

# **THEMATIC FOCUS: POLITICKING THE FARM: TRANSITIONS AND TRANSFORMATIONS IN EUROPEAN AGRICULTURE**

## **Introduction Remaking Rural Landscapes in Twenty-first Century Europe**

**TRACEY HEATHERINGTON**

The management of agriculture has long played a key role in efforts to re-make European borders, landscapes and identities. The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) has been a centrepiece of European collaboration and debate since the first steps were taken to establish the European Community after the Second World War. Launched by the Treaty of Rome in 1957, it was first designed to regulate the agricultural market and protect food security across the original six member states of France, Germany, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg. With successive European enlargements and ongoing transformations in the world agricultural markets, the CAP has been in continual negotiation. During the 1970s, funding directed to the CAP (including price subsidies) reached a peak of almost 70% of the European Community budget. During the 1980s, funding priorities began to swing towards regional or structural development, introducing new logics and mechanisms for the distribution of monies. The ongoing revision of productivist logic in favour of 'multifunctional' farm systems heralded declining farm subsidies.<sup>1</sup> By the 1990s, agriculture was seen as only one facet of the ideal integrated rural economy. This would combine biodiversity and heritage conservation with food production. The first decade of the twenty-first century marked further convergence of sectoral policies under the umbrella of 'sustainability'. A major CAP reform was agreed in 2003, to ensure cross-compliance of public



health, animal welfare and environmental standards, and reduce or eliminate many direct payments to farmers. Following an extensive public consultation carried out in 2010, further significant reforms are anticipated after 2013 (European Commission 2010). The impending cycle of policy revision targets raising the competitiveness and incomes associated with the farming sector, further diversification of rural economies, and enhanced provision of environmental public goods as well as strategies for climate change mitigation and adaptation. Ecological modernisation is featured as a means of establishing prominence in emerging 'green' markets. Official communications on the CAP claim the importance of planning continued development of the agricultural sector at the European level.

The desire to understand unfolding local experiences associated with larger spheres of European collaboration, unification and expansion suggests an important opportunity for anthropological theory and research (cf. Stewart and Strathern 2010). The set of papers collected in this issue of AJEC were originally presented at a Culture & Agriculture Section Invited Session organized by Seth Murray and Meredith Welch-Devine at the American Anthropological Association meetings in 2009. They explore how small farmers in France, Greece, Poland and Bulgaria currently manage the fluxes connected with ongoing processes of Europeanisation and globalisation. These case studies provide windows into different national contexts where European policies entered into force at different moments along the trajectory of CAP development and reform. France was one of the founding nations of the European Community, while Greece became a member in 1981, and countries in eastern Europe acceded to what was by then the European Union only after the major political re-alignments of the 1990s. Poland was admitted to the EU in 2004 and Bulgaria in 2007. All of the papers here deal with the implications of recent and impending policy shifts related to the agricultural sector and its envisioned place in rural development. Seen 'from the bottom up', through the lens of family, community, work and uniquely constituted senses of place, the changing policy architectures of the European Union and its member states are brought into relationship with local life projects.

Although their experiences are shown to be diverse, many of the small farmers interviewed by the authors of the papers in this collection expressed a resurgent ambivalence about the future of agriculture, and a sense of vulnerability about their own future in agriculture. As Strathern and Stewart (2010) point out in their recent discussion of 'bureaucracy, crisis and the ques-

tion of survival' in European agriculture, policy shifts in favour of sustainability can erode the size and security of farm incomes, particularly where they coincide with market downturns or inclement weather. They require significant investments of time and labour to understand and adapt to new schemes, and sometimes constrain farmers from practising existing strategies of sustainable management.

Ideas of integrated rural development have replaced earlier visions of agricultural modernisation that dominated the early through mid-twentieth century. Efforts to manage and transform rural European landscapes now turn to heritage branding of specialty foods and authentic crafts, together with agrotourism, ecotourism and biodiversity conservation. Cultural landscapes and agricultural practices across Europe are now enfolded by a dominant vision of 'sustainable development'. In September 2010, the Europa web portal summary of agricultural policy announced:

Farms and forests cover most of Europe's land and are vital for our health and economy. The EU's common agricultural policy ensures that farming and preservation of the environment go hand-in-hand. It helps develop the economic and social fabric of rural communities and plays a vital role in confronting new challenges such as climate change, water management, bioenergy and biodiversity. (Communication Department of the European Commission n.d.)

Agriculture has become much more than a sector of primary production. It is now the basis of a burgeoning tertiary sector predicated on 'cultivating' the desires of urban or foreign visitors to view and experience traditional rural landscapes and support their sustainability. Indeed, the forms of symbolic production associated with the gentrification of both rural landscapes and farming communities themselves should not be overlooked. The papers here suggest that farmers are expected not only to produce crops, but also to perform heritage as the living embodiments of collective natural and cultural histories. The nostalgic European landscapes imagined in policy discourses are landscapes of hypermodern consumption, where city-dwellers go to rest themselves and spend their money to acquire authentically produced commodities, energising rural economies along the way. At the same time, these rural landscapes are also seen as instruments of ecological modernisation, that is, policy-makers perceive possibilities to improve them so as to address impending resource-base issues and environmental problems.

These policy discourses also suggest that peasant farmers have been (or might be, with proper intervention) successfully transformed into cosmopolitan actors/consumers in their own right. This approach generates some ironies and double binds for the farmers themselves. Are they considered the leading protagonists of positive system transformation or conservative obstacles to the sustainable rural development imagined by planning experts? Faced with changing landscapes of clientelism in national and European bureaucracies, farmers re-craft economic strategies and their own visions of the future in a dynamic policy environment. Global economic processes and ongoing negotiations at the World Trade Organization influence new directions of market liberalisation in Europe's Common Agricultural Policy.<sup>2</sup> These may be thought to favour large-scale industrial models of ongoing agricultural modernisation and development. Paradoxically, critiques of globalisation and conventional industrial agriculture also shape some of the latest European initiatives for rural development. The convergence of fragmented and heterogeneous policy logics with various local contexts indexes considerable variability in the spheres of encounter that bring the global and the local into conversation.

In their distinguished contribution to this issue of AJEC, Meredith Welch-Devine and Seth Murray offer an examination of demographic shifts, market forces and policy transformations that affect herders (the producers of meat and cheese) in the northern Basque region. Their ethnographic work explores what it means when a Basque herder ruefully proclaims, 'We're European farmers now.' They tell us, 'Gone are the days when shepherds took 40 head of sheep and spent six months of transhumance in the mountain pastures. Today's shepherd works longer and harder with more animals and more machinery to cover his or her ever-increasing expenses.' Examining the introduction of A.O.C. designation to market regionally specific heritage craft cheeses, efforts to expand direct sales of agricultural products on the farm and the introduction of agrotourism, Welch-Devine and Murray undertake a nuanced discussion of emerging patterns of agricultural practice over the past decade in the Basque region of France. As farm-based families struggle to access diverse sources of potential income across different seasons, family members may seek supplementary or permanent off-farm employment because the viability of their small farms is increasingly beleaguered. Others risk pursuing alternative on-farm strategies to generate additional income. Welch-Devine and Murray suggest many ways in which these agriculturalists

exercise agency to evaluate opportunities and cope with changing economic pressures.

The Polish case presented by Dong-Ju Kim explores the distinctive experiences that can be associated with different national expressions of European agricultural policy. Kim undertook research with sugar beet farmers as well as sugar factory workers and managers in Poland. He makes an effort to assess the implications of the Common Agricultural Policy within the larger context of postsocialist transitions and the global sugar trade. Polish farmers have faced new difficulties associated with the privatisation of sugar factories and new market pressures that have resulted in the closure of many factories. They have witnessed falling prices and demand for their crops, while the workers and managers inside the factories experienced corresponding vulnerabilities. Resentfulness against the intrusion of foreign investors mediating the economic restructuring fed into tense national debates criticising privatisation and erosions of sovereignty. Kim's thoughtful analysis shows us that the issue of being, or becoming, 'European' is intimately tied to different perspectives on the role of sugar beet production in Poland's national heritage and productive vitality. As farmers negotiate estranging encounters with new bureaucratic forms, they question the fairness and consistency of CAP regulation and dispute their own status of development vis-à-vis both 'east' and 'west'. Kim points to how these individuals express doubt that they are on the path of political and economic progress. Here, the focus on agricultural systems highlights unfolding cultural discourses of ambivalence regarding the results of European accession.

Yuson Jung's paper on Bulgarian wine producers offers a perspective on changing contexts faced by agriculturalists who live in one of the newest member states of the European Union. Reviewing conversations with small-scale vintners who experienced the transition from socialism, she recognises their struggles to cope with new economic pressures and gain access to new funds available under the Special Accession Program for Agricultural and Rural Development (SAPARD). With significant specialisation in wine production and exports established during the Soviet era, Bulgaria's state-owned vineyards and wineries were re-privatised during the 1990s. Efforts to support modernisation of the national wine industry have tended to privilege large-scale operations and networks of clientelism. Stories about the fraudulent use of SAPARD funds are commonplace, indexing the perception from below of governance practices. From Jung's engaging account, we learn that

small vintners often consider themselves unable to compete for funds channelled through a state they presume to be corrupt. Jung explores this case study to interrogate the emerging balance between national and supranational governance in the European Union. In Jung's discussion, Bulgarian vintners lament the enduring control of the nation-state over the dispersal of new European Union funds, and seem to lament a supposed failure on the part of Bulgarians themselves to become more 'European'. In Welch-Devine and Murray's account, comparatively, the role of the European Union appears transcendent in the eyes of Basque herders in France. They lament their subjection to European designs that appear to dictate the structural terms for small farmers, as they witness the immanent end of the subsidies they have come to depend upon.

In his intriguing paper, James Verinis argues that the categories of the 'peasant' and the 'rural' demand demystification. They continue to obscure, stigmatize, inspire and recreate myriad socio-economic realities in the globalized countrysides of the European Union. In contrast to stock expectations of a Greek countryside worked by traditional small farmers who remained relatively isolated from global influences, Verinis paints a picture of fluid migrant labour patterns and many frictions of globalisation across the rural landscape. This is not altogether novel, he points out: historically, farms in Greece have incorporated influxes of immigrant workers. The creative combination of small-scale agriculture with a variety of other household income-generating activities suggests that rural conservatism is tempered by significant resilience and adaptability in the face of socio-economic change. Verinis documents the surprising effects of late twentieth-century policies for agricultural 'modernisation' in Greece that incentivised occupational shifts and agricultural deskilling for many established farm families, while creating a new niche for Albanians and other immigrants who are more willing to invest hard agricultural labour for marginal economic returns. New attempts to restructure Greek agriculture to incorporate environmental conservation, heritage management and tourism development are increasingly also concerned with the integration of foreign migrants. The Young Farmers enrolled in the European Union's new agricultural training programme are a mixed group, navigating towards individual aspirations amid neoliberal anxieties, stigmas of rural 'backwardness' and the latent turbulence of xenophobia. Verinis gives us a complex portrait of this multicultural landscape and asks provocative questions about the future of immigrant workers in the Greek countryside.

Chaia Heller's discussion of the food sovereignty movement in France further complicates our understanding of European countryside as landscapes of global frictions (cf. Tsing 2005). Based on long-term research with one of the largest French agricultural unions, Heller's paper outlines the challenges and contradictions faced by representatives of twenty-first century *paysans* as they struggle to articulate a viable vision for small farmers marginalised by large-scale enterprises and international conglomerates. While Dong Ju Kim's sugar farmers in Poland generate informal, fragmented policy critiques, Chaia Heller's farmers strive to articulate a coherent voice for public activism. Seeking out international alliances and playing a role in global arenas such as the World Social Forum and the World Food Summit, French participants in the movement for social justice in agriculture offer critical perspectives on the role of biotechnology, intensive farming methods and industrial production strategies in contemporary food systems. Heller notes that '*paysans* are invisible victims of the post-industrial condition, attempting to survive in a society that considers their services unnecessary and inefficient.' Defining an alternative space for agriculture that goes beyond market-based movements for organic, local or natural foods, the unruly subjects of Heller's ethnography insist that 'good food' is not simply healthy or tasty for consumers alone. 'Good food' can only come from agricultural systems that allow for peasants to thrive by producing safe, culturally meaningful food, that all people can afford to buy. These producers' search for dignity and security suggest a possible radical critique not only of industrial farming, but also of policy initiatives that seek to transform small farmers into a new service class, performing their agricultural traditions for an audience of urban and foreign tourists. We need to understand where such initiatives revitalise the social fabric of community and support the life projects of farmers themselves, and where they instead seem to (re)produce marginality and exploitation. This suggests important questions to be asked all across the 'New Europe'.

In her provocative concluding commentary, Marion Demossier emphasises the vital relevance of anthropological studies engaging policy questions and theories of socio-economic transition in rural Europe today. Noting the dominance of cognate disciplines such as political science and economics in the current debates on European agriculture, as well as the inherent fragmentation of European anthropology across different national traditions and languages, Demossier insists that efforts to pursue and compare ethnographic perspectives can offer better understanding of the 'complex heterogeneous

rescaling' taking place. The potential results of anthropological research programmes in rural Europe are significant in both theoretical and practical terms. 'Micro-analysis of specific sites and the focus on representations and social practices of ruralité,' Demossier continues, 'as well as the development of multi-sited ethnography of transnational groups contributing to rural regeneration, reveal the increasing diversity of rural societies within the EU, and the tenacious ways in which they have sought to adapt to broader processes of governance and globalisation.' Demossier's valuable meta-discussion of '*terroire*' draws on the papers in this issue and exemplifies a useful model for comparative ethnographic analysis in the European domain. Her attention to not only the material aspects of European agriculture as system and practice, but also to the production of cultural imaginaries entwining national and supranational identities with pastoral elements, suggests new challenges to ethnographers.

---

◆

**Tracey Heatherington** is currently Associate Professor of Anthropology at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee and Fellow of the Society for the Humanities at Cornell University. She has completed extensive ethnographic fieldwork in Italy and from 2006 to 2008 she worked with natural and applied scientists on sustainable development projects in Romania. She is particularly interested in the post-national contexts of biodiversity conservation and the management of rural landscapes. Her book *Wild Sardinia: Indigeneity and the Global Dreamtimes of Environmentalism* (University of Washington Press, 2010) was awarded the 2010 Victor Turner Prize for Ethnographic Writing.

---

◆

### Notes

1. See for example Burrell (2009) on trends in CAP reform, and Ferrari and Rambonilaza (2009), Bryden (2010) and Refsgaard (2010) on the concept of 'multifunctionality'. European Commission Directorate General for Agriculture and Rural Development (n.d.) provides an overview of the current vision for the CAP.
2. Nielsen et al. (2009) point out that the ongoing CAP revisions in the context of European talks with the WTO and increased market orientation of production systems have ambivalent implications on prospects for agricultural sustainability.

## References

- Bryden, J. (2010), 'From an Agricultural to a Rural Policy in Europe: Changing Agriculture, Farm Households, Policies and Ideas', in P. Stewart and A. Strathern (eds), *Landscape, Heritage and Conservation: Farming Issues in the European Union* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press), 141–168.
- Burrell, A. (2009), 'The CAP: Looking Back, Looking Ahead', *European Integration* 31(3): 271–289.
- Communication Department of the European Commission (n.d.), 'Agriculture: Meeting the Needs of Farmers and Consumers', <[http://europa.eu/pol/agr/index\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/pol/agr/index_en.htm)> (accessed 19 September 2010).
- European Commission (2010), 'The CAP towards 2020: Meeting the Food, Natural Resources and Territorial Challenges of the Future', Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of Regions, COM (2010) 672 Final <[http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/cap-post-2013/communication/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/cap-post-2013/communication/index_en.htm)> (accessed 12 October 2010).
- European Commission Directorate General for Agriculture and Rural Development (n.d.). 'The Common Agricultural Policy Explained' <<http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/>> (accessed 14 October 2010).
- Ferrari, S. and M. Rambonilaza (2009), 'Agricultural Activities, Rural Areas and Natural Environment: Drawing Up the Frontiers of the Multifunctionality Concept', in A. Piore and K. Miller (eds), *Rural Landscapes and Agricultural Policies in Europe* (Berlin: Springer), 21–34.
- Nielsen, H., A. Pedersen and T. Christensen (2009), 'Environmentally Sustainable Agriculture and Future Developments of the CAP', *European Integration* 31(3): 369–371.
- Refsgaard, K. (2010), 'Multifunctional Agriculture and Rural Development—A Story From Norway', in Stewart, P. and A. Strathern (eds), *Landscape, Heritage and Conservation: Farming Issues in the European Union* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press), 169–194.
- Strathern, A. and P. Stewart (2010), 'Bureaucracy, Crisis and the Question of Survival', in P. Stewart and A. Strathern (eds), *Landscape, Heritage and Conservation: Farming Issues in the European Union* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press), 277–296.
- Tsing, A. (2005) *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press).