

Balancing uncertainties – Women farmers on small- and medium-scale enterprises face the modernization of agriculture

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Abstract: *Based on a longitudinal study carried out over the last three decades in Bavaria, Germany, our paper shows how farming women on 134 small- and medium sized farms have coped with 30 years of agricultural restructuring. The reorganization of the farms under the ever-changing adaptation requirements (“grow or go”) and the concept of pluriactivity have created new economic responsibilities for the women and resulted in a new visibility of female farmers (“feminization of the farm”). The women in our sample have chosen a variety of ways to balance traditional thinking, particularly the desire for autonomy and self-determination, with the challenges of modernity.*

Keywords: *restructuring of agriculture, feminization, women’s visibility, peasant principle, pluriactivity, uncertainty, contentment*

Peasantry – a society in search of certainty

Peasants are thought of as being traditionalists when placed in historical time; but they are far more accustomed to living with change in cyclical time.

(John Berger)

When contingency in general identifies human’s experience of open-ended and uncertain life, so it is especially true for peasants’ life. Following John Berger¹, “a closeness to what is unpredictable, invisible, uncontrollable and cyclic” (Berger, 1987:282) predisposes the mind and the agency of peasants. It is the result of the specific structural conditions of a) farming itself, of b) family farming as the prevailing system in agriculture worldwide, and c) the low ranking of peasantry in social hierarchy; i.e.:

- a. the need to cooperate with ‘living nature’ which constantly confronts the actors with imponderables and endangering moments: from thunderstorms and climate change threats to plant and animal diseases to farming people’s chronic suffering from locomotive system diseases (occupational diseases);
- b. the family-farming system with its close linkage of company and family roles, which offers synergy effects for processes but produces conflicts and tensions (open succession; the prospect of poverty in old age, etc.);
- c. the position of the peasantry, which in European societies always was at the bottom of the social, economical and political ladder, with the effect of high dependency on the decision-making power.

At the end of the 20th century, the challenges for peasants increased further. Now, the whole agricultural sector underwent dynamic restructuring processes with an increasing involvement into capitalist global economy structures, an industrialization of farm work, new dependency on capital-intensive means of production (high-technological machinery, specialized computers, expensive quotas, etc.) and increasingly non transparent bureaucracies. These processes (tend to) devalue the family farms’ resources considerably. From the 1980s onwards, restructuring accelerated, followed in 1994 by global deregulations in the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade. An ongoing discourse

¹ John Berger, author, essayist and connoisseur of the peasants’ life of a French mountain village.

about “grow or go” raised the farm families’ hope for economic growth and consolidation on one hand, on the other hand it heightened the fear of ending up a loser of that process.

In Germany, the farming families had to face additional challenges with the reunification in 1989 and an abrupt rise of the average farm size. With the turn of the millennium, the agrarian cultural turn towards an environmentally sound agriculture was publicised. Further changes are conceivable when the EC agricultural policy has to be renegotiated at the end of the 2007-13 funding period. German agriculture is forced towards global markets and the dependency of the family farms on (supra)national economic, ecological and socio-political decisions is growing. Structural changes in agriculture are accompanied by a value change in society which also touched the farming families in an unforeseen way (individualization, a new complexity and growing uncertainty).

To focus on the peasants’ century-old resilience to ever changing and never ending challenges, John Berger speaks of a „society in search of certainty“ and a “class of survivors” (Berger, 1982). For him “surviving” is an essential element of the peasants’ thinking and acting wherever they live.² Balancing uncertainties and trying to cope with all challenges was always a more realistic perspective for them than living a good life. Van der Ploeg, who in “The new peasantry” declares a re-peasantization, speaks of the surviving “peasant principle” with the „desire for autonomy and self-determination“ as the central characteristic of peasant farmers’ agency (Ploeg, 2008:23).

Neither John Berger nor Jan Douwe van der Ploeg took into account the findings of rural gender studies. The farming women’s productive and reproductive activities for the continued development of the farm businesses, their role in securing the farm families’ survival and the peasant-driven rural development are not even mentioned. This article will balance this deficiency by focusing on women’s agency. It looks at the adaptation and balancing strategies which women farmers on small- and medium-scale enterprises in Bavaria facing the modernization of agriculture developed.

Theoretical framework: The creativity of action

In order to avoid the trap of looking at the women farmers as either victims or heroes, we based the theoretical framework used in our longitudinal study on the theory of creativity of action conceptualized by Hans Joas (Joas, 1996). He assumes that human actions are initiated and re orientated by people’s own impulses as well as by the changing conditions of given situations. The agents have to build bridges between their impulses and their surroundings. As they encounter resistance, their objectives become thwarted and practices change with unexpected incidents. Acting creatively means handling conditions deftly and adapting objectives flexibly and incrementally to situational and particular contexts. This reconstruction is the agent’s creative performance (Joas, 1996:190). As a consequence, we do not just identify a specific type of action as creative, but rather claim a creative dimension for any human action.

Methodological framework: A longitudinal study of farming women in less favoured areas

The data used for this article are drawn from a longitudinal study of farming women conducted in 1977, 1997 and 2007 (Inheteven and Blasche 1983; Inheteven and Schmitt 2004). A large-scale base line and two follow-up studies were carried out in 63 municipalities of Northern Bavaria, Southern Germany. The study area belongs to Franconian and to Hersbruck Alb, two hilly and mountainous regions (absolute altitude between 300 and 500 m) with a great variety of landscapes, little villages in picturesque valleys with rivulets, partially surrounded by precipitous limestone rocks. The cultivated landscape is traditionally used for smallholding agriculture, forestry, traditional craft and – from the 18th century to this date – tourism (hiking, rock climbing and canoeing conditions, therefore also

² “The peasants’ life is strictly oriented towards surviving. Perhaps, this is the exclusive characteristic they have in common everywhere.” (Berger, 1982: 267)

labelled as “Franconian” and “Hersbruck Switzerland”). Based on its poor general and transport infrastructure, scarcity of job market opportunities, and remoteness to key cities, one study region was classified as “disadvantaged area”. The other region is situated closer to an industrial centre and labour market. Commitment to a conventional lifestyle and religious traditions was and still is a characteristic feature of the whole study area.

In 1977, 134 farm women from small- and medium-sized (2.5 up to 52 ha agriculture and forestry), full- and part-time farms were interviewed. They were of different ages (between 18 and 66 years) and at different stages of family life cycle. About half of the farms were situated more centrally (66), the other half were more remote (68 farms). In 35 cases the women had inherited their parents’ farm, in 99 cases their husbands were the farm’s successors. 52 women had been involved as volunteers in the work of the women groups of the Bavarian farmers’ association. Using a semi-standardized questionnaire with a lot of open-ended questions the data of these interviews comprised various aspects of the farm women’s biographies, their everyday lives, their work and their coping strategies against the background of the challenges of modernization in agriculture (Inhetveen and Blasche, 1983).

In 1997, we revisited 128 of these women – six had died since the first survey – and asked them about their situation and their patterns of action with regard to the accelerating agricultural restructuring process. Biographical interviews with a selected subset of 26 women were used to learn about the social and structural changes of farms and families during the past 20 years. By analysing the farm women’s stories, we reconstructed their ability to cope with the everyday challenges and to balance uncertainties. In addition we used semi-structured interviews with 19 experts to assess the relevant general conditions for the women, their farms and the region.

In 2007, a second update of farms and individual lives of the involved women was conducted, again using a semi-standardized questionnaire. If the farm women had died (25 cases), we contacted other family members. The wealth of quantitative as well as qualitative data from three rounds of surveys allows us to address the issue of coping with the challenges and balancing the uncertainties of the modernization of agriculture from the women’s perspective over 30 years. At first, we present three perspectives of development with regard to the farm businesses, the farming women, and the women’s influence on the farms’ development.

The restructuring of the farm businesses

Grow or go?

In the period under consideration, the farm businesses of our sample did not develop according to the apodictic phrase “grow or go”. Instead, they created a huge plurality of internal developments, from expanding dairy farming to the processing and direct marketing of new products to focusing on subsistence or hobby farming. 101 of the former 134 agricultural enterprises were still active farms in 2007; 33 farms (25%) had been abandoned. In comparison with the official figures for that period (57% for West Germany, 52% for Bavaria³), this surprising result confirms John Berger’s category of the farmer’s survival culture as well as van der Ploeg’s view of the resilience of the peasant principle in Europe. In most cases (90%), one or even two generational changes had taken place. As a consequence, the farming families had not only to cope with the challenges of the agricultural framework but also with their family restructuring.

From full to part-time farming

An important survival strategy was to run the farm not any longer as a full but as a part-time concern. This percentage had increased from 42% in 1977 to 69% in 1997 to 78% in 2007, i.e. it had

³ Authors’ calculation based on Bundesministerium für Ernährung, Landwirtschaft und Forsten bzw. Verbraucherschutz 1978 to 2008 and Bayerische Staatsregierung 1978 to 2008.

almost doubled. The discrepancy with official figures (55% for Germany and 54% for Bavaria) was due to the study area which is one of the regions with rather small farm sizes in average and therefore a long tradition of part-time farming. Meanwhile it is one with the highest numbers of part-time farms in Germany resp. Bavaria (Bavarian and German Ministry for Agriculture, 2008). Besides, one might cast doubts upon the official figures as the definition for farm businesses as well as for full and part-time farms was changed several times during the last three decades. In most cases the transition from full to part-time occurred when the farm was passed on from one generation to the next. This strategy offers the young generation the continuation of the peasant principle, e.g. self-determined work, pride in their own products, as well as a double or triple income security.

Restructuring the dairy farming

A most striking internal strategy to survive was the abandoning of dairy farming. Whereas in 1977 cows were milked on 81% (108) of the farms, the number rapidly dropped until 1997 to 27,6% (37) and until 2007 to 12,7% (17) of the farms. Quite often dairy farming was abandoned when the farm was transformed into a part-time concern or as part of the succession process. As we pointed out in our research in 1977, the farming women were very close to their cows (cf. Inhetveen and Blasche, 1983:159ff.). In most cases, saying farewell to cows and calves was extremely painful, particularly, but not only, for the farming women. Often they did it after long deliberations because of a cost-benefit-calculation and because of the younger generation's interest. Only after some time did the women begin to appreciate the less compulsory work rhythm and the newly won disposable time as well as the reduced work-load.

The re-orientation of the farming women

The farming women of our study had been socialized in a rural farm tradition and had been raised to think of the farm first. In 1977, it was still most important to them to maintain the farm. The restructuring of agriculture and the value change of society have increasingly put into question this attitude. As a consequence of the "new complexity" of farming, new constellations within the family, the hesitation of designated farm successors (Lübbecke, 1998) and their own ageing, the farming women were obliged to revise their traditional routines and to adjust their attitudes and actions to the new conditions.

An important result of our study in 1997, which was confirmed in 2007, was the fact that the farm's development did not necessarily correspond with the women's personal development. Some women living on successfully developed farms failed to enjoy their circumstances and others with decreasing farm businesses were quite content with their way of living. Based on the 26 biographical interviews and confirmed by reflexive analysis of the whole sample, we could identify three main patterns of action which the farming women had developed for their own re-orientation.

Modernizing by keeping and adjusting the peasant principle

Eleven farming women showed an extraordinary mutability. They continued to accept a slow but continuous change and modernized with traditional means, as Heide Inhetveen and Margret Blasche (1983:232) had described earlier as a result of the base line study. The farming families were sceptical about rapid progress. Their dominant mode of coping with changes was to let things take their course and respond to them without giving up their principles like diversified production and earning modes to maintain the farm, in addition hard work, thrift, extensive subsistence production, commitment to the farm and local cross- networks. If the farms were worked full time (5 cases), the increased work load could be carried by a clever division of family labour and intensified local networks. Three women managed to reduce their work load by restructuring the farm and changing from full- to part-time farming.

Not all women experienced continuous improvement in their circumstances. Three women still had to cope with the burden of problematic family relationships, reduced social contacts, chronic diseases and/or precarious livelihood just as they had done in 1977. These women's creativity of action can be characterized as bearing up in their suffering over a long time. They would not choose to become a farming woman if they had their choice again.

Setting out and getting out

Nine women of the biographical interview sample experienced severe blows of fate such as a life-threatening disease, the husband's death, the divorce or suicide of one of their children. Seven of them coped with these challenges by organizing a personal setting out: shaping another concept of life, fighting for more time of their own – at least for 'small escapes' (e.g. to go to a nice restaurant or to enjoy a wellness trip), regular dancing or travelling. In preparation, they had to transcend their strong personal work ethic and norms of frugality. The women with still active farm businesses suffered of a heavy work load as they stayed very committed to their farms that remained in a status quo or were run as a part-time concern. In general, the women of this group had a relatively good health in 2007. Most of them would decide to become a farm woman again, if faced with the choice.

Two women of this sample left their former life completely behind. They took objection to the husband's mode of life or the son's farm management and left the farm they had once married into. Both women secured their livelihood by using their knowledge of agriculture and home economics. Shaping their new way of living, they retained elements of the peasant principle like living in the countryside, gardening and practising subsistence economy. They liked their newly won independence, although they missed being self-employed. The farms they had left were abandoned.

Being irritated and paralyzed

Similar to the second group, the six women of this sample also experienced severe disruptions of farm or family development but, contrary to the former group, these women did not overcome their suffering. They did not identify any alternatives for their living and working situation, felt insecure, despondent and lonely. Relationships with relatives or local people were chopped by themselves or as a consequence of their lack of time. They had fewer and fewer professional colleagues. Three of them were also confronted by their husband's emotional retreat. The ones between 50 and 55 years old did not have any non-farming job opportunity within their reach. On one of the biggest farms, a young farming woman was painfully missed in 1997 as well as in 2007. However, the farm's successor had successfully expanded the farm business by increasing the pressure of work for the elder woman and for himself. The women of this group persist in their suffering out of their deep identification with the farming life-style.

The feminization of the farm as the women's contribution to its survival

Commercialization of the women's economy

In 1997, we identified the feminization of agriculture as a labour-organization necessity, caused by the transition to a part-time farm. This development still continued in 2007. In addition, farming women established together with their families – often their daughters or daughters-in-law – additional sources of income by developing branches of their domestic economy like agritourism, processing and direct marketing of their own produce, running a boarding-house for dogs or horses, opening a café on the farm, or a party-service.⁴ In contrast to the business strategy of specialization, recommended by the extension services of the state, women favoured the advantage of diversification and pluriactivity as a strategy to keep the farms running. Even those who did realize or

⁴ A survey conducted by the Agrarsoziale Gesellschaft, Göttingen, emphasizes the financial and psychological importance of these additional incomes for the farming families (Fahning 2001).

consider specialization (e.g. pig rearing, dairy farming) in 1977, in the end had more confidence in diversified production and earning modes. On more than half of the researched farms several farm-based activities were combined into a form of “cross-marketing” (Barbieri and Mshenga, 2008).

With these newly developed farm-based pluriactivities, the farming women became representatives of and for the current society based on consumption and events. Whereas the ‘home-made’ products of the traditionally underappreciated domestic work became highly appreciated, the female producers got the chance to widen their social contacts and received publicity in the media. We would like to speak of a new kind of farming women’s visibility. It is a new creative variety of the former realized modernization with traditional means – once again labour-intensive like the one of the 1970s.

Matrilineal farm succession

Whereas we accentuated the persistence of the farming families’ mainly patrilineal succession modes in the 1990s, our study of 2007 points to an increasing number of daughters as successors. This development could be the secondary effect of the sons’ escaping the farms in the face of decreasing economic prospects and the lower status of agriculture in society: They refuse to take over the farms and their sisters step into the breach – also out of loyalty to their parents. Perhaps this confirms the hypothesis that it is easier for women to receive powerful positions in “shrinking institutions” (Inhetveen, 2002), besides it strengthens the farming women’s new visibility.

Balancing strategies

Apart from the development perspectives, we now focus on the farming women’s ability to cope with the challenges of modernization of agriculture and to balance the inherent uncertainties for the people involved. We identified five balancing strategies that helped them to succeed.

Centering on the family members’ opportunities

The period of our study can be characterized by a decreasing of the strictly farm-oriented thinking and acting, with first cracks appearing as early as the 1990s. To keep the farm in the family is no longer the farming women’s point on which everything turns. On the one hand, the restructuring of agriculture decreased the importance of the small farm businesses as well as their possibilities. On the other hand, the peasants’ opportunities with regard to labour market and consumer aspects increased.

While most of the farming women we interviewed could not or no longer conceive of training for non-agricultural jobs, it was conceded as a matter of course to their children of both sexes - obviously different to many husbands’ attitudes. The mothers would still ideally see their children doubly qualified, both for farming and for a “proper job”, as insurance against all eventualities that might arise. Our findings confirm Patricia O’Hara (1994) who accentuated Irish farm women’s high educational aspirations and their influence on their children’s educational and vocational decisions.

The farming women’s strong desire for their children’s self-improvement might also reflect their own desire for education which they could not realize themselves during the war and post-war period. Whereas the daughters in the 1990s quite often realized their mothers’ vocational dreams, in 2007 we could find an increasing percentage of academic careers of the women’s younger children and grandchildren which they very much appreciated and supported. When the dream of keeping the farm in the family was still alive, the farming women willingly transformed it into new forms that would have been unthinkable thirty years earlier, e.g. a grandson opened a business for aeroplanes’ pattern-making in the old barn, a daughter-in-law arranged a shop with floristic accessories in the former cow-shed, etc.

Coming into one's own

When we visited the farming women in the 1970s, they quite often complained about the never ending building and reconstruction activities on the farm as a work-intensive consequence of agrarian restructuring. Twenty or thirty years later, we could recognize not only modernized farming buildings but also new dwellings and new living-room-cum-kitchens. We interpreted it as the women's need for a more comfortable style-of-living which they had succeeded in persuading their husbands or other family members to finance and realize.

In addition, the farming women took their own body and health more seriously. Health topics are central at meetings of the farming women's associations; their health and wellness meetings enjoy great attendance. Especially the daughters(-in-law) stir up their mothers(-in-law) who in turn try to convince their husbands to give more attention these topics. The farming women participate in the current adventure and event society, even if at a reduced timescale.

The farming women projected their strong desire for training and education not only on their (grand)children, they also tried to realize it in a reduced or transformed form themselves. The woman who could not become a doctor became something of a professional nurse for sick family members; the woman with the former aspiration to become an engineering drafts person had designed a leaflet for agritourism and realized embroideries; the woman who could not become a teacher became a master and trainer for home economics. Other farming women qualified themselves as herbalists or got a certificate in gardening.

Organizing with the professional colleagues

During the last ten years, young farming women have newly organized themselves outside existing women's groups of the Bavarian Farmers' Association. As a consequence, the women's profile of the Bavarian Young Farmers' Association has got sharpened. The young women assemble as independent "Young Farming Women's Circles" or act together with their male colleagues as "Young Farming Women's and Men's Circle" always with one man and one woman as representatives. They emphasize their loyalty to the traditional institutions of the official farmers' association. Sometimes one young farming woman locally represents the "Young Farming Women's Circle" as well as the Bavarian Farming Women's Association. At the young farming women's meetings, talks on health, sport, wellness, IT, cooking as well as farming topics are offered. The young women also participate - not only in a modest way - at public meetings and demonstrations against the "sale of agriculture". These activities reflect the young farming women's new independency and collective awareness which might also support their balancing strategies coping with the challenges of the restructuring of agriculture.

Remembering one's own strengths and resources⁵

The high indexicality of everyday farming life and the necessity to transform the contingencies always into continuities (see above) ask for a high flexibility in adjusting to each new situation. It is difficult to follow a well-defined long-term project. Patchworking, 'bricolage' and step-by-step processes are the dominant modes of work in agriculture (cf. Knorr-Cetina, 1991:65). It is especially the task of the women on the farm, who according to the traditional gender division of labour have to fork in, to coordinate and to "zip-fasten" their agricultural and domestic work (Inhetveen and Blasche, 1983:207pp). "*Make a plan and it will be crossed*", as one of the farming woman emphasized.

To make ends meet, peasants have developed a high culture of improvisation and combining available and utilizing new resources. Mixing up traditional attitudes with entrepreneurial principals

⁵ According to van der Ploeg peasant principle which (also) "centres on confidence in one's own strengths and insights." (Ploeg 2008, p. 274).

is part of the creative action of the interviewed farm women. They developed entrepreneurial strategies to survive as farmers, to keep the farm in the family and to guard family's traditions.⁶

The strong work ethic farming women were brought up with supports their resilience in facing the heavy work load. One interviewed farming woman not only denied the hardness of the past years but also reflected on the reason: „No, they weren't hard, we just worked hard all day long, so we slept well, it didn't matter at all. (Laughed) And like this, one day, one month after the other passed by.”

The quote points to the peasants' specific time structures adjusted to day and night and the seasons.⁷ Everything has its specific time for realization – where else can this be better experienced than with farming where almost nothing can be forced – in spite of all modernization? The farming women's dominant mode of coping with changes was to let things take their course and respond to them without giving up their principles: “We'll deal with it as it comes”. They were sceptical about rapid progress because “one can never foresee its consequences”.

Being content and trusting in God

In spite of all experienced challenges, the farming women showed an astonishing composure in 1977 as well as in 1997 and 2007. Asked to sum up the past as well as to present their wishes for the future, they most often chose the category „contentment“, quite often adding „actually“ or „I think so“. “Being content” was identified as a stereotype in a survey about young rural people (Böhnisch et al. 1991). We would like to accentuate it also as one of the farming women's main concept of self-confirmation and balancing their own lives. According to them, composure meant that their wishes were fulfilled and that they were proud to have successfully coped with all ups and downs of life. Sometimes it was also used to express the women's view that life decisions cannot be revoked.

For a lot of farming women, composure and contentness go hand in hand with trust in god. Due to the remoteness of the areas and the spatial proximity of the catholic and the protestant denomination of the Franconian Alb, the people perform their faith quite seriously. Most of the women regularly pray at home, read the Bible daily, exchange presents at confessional feasts like communion or confirmation, visit bible circles and church services as long as their health allows it. They define their lives with all its challenges as godsend and therefore as unquestionable. Unfortunately, we did no systematic analysis of faith as a resource for life-balance. There are a lot of indications that it still is an important potential for women farmers to balance uncertainties, to survive and last but not least to live a good life – similar to the farming women's commitment to agriculture, gardening and nature itself.

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⁶ Compared to van der Ploeg (2008:113), who concedes similarities but usually quite sharply polarizes the peasant and the entrepreneurial modes of agriculture, our findings mirror a cleverly combination of both principles.

⁷ See also Inhetveen (1988).

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