

Changing agriculture

Southland farmers' struggles to reconcile neoliberal production demands with increasing environmental regulation

Anna Geiser

Master Thesis in Human Geography

Southland, New Zealand, farmers are stuck in between two opposing poles: They need to increase the profitability of their farming operations in a completely deregulated economy, while simultaneously dealing with the pressure from an increasing public awareness of how intensifying agricultural practices are harming the natural environment.

This study takes the perspective of Bourdieu's 'theory of practice' in order to research how farmers deal with this predicament. Based on interviews with ten farmers, it shows first that different types of motivation for farming in Southland exist: While for some, their paramount reason to farm is carrying on the family legacy, for others it is the 'lifestyle' of farming. And others yet, see farming as a way to make a lot of money.

But all of these farmers are at the mercy of the same paradoxes. Apart from the economy vs. ecology dilemma, they face the contradictory situation of orienting their values and motivations towards farming in view of their local community, but actually, they produce for anonymous consumers in far away overseas markets.

These fields of tension inform the farmers' questioning of the legitimacy of the policy makers of the most recent agri-environmental plan introduced in Southland. Indeed, the plan fails to address farmers' concerns by restricting their ability to accumulate cultural capital through the demonstration of skilled farming. But farmers show great potential for the creation of social capital, because although they are competitors in the market, they are successfully unifying in catchment groups in order to critically engage with policy makers.

However, the paradoxes in the field of farming cannot be resolved from the level of the farmer alone. It is also required that their dilemmas are clearly recognised and addressed in the policies themselves.

Supervisor: Prof Dr Olivier Graefe