. It was also central for building consumers' trust.

When asked if organic farming should be considered more in agricultural policy, conventional farmers in Finland answered that although it must be an alternative, there was no need for it to be given extra consideration in agricultural policy. Organic farmers also said that it was addressed well, both politically and economically. Many stressed that organic farming techniques would be important in the future and that organic farming was important for mitigating the current environmental problems:

> *Yes – at this time in the world, the more farms move to organic production and use organic methods in general when fertiliser industry resources have been reduced, the more there will be a need to cultivate using recycling and biological methods.* (I2Fex)

> *For me it means a person's wellbeing...But then valuing nature is a longer-lasting thing…for maintaining and improving farming land.* (I7Fof)

> *Organic is, in a way, cleaner when it comes to…animal welfare. Conventional farming could also adopt the good doctrines of organic farming so that there'd be no need to use pesticides as much.* (I10Iof)

Yet, it was a general opinion among the interviewees that requirements should however not create obstacles to converting to organic farming. None of the interviewees suggested that all Finnish agriculture should be under organic cultivation. EU membership had radically changed the Finnish operating environment and agricultural conditions, and the position of organic farming had largely improved owing to economic guidance. The interviewees mainly connected the EU's agricultural policy to subsidies. They noted that consumers got cheaper food, but that this also meant putting quantity over quality.

The interviewees also emphasised that there were many climatic and agricultural differences between EU member countries. Those that adopted agricultural or rural development programmes and decisions might therefore find it difficult to understand the conditions in Finland. EU policy was seen as ambiguous, and the policy programme circulation of five to six years was seen as too short. Farmers felt they were living under continuous pressure to change. Having invested in one's farm, one could find that a policy changes and requires something else. It was generally agreed that EU policy was going in a good direction with its

emphasis on climate change and environmental issues, but that it should give more consideration to national/geographical differences between member countries. One interviewee said that although the EU did not support Finnish agriculture or its organic farming, it made it possible for agriculture to exist in Finland. The EU had strengthened the role of organic farming through its subsidies and regulation.

> *EU agricultural policy has a good environmental perspective, including both production and environmental friendliness. The climate perspective has become stronger, and I hope it continues to do so. Though I can't think of all the details, I don't think you can blame EU agriculture policy for the big picture. Finnish agriculture couldn't get along totally alone.* (I4Fof)

> *It's good the* [EU] *exists, because we get subsidies.* (I9Fcf)

> *There's never been a need to consider organic farming as much as now.* (I6Fex)

In the case of Sardinia, as highlighted in Section 4.1, there is not much confidence in organic certification. The shepherds we interviewed perceived organic farming as expensive and bureaucratised, and thought that sheep's milk was naturally organic thanks to the grassland and extensive pasture that produced it.

> *My cheese is not certified. For me it is also a question of principle: my animals are completely grazing in the wild… So why do I have to pay for a certification that certifies that it is organic?* (I17Icf)

The traditional element of the shepherd's work was still central to local farms. The interviewees did not consider organic farming to be synonymous with good production, for genuine healthy cheese depended mainly on pasture and grazing. It was a product of raw milk, not of industrial processing. The shepherds who produced cheese paid great attention to how and where to graze the animals, displaying knowledge of local heritage and craftmanship. They had a strong awareness of agroecological values and focused on moving away from industry and its pressures aimed at productivist modernisation:

> *What's the difference between my products and the industry? Industrial milk is heat-treated, and that burns everything… Mine is a handmade product, so let's say that it is characterised...by manual ability. That's important – it gives character to the product. It's completely different from the industrial one.* (I18Icf)

For this reason, the growth of organic farming was often not an ethical or value choice but the result of an instrumental and technical attitude towards maximising the subsidies available. The interviewees spoke of the need to supplement the farm's income with CAP payments. CAP and EU incentives and opportunities had been inserted in a general strategy to strengthen farm households through financial liquidity and to counter milk price volatility and the risk of agricultural squeeze. This reveals the shepherds' rational approach and cost–benefit calculations; it was only convenient to cultivate the land with organic methods when the EU payment was high and there were no other alternative incentives. In fact, organic farming was considered much more binding and riskier because cultivation had to be done without chemical fertilisers or pesticides, requiring skills that farmers did not always possess and exposing them to the risk of losing their investment, especially in drought years. When the new CAP introduced other agro-environmental payments for farming practices that were less tiring than organic farming, shepherds preferred to move on to those:

> *When we started organic farming in Sardinia in 1994, we were among the first!... Me and nine other friends in my village, Bitti … We were looking for contributions! ...Many have abandoned it! I can't until 2018! Because if you become 'organic' in the CAP regime, you're tied to it for five years! If you leave before then, you must return all the subsidies!...* [I want to leave organic farming] *because*

> *'soil protection' instead of organic farming is less expensive than organic. …With organic farming you have to plough every year, and today that's risky with all this drought and bad weather! The 'defence of the soil' payment is €243 per hectare …for ploughing once every five years!* (1161of)

This instrumental attitude to organic farming was expressed above all by those shepherds who produced milk for industry. They were pressurised by the volatility of the milk price and organised their own business strategies to cover losses when milk prices were low. Farmers tried to optimise their use of CAP subsidies. For example, they were not interested in producing organic milk for the dairy industry because production costs were greater than in conventional farming and there was no marked difference between remuneration for conventional and organic milk. The latter no longer fetched a better price. Industrial organic production lines are still poorly developed in Sardinia. As ISMEA (2020) points out, although pastures and forages represent the main share of Italian organic crops, organic livestock supply chains are still fragmented and poorly organised. In Sardinia the percentage of organic sheep's milk remains residual. Even where production lines are present, they process very small quantities compared to the total production of conventional milk. For many sheep farms still linked to the industrial system, it was difficult, as some interviewees said, to 'take a few steps back' and rediscover the ecological quality and sustainability of traditional extensive farming. While farmers in Kainuu underlined the importance of regulation as an integral part of the concept and understanding of organic farming, Sardinian farmers saw it as nullifying what organic farming should represent.

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to explore responses to organic farming in two cultural spheres as examples of the cultural adoption of pro-environmental innovations. Our general idea was that the local response to organic farming does not merely depend on the biophysical capacity to meet formal standards. The local perception is also derived from identities shaped by local environmental capital and cultural landscapes. We were interested in how the cultural elements of being a farmer and living in a periphery were exploited in the practises of organic farming and how the process of capitalisation was connected with the societal environment as a whole**.** The study shows that while 'organic' as a technical concept can be quite consistent, as a symbol it may vary significantly. Local cultures clearly have an impact on the implementation of environmental policy. According to our data, people's place-specific identities are strong indicators of how to address environmental criteria imposed from the top down.

When it comes to professional identities and the meaning of being a farmer, pride and longing for independence characterise the farmers of both regions. The pride is strongly associated with traditional self-reliance and innovation. It is the attitude to regulation that varies regionally for the most part. The interviews in Sardinia show that when farmers adhere to organic farming, they justify their choice not ethically but economically, mentioning emerging markets, new consumer niches or paying more attention to quality. Values such as the preservation of cultural and environmental biodiversity, countryside protection and management, healthy production, animal welfare, sustainable agriculture and cultural heritage are part of an upstream-oriented decision to exit from industrial production, and not a decision to become an organic farmer.

The peripheral mentality adds an extra flavour to this process. It is evident in the answers concerning EU agricultural policy. In Sardinia, the political representation of organic production is more strongly linked to mistrust of the authorities. The nationally influential peripheral experience is illustrated by an active resistance to the public political hierarchy and active consent to traditional and informal structures. Control would take away the prestigious independence. The Sardinian reappropriation of 'the other' and an 'external' tradition (Pecorino Romano) underlines the pastoral model's capacity (which is often labelled as an expression of backwardness and underdevelopment) to adapt to the pressures of the global market.

In Finland, organic production is more of a national project, with modern farming methods and the EU being the new lifeblood. Networks of trust in Kainuu are based on and run in parallel with the modes of public control. The peripheral experience is based on centrally organised resistance and an active acceptance of corporatist solutions. Trust in the authorities has meant that EU membership is a major exogenous factor contributing to the local interpretation of organic farming in Finland. This is an important driver of the development/diversification of Finnish agriculture. It shows that major transformations require upper-scale structural motivation in Finland. This also explains why subsidies are crucial: without them farming would be impossible in northern Finland.

The EU is an older and less appreciated actor in Italy, and organic farming has become problematic in Sardinia. It is seen as a strategic opportunity to optimise EU subsidies and as a tool to diversify production in order to drive peasant agriculture forwards in enhancing territory, biodiversity and a direct relationship between producers and consumers. Another issue that often emerges concerns the tension between 'natural' and 'certified' organic farming. Strict regulation accords organic farming with strong corporatist anchors and a clearly dominant perception of organic farming which influences all the other interpretations of it.
When considering agricultural policy, farmers believe that the EU lacks an understanding of local climatic conditions, which may lead to inequalities in the distribution of subsidies and, thus, just transition. This reinforces tendencies to create sometimes over-optimistic impressions of the local status of organic farming. It can be interpreted as an implicit instrumentalism, equating more subsidies with formally appropriate justifications. An instrumental attitude is more transparent among Sardinians. As the land itself is perceived as organic, the belief is that formal organic criteria may be exploited like any other resource. The alleged local biocapacity thus proves to be a cultural product.

The research results are fairly consistent with those of studies that emphasise the importance of place attachment and indigenous knowledge as a component of adaptive capacity. For example, Boillat and Berkes (2013: 21) show that indigenous farmers in the Andes have a rich set of indicators used for indigenous ways of predicting the weather, including plant and animal indicators as well as astronomical phenomena. However, the awareness of environmental problems does not always translate into social action. When facing uniformisation and standardisation from above, people may feel a sense of helplessness that leads to fear, ignorance, or denial of the suggested environmental actions (Norgaard, 2011; Eriksen, 2017: 152).

Traditions are utilised to create a collective connection with like-minded people. Local traditions and anecdotal knowledge are used as material for resilience. One can speak of socio-traditional capital as a subtype of social capital. In addition to facilitating the aforementioned networking, it may serve as a human rights argument. Socio-traditional capital may be an even more crucial resource for environmental issues in a modern, digitalised and rapidly changing political environment than it was in the era of Fordist organised capitalism.

As for the just transition mechanism, many studies show a lack of coordination. In their broad comparison of regional profiles, Krawchenko and Morgan (2021) found that industrial transition policies have been largely devoid of social justice language, that is, language rooted in whole economy thinking (e.g. addressing structural inequalities, social issues, gender and socio-economic status). They argue that the inclusion of indigenous peoples and their traditional farming methods in decision-making, particularly regarding resource development, would be crucial in establishing recognitional, procedural and distributional justice. In practical terms, this means that a more sensitive analysis of cultural encounters than before is needed to implement just transition. The cultural dimension of the just transition mechanism must be kept on the agenda so that it has all the potential to become a realistic leverage across Europe.

As a concluding word, one may say that modern, pro-environmental concepts addressing today's ecological challenges are textbook examples of unfamiliar formations that local communities must face. They offer practical perspectives from which to analyse peripheral regions, showing that unidirectional and diffusionist modernisation schemes do not always work similarly. The separation between organic farming as a neutral technical concept and as a symbol indicates that similar criteria and official requirements can relate to local realities in almost contrasting ways in different cultural spheres. In such situations, formal environmental standards meet centuries-long traditions, with all their implications. Sometimes these implications hinder pro-environmental diffusion, sometimes they facilitate it. Sometimes they may expose a lack of local knowledge and cultural sensitivity in formal standards.

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Appendix 1 (questions used in Kainuu)

- What do you think about organic production? How necessary do you consider the transition to organic production to be? Why?
- Should agricultural policy take account of organic farming? Why or why not?
- What do you think about the inspection of organic production? Why?
- Which parties promote the interests of the individual (organic/conventional) farmer? Is there an alternative?
- Which organisation supports you if you encounter problems or insurmountable obstacles? (An authority, party, organisation, community or experts?)
- What do you think about the EU's agricultural policy? What do you think about the Russian sanctions?
- Is agriculture in Finland possible in the future? What does it require?
- Should agricultural production be more concentrated on the more productive areas (i.e. southern Europe)?
- What does agriculture mean to you?
- Could you move because of work? What do you believe/hope will happen to your farm in the future?
- What do you think about the relationship between man and nature? (If you see it as bad, how do you think it could be improved?)

Appendix 2 (questions used in Sardinia)

1. Could you tell me your personal story of shepherding: what does it mean for you to be a shepherd?
2. Could you tell us about the organisation of your sheep farm (how many hectares of land, what it produces, etc.).
3. What do you think about organic farming?
4. Could you tell us about the organisation of the work on the farm? (Who does what in the company? Are there salaried workers? What are the characteristics of these workers and their working conditions? What is the role of family work?)
5. Are you a member of some trade association? If so, which one? What is your opinion of trade unions?
6. What do you think about the CAP? What CAP funding do you receive for your farm?
7. What do you think about animal welfare?
8. What are the main difficulties you face in your work?
9. Who do you collaborate with in your territory?
10. Could you tell us about the (positive/negative) role that public institutions (e.g. regional, national and EC government) have in your work?
11. What are the future prospects for your company and for sheep farming in Sardinia?