Reaching beyond the microcosm: Casting recognition-based systems of engagement and exchange as essential for the appropriate development of alternative agriculture

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Reaching Beyond the Microcosm:

Casting recognition-based systems of engagement and exchange as essential for the appropriate development of alternative agriculture.

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Abstract

This thesis seeks to identify recognition-based systems of engagement and exchange within current alternative food networks and hopes to demonstrate how these fluid micro-structures are fundamental to the development of alternative farming in an Irish context. The author confronts prevailing discourse by proposing that internal structures of mutual recognition rather than the market logic of productivist hybrids underpin successful alternative farms. By adopting a Vygotskian developmental approach, necessarily grounded in communities of practice, the thesis sees the expansion of alternative farming in the social-cultural context of scaling out rather than in the clinical economic context of scaling up which is currently supported by the Irish state. Relying on Honneth’s recognition theory and theories of extended cognition as an analytical starting point, a hands-on engagement involving volunteering, participatory observation, and informal interviewing was seen as the immersive component of the research strategy. Qualitative methods included typical ethnographic research tools but also elements of grounded theory, critical theory and cognitive ethnography. The results of the research revealed that farmers who are more strongly alternative are more likely to adopt a recognitional stance and that this has the effect of grounding social and human capital but also helps to prevent loss of resources to the mainstream and inhibits the type of allegiance switching commonly described as entrepreneurship or diversification. Recommendations for further scholarly work includes re-evaluating the term ecological entrepreneurship in the light of the biological farming approach, popular among a growing number of conventional Irish farmers, and the suggestion that conducting a systematic study of the forms of recognition which have emerged during the course of this research may open up new theoretical frontiers for rural sociologists.
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Chapter 1 Introduction

Introduction

Masanobu Fukuoka, the Japanese author of *The One Straw Revolution* (Fukuoka 1978) was firstly a scientist and later an experimental farmer, as was Albert Howard (one of the founders of the organic movement). They both saw fit to leave their laboratories or areas of specialism and go to the fields in the 1930s as practitioners and observers. They both sought to discover through trial and error and careful observation how best to produce food, while at the same time trying to mimic nature or follow natural patterns. They had the idea that science and the narrow productivist script in many ways determined what was studied and consequently, which methods were pursued. These features had led humanity on an erroneous path, a pathway which was traversed at speed. Unfortunately, the rate at which the new methods were adopted were not matched with enthusiasm for validating the implied claims of improvement, or for interrogating the longer term consequences. Fukuoka’s first book is talked about today as a classic, often popping up in conversations on organic or other alternative farms or within related networks. A farmer described to me how Fukuoka shaped his thinking, in particular on the subject of *accumulated error*. The moulding and transformation of agricultural methods and the emasculation of the farmers relationship with nature, with his fellow farmers and the wider society, was often based on mistaken premise built up in layers. There is a memetic process, he told me, whereby one farmer breaks with tradition and gets an increased yield (or the same yield with less labour or less input costs) and other farmers quickly follow suit. The advantage may be clawed back by nature as the years go by (depleted soil biology or the emergence of weaker strains of plants and animals) but by then perhaps another or several other “innovations” or changes in practices have come into play and the ability to observe the diminishing returns of the first is lost. According to alternative farmers, the frenetic rate of change associated with conventional farming is necessary to keep the productivist script going,
science and technology plus big business must always be seen to have the answers. “They” have the key to the solutions treadmill and there are many solutions needed as the socio-ecological system cascades down an ever-narrower spiral towards zero fertility. The ability of the ecosystem to absorb pollutants and recover over a period of time is not considered. As the same farmer pointed out, if alternative farmers are able to solve a problem, their solution, more often than not, gets ignored because science-based or large-scale solutions have to be seen to win, or putting it another way, the adoption of scientific-entrepreneurial routes to maximised output must be seen as the precondition of all possibilities\(^1\). There are no down sides for the farmer, he or she just needs to follow the script or get a job, usually both.

Fukuoka was having the same problem in the 1930s and 1940s. Many scientists and professors came to see his remarkable yields and were shocked by the low levels of pests, weeds and disease among his crops. All achieved with zero inputs from beyond the farm and no ploughing, in fact, far less labour than one would expect and less intervention in the natural processes on a manual level than thought possible. He remarked that the professors would leave, and you would never hear from them again. In the work of Axel Honneth the German social philosopher, this is what is known as withholding recognition, or an act of misrecognition. The suppression of alternative means to achieving the benign goal of feeding the human race with the most effective and accessible methods, embedded in communities where people could expect a good livelihood farming on a small scale, is actually an area that has not been extensively dealt with by academic research. This would appear to be a substantial omission on the part of research designers and funding agencies, as problems emanating from industrial modes of production did not start to manifest themselves in the last thirty years or so and likewise interest in alternative methods aimed at reversing the damage on an ecological and social level are not as recent as some commentators might suggest.

Honneth’s recognition theory retrieves Hegelian ideas relating to mutual recognition as fundamental for building the social institutions which we now

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\(^1\) Georg Lukacs (1968)
take for granted, such as the legal system. But the origins of contractual obligations and the highly rationalised thought structures that go with these social artefacts are actually recognitional in nature. Honneth rightly asserts that forgetfulness, a disregard for the origins of systems of thought or interpretation, can lead to the development of social pathologies. Honneth’s recognition theory gives primacy to recognition and recognitional thought patterns over cognition or cognitional thought patterns. In this thesis full use is made of this distinction and its implications for the study of alternative agriculture and its associated networks. Strongly alternative farmers are cast as recognition based, while those who tend to follow the logic of the market are thought to be governed by calculative thinking and prone to objectification of all resources.

In our time we struggle to make sense of food systems that have become a major source of pollution, while at the same time destroying the topsoil, negatively altering microbial ecosystems in freshwater streams and rivers as well as introducing harmful components into the human food chain. The development of a polluting and resource destroying food system is a remarkable story, and a somewhat depressing one given that holistic solutions were already identified as far back as the 1930s\(^2\). We can also add to the above list the work of Rudolf Steiner and the farmers he had contact with in the 1920s which lead to the bio-dynamic agricultural movement. This was the first formal organic agriculture according to Lockeretz (2007). In Japan, the first community supported agriculture farms (CSAs)\(^3\) followed the example of Fukuoka\(^4\), further proving the notion that slowly developing knowledge structures involving very few actors can be extremely effective at instigating collective action orientated and bottom up innovations. It can’t be emphasised enough that these solutions were available at near the genesis of the previously mentioned ‘destructive’ treadmill, a set of interlocking systems that would

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\(^2\) Of course, developing countries were still in the throes of agroecological peasant agriculture. There the resistance was not a reversal to natural processes but a refusal to adopt high input practices.

\(^3\) CSAs are farms which provide food by prior arrangement with customers who in turn agree to share the risks as well as the rewards of that season with the farmer.

wipe out so many small farmers and local provisioning systems. Knowing what we know now, I fail to see how this original misrecognition could be not be construed as anything but a corrupt impulse. One social theoretical way of looking at it is that a social pathology took root around that time which, although identified, was not successfully uprooted.

Alas these exemplary actors have come and gone but they had successors who either followed their advice and adopted it to their own soil, climatic and socio-cultural conditions, or discovered other quirky tendencies that nature revealed to them, things that restore the balance in soils through interventions that mimic nature (Lockeretz 2007). The micro level social and ecological changes resulting from their efforts stand out as an example to us all, although usually one that we do not follow. Combining these social and ecological dimensions, I see these ongoing localised events collectively as an exemplary regenerative process. I developed this idea from talking to farmers some of whom describe their farms as regenerative farms and endeavour to extend the impact of the farm to the social world, that is, the community, their customers and society as a whole. There are those who have overcome various resistances and barriers over time to be recognised within the networks as the model alternative farmer or farmer-educator. These will be a primary focus of the coming chapters.

In recent years, state interventions have been designed to ‘bribe’ a proportion of farmers to adopt the organic model through the third party certification model of assessment, state assisted marketing and attractive subsidies and this is seen by many as a mistake as it introduces a shallow take on the original principles of the organic movement which also emphasised small farms, local markets and social factors, such as equality of access to higher quality, more nutritious sources of fresh food (Lund et al. 2002). It is proposed that the aforementioned social pathology (through its proponents) ekes out opportunities for its own reinvention by coalescing with all newcomers, aiding their efforts, studying their methods and lavishing them with praise and awards before slipping out of the restraints and moral commitments to create another strain of conventional agriculture. To the mainstream actors, the ecological point of view is just an option and one that they would have wished never came into
being. They assume a segment of the consuming public will pay for producers to ‘waste their time’ creating the ultimate guilt free product. To zoom out, for them, is to see a segmented market with lots of conventional and atypical opportunities, to zoom in is to ponder over the puzzle of how to survive in some kind of highly competitive specialism, what they call a niche market. Unless of course you operate on a huge scale across multiple jurisdictions, in that case your purpose is to feed the masses with the cheap and cheerful while supplying better off groups with high end conventional product.\footnote{Ireland’s export business in baby milk powder follows this pattern}

Transposing primary producers from being peasant type farmers to being entrepreneurial and from there (if circumstances permit), to engagement in scaled up capitalist agriculture, is one of many patterns in the empirical world that has become the preoccupation of rural sociologists (van der Ploeg 2018). In the western world, extension services (state sponsored agricultural researchers and advisors) are explicitly supportive of agri-business solutions which can only happen on a corporate scale. This has of course pushed farmers into having an entrepreneurial approach, together with the hygiene fanaticism, pharmaceutical based animal health perspectives and bureaucratic regulatory controls. It’s no surprise that these features usually coincide with subsidy qualifiers. Farmers often have to hire private advisors to help navigate through paperwork to get their subsidy applications fine-tuned\footnote{Tallamh Beo founder member is also an advisor and confirmed this point at the first public meeting 2018. Farmer Burke (f) also confirms this competitive atmosphere around subsidies where farmers seek to outdo each other with their own skills and by seeking professional help}, maximising their unearned income in order to offset their expenditures on expensive inputs. Some highly regarded rural sociologists and food system scholars have created, or made tactical good use of, concepts like re-peasantisation, re-agrarianisation, re-localisation and profit sufficiency while stopping short of an outright attack on corporate interests that have run rough shod over farmers, their families and their communities in the part of the world where these scholars are likely to reside. More direct criticism of corporate interests operating closer to home appears on the websites of food sovereignty organisations and peasant farming interest groups like European Coordination Via Campesina (ECVC) .
Farmers have, for thousands of years, been able to engage with the market and have been sufficiently entrepreneurial to keep body and soul together. That’s not to say there were not crisis moments. Disruptions due to wars, economic decline and freak weather conditions litter the history of food provisioning. I have witnessed, during the course of this study, farmers who either on a collective, familial or entrepreneurial level have managed to avoid the kind of diktat that tells practitioners how to think. They minimised or eliminated subsidies and seemed to be making their own way in the world as sovereign producers. In this case a local or regional engagement with the world seemed adequate and a micro level engagement with the soil and the plant and animals which derive nutrients from and return nutrients to that soil seemed to be driving a revolution in thinking about farming.

Is it so unreasonable to propose that where recognition is withheld (I’m thinking of Fukuoka), detachment becomes inevitable and in an escalation of these positions, where recognition is withheld aggressively, a more disproportionate and unnecessary detachment wrenches people and things from their roots? I hope in this thesis to show the reader that a significant number of farmers, including those who are quite conservative in their ways, have figured out that a detached, clinical modus operandi where business minded, and profit orientated actors seem to rule supreme, is not suited to primary food production. Through paying close attention to the recognitional nature of alternative farming I hope to explicate this largely unexplored facet of resistances to co-optation and perhaps make a contribution to a concept common to European rural sociology known as autonomous restructuring.

Some of the hallmarks of these farmers include, observation as a default knowledge generator, seeing the more knowledgeable other as a person, giving priority to relational ties and face to face contact, recognising bio-regional characteristics, perceiving micro climes and fertility variations within landholdings, identifying mutual interests and potential collaborations with other farmers but also with both urban and rural dwellers without recourse to institution building. In asking the question: What would fill the vacuum left by the abandonment of detached, clinical thinking as the default mental process? I had presented myself with an intriguing problem.
It is proposed here that rejigging the way these recognition-based mental events and cognition-based mental events are bound together habitually can significantly impact one’s capacity to resist co-optation and disempowerment. In short it is suggested that alternative farmers are instinctively enacting a corrective measure whereby the habitual way that they deploy recognition and various forms of cognition gets turned on its head, or should we say back on its feet.

I explore these issues through a focus on three central research questions. Firstly I ask, how is Irish alternative agriculture distinctive and how does it differ from conventional agriculture? This question suspends the assumption that alternative farms are qualitatively different and puts the onus on the researcher to provide an account of these differences and distinctive features as they occur in the present climate and in the Irish context. Secondly, I ask the core research question. Do Irish alternative farmers use recognition-based systems of engagement and exchange? How might disengagement from a recognitive stance (or the renewal of misrecognition) happen? This question seeks to establish evidence for the existence of recognitional forms and is suggestive of a dynamic process which is characterised by reversals to mainstream entrepreneurial forms of engagement. The question hopes to provoke a new approach to understanding this dynamic. Finally the third is an auxiliary question in support of the task set out in question two. Can the concept of distributed cognition be usefully employed to further explore aspects of recognition based engagement and exchange? This question allows for the tentative exploration of the ways in which situated and extended cognition enable recognitive exchange in the context of the alternative farms and their supporting networks.
Alternative and conventional approaches as they stand.

In Ireland there are many opposers of conventional agriculture. These opposers are part of a loose coalition of actors, strands of which originated in the organic, bio-dynamic or environmental movements, others such as members of community supported agriculture, food sovereignty organisations and the slow food movement are recent additions. Although these oppositions are a substantial counterweight to the ethos of productivism, destabilization of support for the conventional approach has come from other sources such as mainstream consumers. If one were to listen to Green Party politicians, climate activists and a growing number of scientific advisors, the tide is turning but slower than the (increasing) rate of destruction still being pursued. The following are just some of the more significant issues which have led to the mainstream food system being subjected to increased scrutiny

1) The demand for more organic or higher quality and artisan foods took root.
2) Food scares such as Human Variant CJD and the creation of antibiotic resistant bacteria on a massive scale put a dent in the legitimacy of conventional methods as the trusted source of safe food.
3) Fears in relation to long term effects of ingesting chemical residues and genetically altered food (GMO’s) helped mobilise support for alternative producers.
4) A growing international consensus on global threats caused or exacerbated by conventional agriculture, such as climate change, top-soil degradation, biodiversity loss and water pollution has become a permanent feature of the international scene.
5) Consensus at UN level and among NGOs has proposed that agroecology is the solution to global food scarcity/security threats accentuated by rising population, higher demand for meat and dairy in emerging economies, and competition for land from energy crop investors and property developers.
6) More recently the bio-nutrient content of conventionally produced food has been revealed to be poor, which correlates with depleted soils. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the conventional approach to agriculture is fighting for its survival but, due to
overwhelming private financial resources, consistently large state subsidies and a powerful political lobby, it could be around for some time yet. In fact, the balance of probability suggests that 1) it is not going to lose that fight and 2) it intends to co-opt its opponents and turn these problems (oppositions) into opportunities.

There are reasons to be hopeful if you support conventional methods. Ireland Inc standing out as a leading proponent of export agriculture and being committed to intensive production and the continuation of policies featuring the maximisation of output through conventional means. As part of the national lobby at EU level but also in terms of interest-group-based and corporate based power brokers, Irish actors (on the conventional side) have a reputation for punching above their weight and getting good deals. In contrast, Ireland lags behind its European counterparts in organic production relying instead on an undeserving green image. As one organic farmer told me “Ireland is green because lots of rain falls on it”, describing the government’s policies on sustainable agriculture as “total greenwash”. But more recently the pressure to make more profound changes is mounting.

For many years now the EU has encouraged its members states to minimize the damaging effects of conventional farming but has also given support for its continuance via subsidies. In many instances individual states are given a lot of latitude as to how to apply EU policy. As mentioned above intensive lobbying by well organised and well-funded conventional farmers has kept the conventional approach in a dominant position, while at the same time capturing huge proportions of EU budgets (CAP funding absorbed 73% in 1985, 37.2% in 2018 of the EU budgets [EU commission 2019]). Ireland has responded to various selection pressures (Geels 2010, 2011) emanating from consumers, citizens and from the EU policy makers by funding various schemes for promoting organic agriculture (Healy 2015), but also controversially, it funds schemes which allow conventional farmers to reduce harmful inputs incrementally. Many consider these increments too small, a sort of “bluff” sustainability exercise or greenwash.
The argument against this minimalist approach was given some weight when the government branded one version of these incremental improvements as “Origin Green” subsequently using this brand to market Irish farm produce abroad. Those who are eager to promote a middle ground where farmers pay increasing attention to soil biology and use cover crops to “fix” nutrients rather than applying manufactured inputs are also making their presence felt in Ireland. With these methods, termed biological farming, it is up to the farmer whether or not to use chemical inputs side by side with agro ecological methods. In this thesis the broad term alternative agriculture is used to describe all efforts to break away from conventional agriculture and implement agroecological methods in Ireland. Obviously, there are grey areas but tolerance for certain ambiguities is necessary in order to understand a situation that is in constant flux.\footnote{There are limits of course, for example “Origin Green” will be treated as conventional agriculture in this thesis but this is typical.}

Many people in industrial countries ask if there is some way to have more organic, biodynamic and community supported agriculture? Apart from paying people via subsidies and enticements to switch, is there a way to have more wholesome foods coming out of farms? But is that a request for a quantitative more or a qualitative more? Or does it really matter? Many alternative farmers are a little sceptical about the newly converted organic farmers, saying that these newcomers are doing it for the premium price and the subsidy payment. There is some evidence that this might be the case (Lund et al. 2002), but is it not preferable than a situation where those farmers continue chemical-based farming indefinitely? Not everyone agrees.

To determine how you might have more of something, it might be wise to look closer at its qualitative dimensions initially. If alternative ways of food provisioning dwells within its own microcosm, and develops incrementally via qualitative progressions, the question remains, how might it reach beyond this
point? In this dissertation it is proposed, that through recovering recognition-based systems of engagement and exchange, this kind of agriculture finds its feet and naturally migrates to new territories when conditions are optimal. A positive contagion effect if you will. Its proponents adapt to the soil and climatic conditions as well as social idiosyncrasies of that particular area, and that can take many years, even decades. It seems there are many questions of a qualitative nature that need answering.

The first task, in order to form a base line for further critique, and provide a starting point for structured research, was to examine alternative agricultural practices in the Irish context. To this end an introductory typology of Irish alternative agriculture was developed and this helped me conceptualise an approach and weed out some of the ambiguities present in the many shades of alterity. Then a selection of alternative farms was visited. Some of these visits yielded interviews with farmers, some more casual conversations with volunteers or yielded opportunities for participatory observation. In other cases organised farm walks were the first point of access which often provided further data collection opportunities.

Chapter outline

The remainder of this chapter provides an outline of the thesis structure. As just mentioned and detailed in the following chapter, an engagement with alternative farmers took place both at their place of work and in other contexts such as at conferences or on farm walks where the farmers were visiting other farms. An ethnographic approach was the primary method but the synthesis of this approach and that of grounded theory, is important to the overall methodology. Testimony of farmers and network actors was obtained by participation in farm activities and through more formal arrangements such as conducting interviews and this is detailed with reference to some aspects of the supporting literature in anthropology and sociology.

Scholarly work carried out in relation to alternative food networks and rural development in Europe is plentiful and in Chapter 2 as well as discussing methodology the texts thought to be relevant to the thesis are dealt with under headings such as “Considering the boundaries of alterity”, “Is allegiance
switching or crossing the divide a real problem for AFNs?” and “AFN structures that create distinctive practices and embedded formats”. On rural development the usefulness of recurring concepts such as multifunctionality and pluriactivity are examined while the rationale for the theoretical and analytical framework used which dominates chapters 4, 5 and 6 is laid out through a discussion of relevant work carried out on recognition and reification by authors such as Axel Honneth, Lukacs and Hegel. Finally the Vygotskian tradition and its impact on social research is summarised as is the concept of distributed cognition.

Chapter 3 gives a broad account of alternative farms in the Republic of Ireland 2018-2019, selecting 12 farms presented in three panels. Four beef and tillage farms are presented in panel 1, four farmer-educators and horticulturists in panel 2 and four CSA and box scheme operations in panel 3. In the second part of the chapter, consideration is given to the outcome of the interviews, conversations and observations. An attempt is made to conceptualise primary features that make alternative farms distinctive and this goes some way to answer the first research question (How is Irish alternative agriculture distinctive and how does it differ from conventional agriculture?). For instance, alternative farmers believe that they are improving the ecological capacity of their farmland and according to them, this is something that builds fertility and biodiversity over the longer term. Conventional farmers do not prioritise this aspect of agriculture. Organic, biodynamic, CSAs and biological farming are some of the ways farmers describe their approaches, others use phrases like ‘I’m just doing it’. This heterogeneity could be seen as a hinderance to the researcher, it can certainly be confusing at times, but the splintering might be there for a reason. One wonders if these ruptures are caused by pressure exerted from mainstream distribution systems and institutional actor’s bias towards a formulaic replication of products for what they term ‘niche’ markets. As one answers the question, what is alternative farming in Ireland today and how does it differ from conventional farming? one is presented with a puzzle. Contemporary theories such as social embeddedness, conventionalisation, bifurcation, reflexive localism, network
theory, moral economies, solidarity economies and so on, do seem to fall short on so many levels.

For example, conventional approaches to Irish agriculture are also tied to moral notions about authentic or traditional rural communities, display solidarity in certain circumstances, are keen to develop multiple networks and can tap into local revenue streams rather seamlessly. Embeddedness as a concept can also be applied to many aspects of conventional forms of agriculture. Although the proponents of these midlevel theoretical constructs have shown how the alternative forms of agriculture display distinctive and durable types of local networks with unique moral motivations, many other writers, including those associated with conventionalisation theory and entrepreneurial studies, were able to point to ambiguities within these arguments and to porous boundaries between the conventional and the alternative actors.

Taking this into account, the search for a different theoretical approach brought me to a combination of recognition theory (Honneth 1996, 2003, 2008) and Vygotskian approaches to social theory. The latter concerned ‘the more knowledgeable other’ and ‘distributed cognition’ but also the importance of social artefacts and the historical and social context of knowledge transfers.

Chapter 4 entitled ‘Exploring the Recognitional Stance’ presents extracts from the interviews or paraphrased accounts of recordings from farm walks or conferences as evidence. The purpose of this chapter was to broadly answer research question 2 (Do Irish alternative farmers use recognition-based systems of engagement and exchange? How might disengagement from a recognitive stance (or the renewal of misrecognition) happen?) and to identify areas of interest which could form the starting points for additional investigations or research agendas. The data appears to confirm that there are many behaviours, practices and social structures that exhibit a recognitional rather than a cognitional bias on Irish alternative farms or within the associated networks. For example, the issue of respecting the roots of a specific aspect of knowledge or a specific dialogue centring on soil health, might be an interesting area to examine. One subsection is entitled
‘Acknowledgement of the socio-cultural and historical context of the knowledge’. It was found that some proponents of the biological farming, and holistic management approach tend to ignore the fact that organic, biodynamic and natural farmers have been talking about many of the same issues as these ‘new kids on that block’ have just discovered. These original pioneers and disciples had developed solutions similar if not identical to these ‘new’ solutions. This forgetfulness or severance from previous versions, which had stressed connectedness, engaged praxis or moral, future-observing considerations is interesting from a recognition theory point of view but also from a Vygotskian standpoint as both might well depict such behaviours as cognitivist, utilitarian and detrimental to longer-term developmental concerns on an individual and societal level. Other proposed indicators of a recognitive stance were considered such as ‘Establishing and Maintaining Place-Based Opportunity’ which delved into ideas like creating a space, creating a product, pedagogical-role and providing a transformative dynamic to the local community. It was observed in the course of the research that more entrepreneurial alternative farmers tend to depart from the locale, extending their reach for strategic reasons. Their energies often become very much focused on that external effort. To acknowledge that local people are better off with local food provisioning, that their lives are improved if farmers invite them to their farm to learn about that natural space, the biodiversity and connectedness of all living things, this is part of a recognitional stance. When a farmer or collectively owned farm reinvests assets locally and cultivates a grounding of human and social capital, it is proposed that these behaviours can be seen as confirmation of the recognitional having primacy over the cognitional or the strategic.

Chapter 5 focuses on ‘distributed cognition’. It was thought that the use of recognition theory was plausible but lacked something. Some notion of extended or situated cognition seemed to fill that void possibly because farming is a very practice orientated occupation and distributed cognition is a useful tool in the analysis of communities of practice. The evidence presented in this chapter is an attempt to answer research question 3 (Can the concept of
**Introduction**

distributed cognition be usefully employed to further explore aspects of question (2)?) and it is thought to adequately demonstrate that synthesis of Honneth’s notions on recognition and the idea of extended cognition can be revealing and appears to be applicable in these kind of practice orientated surroundings. Seeing nature as a ‘creator and host of dispersed knowledge’ reflects how alternative farmers do their job. Some classic distributed cognition studies focus on the human actors who jointly superimpose themselves on linked technological thinking, measuring and information relaying machines as in the cockpit of an aeroplane. Alternative farmers see the natural world almost in the same way, as plants that have a mind of their own, sensing competition and responding with aggressive tactics or going to seed when they think the options for further growth have disappeared early in the season. They appear to think of each component of the natural world as having its own cognitive program and the overall integration effect is also thought of as a thinking being, akin to ‘mother nature’. This may be a heuristic device to convey something to others, what’s important for this study is that the farmer acknowledges that nature does know stuff, it knows itself. In fact the complexity of what nature is, and what it knows about itself is a source of fascination to the farmers as they are continually discovering more facts, more interconnectedness. Although it is not a cognitive performance in any way similar to that found in the human brain, the natural world has communication systems and intricacies of possible responses to any scenario, to any intervention from humans. It is not unreasonable to think of nature as a ‘creator and host of dispersed knowledge’.

The second main focus of this chapter is distributed cognition at the human to nonhuman interface. Alternative farmers are continually getting down on their hands and knees or picking up soil in their hands as they explain to the students, volunteers or visitors how they gain understanding about natural processes. Farmers involved in holistically managed grazing are plucking blades of grass or turning over cow dung in the fields to demonstrate how it happens. The thought processes of alternative farmers and the thought processes of their co-practitioners are very close to the actual soil, the grass plant or the crop of wheat. The farmer, employees and volunteers co-create the
cognitive exchanges at the interface where they interact with the previously mentioned host. This mirrors the kind of distribution or superimposition of human subjects over a nonhuman assemblage which Hutchins (1995) talks about in his classic ‘cognition in the wild’ except this is a different kind of wilderness.

Lastly, the deferral of cognitive tasks to new institutional forms is subjected to critical analysis. An example of one of these tasks is to explain to potential customers what kind of alternative agriculture a particular farm and its workers and volunteers represent. This when it is done with a certain level of competency can generate revenue, possible new relationships and network connections and perhaps also legitimacy with publics who may have had reservations about these types of operations. Normally the task would be distributed among various actors close to the farm or the network of customers or members (in the case of a CSA). Some farms just get to a level of complexity, in terms of socially orientated tasks, that it seems like a good idea to outsource part of the job. Even if the new institutional form carries with it certain ambiguities and these ambiguities will then be leaking into the narrative of the farm and its own network, this seems to be an acceptable exchange for some actors. This scenario is compared with farms which appear to consciously keep all their thinking tasks in-house. They seem to have thought through their strategy on how to communicate their ethos very clearly and more or less stick to it. Familial or single person operations may have the advantage of having a stable message to contend with.

Chapter 6 is where the main discussion takes place and where recommendations are proposed, contrasting the recognition-theoretic approach with some of the more effective approaches espoused by the AFN and European rural development literature. It discusses how some of the AFN literature may exhibit a less than adequate understanding of how the actors within AFNs actually contend with conflicting objectives on a day to day basis, and how those rural sociologist and human geographers, who are adept at interpreting these actor’s ecological, ethical and socio-economic aspirations, are sometimes not studied with sufficient attention to detail. This can form the
basis of weakly structured critiques of AFN literature which all too often goes unanswered.

Later the common good approach is weighed against private, acquisitive motivations which are ever present in market economies. Casting the crossing over from alternative to conventionalised versions of alterity in food provisioning as a cognitive process, at least in the initial stages, is thought to be a demonstration of how new insights become available to researchers by adopting recognition theory and distributed cognition theory as basic tools of analysis and interpretation but also shows how these are two compatible vantage points. Other suggestions which are said to lend credibility to the approach relate to testing concepts like the objectification of the persona of the farmer and the role of the farm as it moves towards a more entrepreneurial operation. This leads to the farm being reduced to a thing which is expected to perform, interpreted as leading to the redundancy of the recognitive stance.

As a subsection of this chapter is a discussion of what a synthesis of recognition theory and distributed cognition might look like. A Heuristic Map showing the relationship of recognitional and cognitional domains reflect some important aspects of Honneth’s rehabilitation of the ‘reification’ concept (2008). As discussed in the literature review the Vygotskian approach and Honneth’s association with Hegel and Lukacs all point to Hegelian, Marxist and Russian roots. As the above synthesis is something that may have a broader range of applicability, beyond alternative agriculture and AFNs, it was decided to refrain from possibly overstating its relevance to the task at hand. Recognitional stance and distributed cognition have been found to have complementary properties in the case of alternative agriculture and its supporting networks. That said, it is hard to consider the distinctive aspects of recognitional behaviours, practices and social structures without being aware of its flip side, the more abstract and calculative cognitive versions of same.

Recommendations for future research include the use of the term \textit{ecological entrepreneurship} to describe actors in conventional agriculture who are engaging with agroecological methods and are said to be discovering new
opportunities as a result. On a more theoretical level, the systematic compartmentalisation of the forms of recognition in the context of alternative agriculture and AFNs is thought to be a promising area for further study. This takes a Hegelian notion and brings it forward to the present day as a possible strategy. The precontractual relations of regard which was pointed out by Hegel are still relevant today and this suggests that institution building has not eviscerated the need for mutual recognition, even by actors in competitive situations.
Chapter 2
Literature, Theory and Methods

The following review explores some of the issues in the area of alternative agriculture in Ireland today as expressed in the home produced and internationally available literature. At the same time it attempts to give an up to date account of what the state of the art can offer the specific concerns elucidated by this thesis. It is obvious to those that are in tune with current trends in the literature that the focus on the fundamental nature of Alternative food networks (AFNs) and the New Rural Development Paradigm has somewhat decreased in recent years and many of the familiar authors have moved on to international perspectives on food systems or are following new interests such as Hybrid markets, Agroecology, Food security, Sustainable intensification, Ecological intensification, Peasant Agriculture, Genetic pollution. Despite this, the AFN and New Rural Paradigm literature needs to be looked at as an invaluable resource but one that has perhaps fallen prey to sub optimal conceptual tools. Embeddedness, conventionalisation, bifurcation, social network analysis, moral economies of food and de-peasantisation are some of the more interesting and frequently used ideas but thick ethnography still seems to be the methodology of choice for many AFN studies.

After dealing with the AFN and rural development (RD) literature as it stands, I decided that an alternative direction needed to be explored. The recognitional stance of alternative farmers and the actors within associated networks was viewed as a potential alternative strategy to the ones discussed in existing literature. With a view to this, the recognition theory of Honneth is explored in depth. Particular attention is paid to Honneth’s rehabilitation of Lukacs’s idea of reification. As an additional theoretical dimension the social research emanating from Vygotsky is assessed, particularly ideas around the socio-cultural context of learning environments and extended or (socially) distributed interpretations of cognition. The selection of literature in this section is not exhaustive as the intention is to provide the impetus to establish new ways of seeing the problems associated with alternative agriculture, not to
start a debate on the limits of cognitive science. It was thought that the investigation of the farmer’s recognitional stance (following Honneth’s lead), in conjunction with the conceptual tools available from distributed cognition (following Vygotsky’s lead), might provide interesting insights.

**Alternative Food network literature**

*Introducing the AFN literature*

The alternative food network’s literature of course involves many strands including the specific literatures pertaining to organic farming (in Ireland: Tovey 1999, Duram 2010, Läpple and Cullinan 2012, Läpple and Kelly 2015, Bord Bia 2014. Post-Organic farming, (Moore 2006) community supported agriculture, fair trade, the quality turn and localism (Whatmore et al 2003, Murdoch et al, 2000). Goodman et al (2014) provide a good overview, but the sheer breadth and scope of this text leaves us wondering if the alternative food networks umbrella is over-sized and unwieldy. Jarosz (2008) gives us a more manageable definition (see below), although defining alternative food networks remains problematic (Dansero and Puttilli 2014).

Extending that broad overview to conceptualise shifting positions of producers and retailers Goodman and Sage’s (2014) *Food Transgressions* provides a thought-provoking set of perspectives on how discursive and material boundaries are crossed. This is exemplified by Dixon et al.’s (2014) treatment of retail strategies. Fortunately, the diversity within *alternative food networks* literature allows for many disciplines and areas of study to co-evolve, as they struggle to keep up with the changing situation. Collin Sage (2003), during his tenure at the department of geography, UCC, contributes to our understanding of relational issues involved in West Cork alternative food networks. From a cultural practices and environmental values point of view, Goland (2002) looks at inconvenience as one possible obstacle to CSA membership and Worden, from a more institutional perspective (USDA’s SARE program),

In Europe, social movement organisations such as Urgenci have conducted their own research on CSAs. These institutional studies contribute to our understanding and show that work on alternative agriculture as opposed to alternative food in general requires a lot of fact gathering from dispersed communities. On an economic level, the literature suggests that farmers ignore the opportunity cost of their own labour (Connolly and Klaiber 2014, p1104), tend to rely on self-exploitation (Galt 2013) and sometimes produce precarious forms of employment (Weiler et al 2016). These farms are also susceptible to competition (Galt et al 2016, Marsden and Smith 2005, Sinnino and Marsden 2006 ,182) and are somewhat dependent on proximity to large urban settlements (Jarosz 2008).

**Considering the Boundaries of alterity**

AFNs are defined in four major ways 1) by shorter distances between producers and consumers 2) by smaller farm size and scale and organic or holistic farming methods, which are contrasted with large scale industrial agribusiness 3) by the existence of food purchasing venues such as food cooperatives, farmers markets and CSAs and local food-to-school linkages. 4) by a commitment to the social economic and environmental dimensions of sustainable food production, consumption and distribution. (Jarosz 2008).

According to Forssell and Lankoski (2015), the diversity of AFNs as they occur in real life calls for a case by case analysis of their sustainability benefits which helps avoid getting caught up in different discourses which attempt to differentiate one type of AFN from another or having to deal with the issue of the permeable boundaries between operations considered to be alternative or those considered to be conventional or not alternative enough. They, like those involved in the recent biological farming (Zimmer 2017) and holistic grazing initiatives (3LM), cross the divide and also view conventional contributions to
sustainability as worthy of consideration. Theoretical efforts to conceptualise AFNs have been hampered by the unclear lines of separation between the alternative and the conventional sectors. Sonnino and Marsden (2006) consider these ambiguities to be partly the result of intense competition between the two modes of operating but also attributable to their ‘emphases on differentiated and contested notions of quality’ (p182). The more abstract notions of difference are sometimes contradicted by case studies where conventional and alternative systems overlap in complex ways as depicted by Murdoch and Miele’s (1999) study of contemporary food production in Italy. Morris and Kirwan (2010) point to another conundrum when they propose that the intensification and personalisation of the connection between producers and consumers could inadvertently introduce rival fetishes rather than removing the food fetishes altogether which was suggested as a desirable outcome by some proponents of AFNs but also by a number of outside observers.

Is allegiance switching or crossing the divide a real problem for AFNs?

One of the perplexing aspects of this review was that little or no explanation was provided as regards the leakage of skills and resources away from alternative agriculture. I assumed this phenomenon was associated with a tendency of alternative farmers to become more entrepreneurial over time whether they be collective, familial or single operator farms. This I saw as a form of co-optation mobilised from within the network. AFN literature proposes a Polanyian explanation for such events via the concepts of embeddedness and disembeddedness (Winter 2003, Murdoch et al 2000). Eventually I thought that this explanation runs aground if one asks how many switches can be made? In other words, it does not adequately account for repeated switching from an embedded process to a disembedded and visa-versa. I was able to witness this kind of flitting over and back in the real world, but no adequate explanation existed in the literature. One way to address this might be to understand these processes as part of a reflexive engagement by actors with the conflicting demands put before them (Moore et
al 2014), but one that requires a reflexive and developmental approach from a research point of view as well, in order to apprehend the true nature of these happenings (Attia and Edge 2017). In this case the expression of embeddedness might have to be understood in the temporal or socio-cultural context and the distinct pressures experienced by the actors. Goodman et al. describe both consumers and producers within AFNs as being involved in reflexive communities of practice ‘whose repertories create new material and symbolic spaces’ (Goodman et al 2014, p7). As part of the background to this statement Goodman et al., it seems, are against the ‘dogmatic politics of perfection’ and prefer to adopt reflexive localism as a theoretical solution which counters the ills of purist narrative.

It is part of the central hypothesis of this research that, despite the laudable aspects of these approaches, there still exists a problem without a solution. Remember that Goodman et al.’s definition of AFNs uses the term rapidly mainstreaming and they see normative qualifiers and claims to purity as likely to lead to even more co-optation (Goodman et al 2014 p12). It is proposed, as an expected outcome of this research, that the situation can be remedied by a detailed examination of recognition-based thinking and how that interacts with a calculative, objectifying stance across many versions of alterity (Honneth 2008). It is impossible to escape the fact that leakage of valuable resources (whether they be concrete forms of capital, symbolic or discursive creations or just relations with paying customers) is problematic for strongly alternative sectors of the networks and may lead to too many hybrids and confusion due to the multiple claims to the same notional space (Holloway et al 2007).

Knowledge and knowledge transfers pertaining to AFNs

Current research is said to enhance our understanding of alternative food provisioning systems as ‘socio-ecological assemblages of contested knowledges and collective learning’ (Goodman et al. 2014, p 35) and bridge the gap between the production orientated view of things and the cultural understandings of consumptive practices. This uniting of producer-based knowledge and consumer-based knowledge has already happened to a greater
or lesser extent within the communities of practice (Tovey 1999). Jarosz (2008) refers to the research of other writers claiming that face to face contact may help to stabilise the farmers income but also increases trust between growers and eaters and within the community in general. She extends these benefits to include increases in the transfer of knowledge and understanding about their food, including the social and environmental conditions needed for its production (p234). In a similar vein Collin Sage cites Lee (2000) who had parallel findings in a European context:

…in addition to the desired product, the buyer gains insight into the production system, status and identity associated with the consumption of a good with limited distribution, and enhanced expertise, for example suggested recipes, ways of preparing or serving the food (Sage 2003 p48).

Although according to Carrol and Fahey (2015), consumers understanding of alternative concepts such as localism must be further interrogated to screen for a plurality of interpretations some of which are clearly wide of the mark. That said it’s obviously a long-term process to re-educate both farmers and consumers and erroneous assumptions are to be expected. The reader will become aware through reading the thesis and delving into some of the texts referred to that it takes up to five years to bring grassland back to biological health after chemical based monocropping. In contrast, culturally engrained habits of human actors are possibly more durable and more difficult to eliminate than the weeds that first take root when the herbicide is withdrawn during the cleansing process.

The pervasive positivist approach embraced by scientific methodology and typically applied to agricultural practices has led to ignorance relating to local conditions and that is where alternative farming has fallen on its feet (Pretty 1995, p1249). This is where farmer to farmer knowledge transfers are important. Hassanein and Kloppenburg (1995) have demonstrated that farmers need not be trapped in the idiosyncratic knowledge structures available locally if they instigate the formation of horizontal knowledge structures specifically for pooling knowledge and arriving at sustainable and creative solutions. For
instance, Läpple and Kelly (2015) found that proximity to organic dry stock farmers correlated positively with organic conversion rates for Irish dry stock farmers, indicating that informal farmer to farmer learning was taking place. Taking a historical view, it appears the influence of pioneering farmers (Tovey 1999), who settled where the land was cheap in Ireland 30 or 40 years ago, is still in evidence today as clusters of organic farms have flourished down through the years in places like West Cork and County Leitrim (Läpple and Cullinan 2012). Farmer Educators such as Allan Savory (Savory and Butterfield 1999), Garry Zimmer (Zimmer 2017) and Dan Kitteridge (Biological Farm Conference Tullamore 2018) are examples of farmers involved in the proliferation of similar horizontal knowledge transfers in recent years and these actors have had an impact on the Irish scene. They make good use of social networks and all are poised to be financially much better off by extending their influences on an international stage.

**Looking at pedagogical roles amongst AFN actors**

Etmansky and Mitchel (2017), casting the emergence of organic agriculture as a food justice response to the negative impacts of industrial agriculture, depict organic farmers as positioning themselves to lead the transformation of food systems and as ‘educators addressing the complex socio-economic and environmental challenges we face today’(p41). Their research results indicate that these farms provide an ideal space for ‘informal, incidental and self-directed learning’ (Etmansky and Mitchel 2017, p41). Others such as Pretty (1995) and Salomonsson et al. (2008), have emphasized the need for sustainable forms of agriculture and its supporting structures to initiate patterns of ongoing learning rather than being taught by professionals who are often skilled in a singular discipline and Chambers (1993), supports this view in a rural development context, claiming that resource poor farmers are naturally more diverse, are comfortable with combined crop, animal and tree environments and should be consulted in a meaningful way when policy makers or project designers are searching for solutions.
Everson (2015) takes up the idea of incidental and informal, self-directed learning for CSA members (customers who share risks and rewards with the farmer), but also proposes that the CSA farmer is in a particularly strategic position to influence or change the way their community members think. As we have seen the literature on AFNs supports the idea of increased trust between farmers and consumers as one of the key transformative elements. In general, supportive pedagogical relationships grounded in values such as trust, care and reciprocity have a positive impact on learning outcomes as pointed out by King (2017 p84) and this certainly appears to fit the CSA model.

Summer and Wever (2017) demonstrate through their study of social learning patterns in an organic food co-op network that organisational structures can grow out of farmers production choices and the socio-ecological framing of producer activities. The resulting learning process can then move away from the farmer into democratic restructuring of the food system along co-operative, solidary lines:

In terms of solidarity learning, participants in the study learned spontaneously and unpredictably through the myriad social interactions inherent in being both a cooperative and a member of the LOFC Network (Summer and Wever 2017 p201)

In the preface I discussed the work of Fukuoka in Japan, Steiner in Germany and Albert Howard in Britain who pioneered a response to the destructive pathway that industrial agricultural practices had opened up. Although Steiner was not a farmer, he was approached by others who asked him to get involved so the initiation process came from farmers. Natural farming, bio-dynamic and organic farming methods provides for accumulation and dispersal of knowledge through inventive and informal pedagogies as well as formal training which has more recently been institutionalised and grant aided in many parts of the world, including Ireland.
**AFN structures that create distinctive practices and embedded formats.**

Many theorists are in favour of a process-orientated focus which acknowledges the practical day to day shifts contributing towards a highly differentiated alterity (Jarosz 2008, Goodman et al. 2014). Magloire et al. (2014 b) conducting a study in Italy were interested in social embeddedness related to attitudes of farmers and whether these attitudes were found to be more intensive depending on different direct sales formats, for instance, the farmers markets (conventional or organic), solidarity purchasing arrangements or box schemes. The collaborative input among the producers was found to be greatest in the solidarity purchasing groups but still significant relating to the farmers market venues (2014, p106). These practices enabled and maintained by a form of social embeddedness which collapse the spaces between producers and consumers are also reflected in Sages (2003) ‘relations of regard’ although he incorporates another factor, that of ‘ecological embeddedness’, in his definition of good food (p50).

Morris and Kirwan (2011) suggest that practices engaged in at farm level which involve respectful human interaction with natural processes could be understood as ‘ecological embeddedness’ and this could compliment social embeddedness factors. The producer can then communicate the on-farm regenerative process to ‘develop product quality, distinctiveness and trust’ (p325). If the idea of ecological embeddedness were to be expanded throughout the network, improvements at farm level must be recognised and become part of the consumers purchasing decision (Morris and Kirwan 2011). Nevertheless, Sage (2003) cites Marsden et al. (2000) perhaps as a warning that other practices are being adopted by small producers which appear to be an act of disembedding, or of undoing initial distanitation from mainstream food provisioning. He refers to the increasing ties between corporate retailers and the artisan or organic producers, something which is taken up years later in Goodman and Sage (eds) *Food Transgressions: Making Sense of Contemporary Food Politics* (2013) where the authors are partly concerned
with the material and discursive transgressions in the food system. Taken together these departures from AFNs and partial capitulations to the industrial food provisioning system suggests a more complex and diverse producer–customer interface.

Although Hinrichs (2003) acknowledges that the beginnings of awareness around local food can be traced to direct marketing venues, she chooses food banquets which emphasise local food (prepared by local chefs in Iowa) as her area of study. Even though this is not a practice relating to the everyday, it nevertheless challenges what she sees as the compartmentalisation or segregation of producers and consumers common to all conventional food systems.

What may be increasingly important about the Iowa grown banquet meal is how the common table begins to melt producer–customer distinctions……..the distinction between who grows and who eats is momentarily erased.. (Hinrichs 2003, p41)

Where practices create distinctiveness, it may be identified with specific cultures of resistance or solidarity, but the initial departure may mutate into a format that is more acceptable to the mainstream consumer. Practices that are honed down to an identifiable set of procedures such as those ‘certifiable’ as organic or bio-dynamic are said by some (Loconto and Hatanaka 2017, Tovey 1999) to be in danger of creating new institutional barriers to change.

The Grounding of Human and Social Capital as evidenced in the AFN literature

Tensions often arise on alternative farms and within their supporting organisations and associated networks as to the appropriate level of entrepreneurship and institutionalisation for an authentic alterity but also issues arise from the interrogation of linkages to corporate distributions systems (Sage 2003) and the embracing of import-export activities as viable extended networks. Tovey (1999) details the split in the support organisations associated with the organic movement in Ireland (early 1990s) which was
linked to the above tensions. She explains that the early adopters were more interested in the very act of withdrawal from the capitalist system by simply operating an organic farm which enabled ‘a shared preference for independence from the state and from market structures, and for loose and communal rather than formal and hierarchical ways of organizing themselves’ (Tovey 1997, p27). Across the Atlantic in the United States, the cost-price squeeze was forcing established organic farmers to become ‘more alternative’ and engage in direct marketing of their product (Sutherland 2013 cites Guptill). In the United States conventional farmers often hive off a few acres to run it as a CSA only because this is seen as an economically viable thing to do.

Another aspect of distinctive practices involves the honing of skills and the enriching of human capital. Sutherland (2013) identifies that new skills need to be learned in order to convert to organic farming as well as to cope with new cultural codes. Brunori and Rossi (2000), in their study of synergistic happenings on the wine routes, which incorporate many farms and rural businesses, acknowledge that cultural trends and influences are fed into the rural space via the arrival of alternative farmers and the presence of those returning to the countryside from city living. It needs to be understood that stabilisation of relationships and cultural adjustments takes time, particularly when a farm or a local area is transitioning to an alternative or local type of food provisioning (Seuneke et al. 2013, Horlings and Marsden 2014). Migliore et al (2015) contrast the social and environmental concerns of some AFN producers with their more (commercial) entrepreneurial AFN competitors, the former paying more attention to matters like relational sensitivity and connectedness to the rural environment.

Furthermore, we can observe the relationship between sustainable solutions and the level of empowerment through farmers’ attitudes to strengthening personal relationships with consumers and their desire to establish reciprocity with them along with trust and loyalty. (Migliore et al 2015, p897)

According to the literature, the creation and maintenance of human and social capital in the networks around alternative forms of agriculture recalibrates the
cultural codes and expectations of the network actors. It is part of the hypothesis of this work that the actors who are strongly alternative tend to approve of a more grounded and localised approach to maintaining the newly created capital while those actors who are more entrepreneurial are inclined to leverage human and social capital for the purpose of creating commercial opportunity.

**The New Rural Development Paradigm.**

**The new rural development paradigm: a European invention?**

In Europe the alternatives to productivist agriculture are often framed in the context of new visions of multifunctional agriculture with strong environmental and social concerns. Van der Ploeg, one of the leading proponents of rural development restructuring in Europe, he and his colleagues describe the “new paradigm” as having emerged slowly and persistently and was beginning to go beyond policy and practice to establish theoretical constructs (Van der Ploeg et al 2000). *Autonomous restructuring* (Horlings 2012) which often involves the identification of *dynamic synergies* (Brunori and Rossi 2000 p 417) with other rural actors needs to be supported by creative policy initiatives (Van der Ploeg et al. 2000 p396). Some of this restructuring responds to new markets developed as a result of a new connectedness between town and country (Horlings and Marsden 2014, p17). Other restructuring efforts include self-provisioning on a farm input level (Van de Ploeg 2010), network building and the exploitation of marketing and production synergies, these being vital components to ensure continuity. Some writers emphasise the need to set up and continue to demarcate the spatial and competitive relations around new formats (Marsden and Smith 2005).

Associated with the new vision for rural development is the idea of pursuing the integration of many aspects of rural life (Knickel and Renting 2000), via a
recombination of its constituent parts (Van der Ploeg et al. 2000 p399) which coincides with an increased level of entrepreneurial input at the farm and farm household level.

“Crucial for . . . entrepreneurial activity is the discovery of new channels for conversion and [especially the construction of] breakthroughs between spheres [of circulation].” Markets that reflect the new needs of society at large are obviously the most relevant in this respect. (van der Ploeg et al. 2000 cites Long 1977 p 396)

These propositions are more pragmatic, but no less elusive, than some of the stand-alone alternative food networks models such as CSA. As a consequence of being more inclusive, the new paradigm approach has gained approval from organisations such as the OECD (Horlings and Marsden 2012 p5) and EU policy makers. One wonders if the more conservative appeal is likely to put more radical components of the alternative agriculture network at a disadvantage and put the more entrepreneurial components at an advantage.

In Challenging the Professions: Frontiers for Rural Development Chambers (1993) discusses development paradigms. He describes a paradigm as a ‘coherent and mutually supportive pattern of concepts, values, methods and action, amendable to wide application’. He also says that ‘some of the new in the development paradigm is old, having been part of development thinking for some time’ (p2). He poses the question regarding the likelihood of the new succeeding in way that the old has failed. Although he is mainly talking about poorer farmers in the global south his points are relevant to the European context. Van der Ploeg et al. (2000), writing only a few years later, agrees with Chambers that rural development is now subjected to an increased rate of change, but in the European context the new paradigm is searching for ‘a new agricultural development model’ (p392). What the model might look like was beginning to manifest itself in practical terms but also in terms of ‘a multi-faceted and sometimes confusing theoretical model’ (van der Ploeg and Renting 2004). Although acknowledging that it was a slow and contentious process, some think the writers at that time may have underestimated the ability of productivist, commercial and corporate interests to hold their ground. But van der Ploeg and Renting (2004) respond robustly to criticism as
to the newness or otherwise of the rural development process they advocate and study.

Hence, what matters is not whether or not specific practices are ‘new’ or draw upon well-established cultural repertoires. What is decisive for their inclusion in the ‘RD box’ is whether they articulate in new ways with patterns of resource use, livelihood strategies, institutional arrangements and new development trajectories. (van der Ploeg and Renting 2004, p235)

They also state clearly that rural development is progressing alongside a cohort of ambitious and well-funded actors whose intentions to continue on the modernisation-productivist pathway is given huge support politically, but also there is a substantial resource diversion being spearheaded by actors heading down the consumption landscape and conservation route. Yet contentious matters cannot be swept aside so easily.

To begin with, take the idea of multifunctional farms. Feehan and O Connor (2009) writing about multifunctionality in Irish agriculture point to the contentious nature of the idea:

….. (Multifunctionality) has emerged as a bone of contention within the context of the WTO negotiations on agriculture. This debate has been ongoing between the ‘friends of multifunctionality’, who regard it as a key vehicle for safeguarding the multiple functions of agriculture, and its opponents who regard it as disguised protectionism (Burrell 2001; Thomson 2001; Mahe 2001; Potter and Burney 2002; Losch 2004). (Feehan and O’Connor (2009, p126)

Multifunctionality can be seen as part of the contradictory tendencies in policy options adopted by many governments (Sonnino and Marsden 2006, Feehan and O’Connor 2009). Governments, although through highly differentiated strategies, appear to be pushing for adoption of productivist and post productivist or alternative strategies at the same time, although again van der Ploeg and Renting (2004) point to the varied interfaces available as a result. Generally, it is part of EU policy to allow for many competing types of agriculture which was evident in the battles relating to contamination of non-genetically modified crops by genetically modified crops (EU Commission Recommendation 23 July 2003 ).
Pluri-activity, off farm work undertaken by marginalised farmers, is also a contentious element of the multifunctional mix as it is said to be only propping up a failing model (Kinsella et al. 2000). However, van Dr Ploeg and Renting 2004 were careful to stress that Kinsella et al. (2000) thought these much-disliked strategies for survival may in fact be a bridgehead, enabling a reorganization of resources away from dependency on financial institutions and agri-business models. And finally the idea of the countryside as a consumption landscape which is regulated in part by the adoption of the post-productivist paradigm (Feehan and O’Connor 2009) is another point of conflict as some would say it plays into the hands of dominant players, pitting farmers against businessmen and other new prospective landowners when land comes up for sale in Ireland (Jordan 2019). This could curtail options for food sovereignty but also introduces new tensions between farmers and non-farmers (van der Ploeg et al. 2000, van der Ploeg et al. 2015). Van der Ploeg et al. (2000) warn that these suggested changes are not always going to work out to the advantage of those intended to benefit from them, despite the claims of possible win-win situations.

Any search for a new development model for agriculture must proceed from a careful scrutiny and analysis of the new forms of co-operation and contradictions that are emerging between agricultural and non-agricultural economic actors. (van der Ploeg et al. 2000, p393)

This is where some difficult issues need to be addressed. One of the outstanding issues today is access to land for new entrants and land grabbing (van der Ploeg et al. 2015, Global policy.org 2013). If European farmers are leaving the land at a fairly high rate (Eurovia.org 2019) and much of the available land is being snapped up by non-farmers or larger farmers and large-scale food industry interests (van der Ploeg et al. 2015), how will new entrants to farming get access to land? Food sovereignty and access to land groups (accesstoland.eu) plus organisations associated with Europe Co-ordination Via Campesina are now trying desperately to influence policy to prevent land grabbing in the EU. In terms of consumption landscapes there is also the question of consumption and service orientated perspectives taking over from
small scale primary provisioning as a desirable goal. For those of us interested in revolutionising the food system in the direction of re-localising and agroecology, this kind of displacement may be a worrying development.

Macken-Walsh (2017) and Van der Ploeg (2003 p2) have identified failures in sponsored local partnerships in the EU. It seems funds targeting local partnerships did not benefit primary producers and this could have been due to the cultural economy being out of reach in terms of the skillsets normally available within these groups. Macken-Walsh (2017) cites Shortall (2008) when highlighting that farmers and fishermen might well be interested in schemes that help them stay in farming and fishing but are perhaps less interested in those which propose participation in other professions by way of a baptism of fire. On the level of autonomous restructuring however, better results were obtained by self-organising farmers and their extended networks.

Where the producers themselves change the way they do things, without the need for policy driven interventions, they are likely to increase the value capture involved, provided they have incorporated elements of civic agriculture, embraced shorter supply chains, or have acknowledged that synergistic opportunities with other rural activities are desirable. For Marsden and Smith (2005) new ways of distributing the returns on added value creation among producers and processors are enhanced by the possibility of creating protective alliances in the face of countervailing forces, but also by creating new layers of value capture through connecting productive features with services which are either compatible, or can be described as mutually reinforcing enterprises. Although Sonnino and Marsden (2006) cite Gilg and Battershill (1998) referring to the need for financial assistance to prevent ecological minded and quality conscious producers being (re)absorbed into more intensive production modes, they stress that accurate identification of problems and the motivation to find self-organised solutions is something that is deemed necessary in this autonomous space. Van der Ploeg and Frouws see some of these challenges in terms of taking calculated risks:

The willingness and the capacity to take risks was a third resource, evidently relating to the capacity to manage the indicated fields of insecurity in a distinguishable way (van der Ploeg and Frouws 1999, p340)
**Self-referential closure**, a term I borrowed from Luhmann’s systems theory (Luhmann 2004) seems to fit here. The protective advantage gained from unique knowledge creation, is something that exceeds the mere competitive advantage. Commercial competitiveness is more suitable to larger and better capitalised actors. However size isn’t everything. Even fairly large producers are having difficulties over the last 25 years or so (Van der Ploeg 2018). Van der Ploeg suggests some of these difficult situations can be negotiated by some of the smaller farms or farms which operate outside of the price squeeze, they are somehow able to adapt.

The less commoditised parts of agriculture that are able to distantiate decision making from the ‘logic of the market’ are the ones that are best placed to face the current crisis (van der Ploeg 2010 p11)

The rejection of the leadership of market orientated perspective, which allows for the designation of ways forward to be arrived at internally, is often linked to a reconfiguration of resources (van der Ploeg and Roep 2003, Knickel and Renting 2000 cite Ventura and Milone 2000) combining new and previously existing material and symbolic aspects of the rural scene. According to Brunori and Rossi (2000), the coherent amalgamation of these symbolic and material factors increases the chance of value being added to each product.

One would imagine that the kind of synergies discussed by Brunori and Rossi (2000) should be achievable along the western seaboard of Ireland, connecting farmers and fishermen to restaurants and hotels, but according to Macken-Walsh (2017) this has not materialised despite the very successful ‘Wild Atlantic Way’ tourist route which navigates the entire length of that landscape. This could be down to ineffective collaboration between diverse actors viewing things from either 1) productive-rural or 2) consumptive-rural perspectives.

Horlings et al. (2012) espouse the building of coalitions among disparate actors and see one of the fundamental elements as the provision of multiple
opportunities for entrepreneurs. This point is echoed in the idea of expanding the *economies of scale advantage* to something which can be achieved at a local or regional level rather than at firm level (Brunori and Rossi 2000). We can see that producers taking matters into their own hands and avoiding the trap of being subsidy driven, could spur many self-propelling initiatives to take root. Coming from the European perspective on rural development, the type of entrepreneurship referred to above is within a different class than productivist entrepreneurial farming and is often called *ecological entrepreneurship* (Marsden and Smith 2005). This term is not unproblematic as any researcher who chooses to use it may find. One should use the term sparingly while researching alternative farms. Alternative farmers of the more radical kind have an aversion to anything that makes them sound business orientated.

Van der Ploeg et al. (2009) discusses the root causes of classification problems, one being visualising the modernisation process as a purely quantitative development which saw convergence as the key. Empirical diversity which was present at the time (when this approach was in vogue) was ignored apart from seeing it as the point of departure, or jump point, which one entered the new optimum. They contrast the French and Dutch classification systems which later tried to reintroduce viewpoints that were compatible with true levels of diversity. Van der Ploeg 2010 (farming styles) discussing the Dutch farming styles approach points to the importance of recognising diverse approaches in farming.

……..under *ceteris paribus* conditions there is, time and again, a considerable and often highly relevant diversity. Quite often this diversity contains promising elements that allow for new solutions, new trajectories and new institutional arrangements. (Van der Ploeg 2010, p4)

But he also indicates that a co-production with nature may uncover interesting patterns of knowledge apprehension relating to the human to non-human interface, noting that this is something that is ongoing and has unknown potential.

Novelties emerge out of the ongoing interaction of man and living nature but are, as yet, not well understood. (Van der Ploeg 2010, p8)
Van der Ploeg (2003, 2010) has dealt with the difficulties of categorizing various kinds of farmers in his work on Dutch farming styles, but he also zooms out to a global perspective when he firstly separates the practices and cultures of peasant agriculture, entrepreneurial agriculture and capitalist agriculture. In his view broadening (adding non-agricultural activities such as agri-tourist enterprises), deepening, (gaining higher added value per unit, organic production, small scale processing), cost reduction (not through scale increase but by cutting out agribusiness in-puts such as using green manures and other holistic measures) and pluri-activity are activities which represent a restructuring of agriculture in Europe. He refers to this as a *re-peasantisation* which appears to be happening in various parts of the industrial world. In his own country (the Netherlands) for example, 1000 new small dairy operations were set up, many by new entrants to farming, between 1980 and 2006. He contests the notion that the only way farmers can meet the threat of intensifying global competition is to scale up and intensify farm operations, adopt high tech solutions, and to do so as quickly and on as many dimensions as possible.

He provides evidence from The Netherlands that shows the (productivist) entrepreneurial farms are becoming less efficient, more wasteful and more polluting over time and maintains that they are now contributing to the global warming crisis. Cost reductions (referred to as *farming economically* by the farmers) has become increasingly prominent as a top strategy for Dutch farmers (van der Ploeg 2018). It is also a strategy that the methodologies of *biological farming* (Zimmer, Biological Farm Conference Tullamore 2018) and *holistically managed grazing* (Savory, A. Butterfield, J 1999, 3LM) advocates in Ireland have promoted as a core objective. All of these depict

…… ‘new forms of heterogeneity’ that result from new rural development practices adopted on a spontaneous grassroots basis which taken together constitute the process of re-peasantisation within European. (Van der Ploeg 2018, P106)

Another important aspect of newly emerging peasant type farming is an altered view of technological inputs. According to Rissing (2016), new entrants to farming in the Mid-Western United States develop new economic
strategies which, coupled with a low-tech approach, often use machinery disposed of by previous generations of conventional farmers. Strategies of equipment sharing and reciprocal labour exchange help to avoid incurring debts or being subsumed into an alternative technology treadmill. Resource access through collaboration has also been a feature of European smaller scale initiatives (Brunori and Rossi 2000, p 409).

For van der Ploeg (2018) there are several design principles essential for skill orientated technologies to travel, but their transfer to other locations requires careful consideration of local culture, practices and skillsets. He lists the following as the five essential ingredients: Endogeneity (relying on local assets and blending with outside assets in limited ways), Bridging (making new connections between resources, actors or activities to create opportunities), Inward orientation (finding solutions locally via rounds of conceptualisation and materialization), Convertibility (non-market orientated transactions are possible and desirable) and finally Craftsmanship (the centrality of labour and experiential knowledge).

Van der Ploeg (2018) expands the principles discovered by Bray (1986), while studying farmers in the Far East, to describe the European farmer's adaptation of peasant like disposition towards all things technical as requiring a combination of both skill-orientated and sophisticated technologies. He uses the example of small-scale olive oil production which relies on an ‘ongoing process of engineering, creation and discovery’ (P115). The process also interlinks people, not just artefacts and material flows, in sophisticated handling of extended domains in the human, natural and technological worlds (p144).

Van der Ploeg remarks that the purely mechanical view of technology has an adverse relationship with variations and particularisms common to the above-mentioned intersection of human, natural and technological processes. Interestingly Lukács (1968) makes precisely the same point in his critique of capitalist production, noting that variation in the speed or skill levels of workers are seen as a negative factor. If one worker does his job exceptionally
well this will disrupt projected outcomes and in the reified world every ‘thing’ must fit with another ‘thing’ somewhere else in the system this is undesirable.

**Reification and recognition theory**

**Reification influenced and Recognition influenced social forms**

Georg Lukács (1968) in *History and Class Consciousness*, combined elements of Marx, Simmel and Weber to formulate his theory of reification. He saw the commodity structure, once it had become the dominant form of social organisation, as wielding supreme power to generate a kind of forgetfulness of our true nature and our relationships with others, but also distorted the way things related to other things in the productive process.

The essence of commodity-structure has often been pointed out. Its basis is that a relation between people takes on the character of a thing and thus acquires a 'phantom objectivity', an autonomy that seems so strictly rational and all-embracing as to conceal every trace of its fundamental nature: the relation between people. (Lukács 1968, p83)

The ‘disintegrating effect’ of the commodity exchange as it permeates every aspect of a life world, ‘decomposing’ all community structures, overcomes the episodic nature of commodification in pre-capitalist societies. In these societies, the use-value of objects being exchanged was the basis of transactions. Where there once was a multiplicity of forms regulating the metabolism of human society now, in capitalist society, the universal structuring principle of commodity exchange takes over. According to Lukacs the category of ‘commodity’ itself undergoes transformation from a type of exchange to become the ‘universal category of society as a whole’ (p87) and this is where reification subsumes all other relations, penetrating even the inner subjective process of people’s consciousness.

Subjectively (where the market economy has been fully developed) a man's activity becomes estranged from himself, it turns into a commodity which, subject to the non-
human objectivity of the natural laws of society, must go its own way independently of man just like any consumer article. (Lukács 1968, p87)

We see that Lukács is horrified by the loss of human identity and what he calls their true objectivity or true purpose. As van der Ploeg (2018) alluded to in his discussion of small scale versus large scale olive oil production the loss of sophistication on the human side of the production process, the co-ordination of various skilled inputs together with the material flows, but he also refers specifically to the skilled operator’s sensitivity to the worries of the farmers who need the harvest to work in order to supply the income for the coming year. Here Lukacs foresees the problem van der Ploeg has identified:

…..from the handicraft via co-operation and manufacture to machine industry we can see a continuous trend towards greater rationalisation, the progressive elimination of the qualitative, human and individual attributes of the worker….This destroys the organic necessity with which inter-related special operations are unified in the end-product. (Lukács 1968, p88-89)

And finally, the idiosyncratic nature of the labourer, whether she be quick or slow, skilful or clumsy, thoughtful or practical, is not only irrelevant, it is seen as a problem that needs to be eliminated. The peasant-type farmer described by van der Ploeg, could not be more distinctive, independent and autonomy seeking. To convert that into the largely ‘indoor’ worker doing repetitive tasks and paying copious amounts of money to agri-business firms and financial institutions is no mean feat and this admirably demonstrates Lukács’s point.

In consequence of the rationalisation of the work-process the human qualities and idiosyncrasies of the worker appear increasingly as mere sources of error when contrasted with these abstract special laws functioning according to rational predictions (Lukács 1968, p89).

For Lukács it is not that all this represents a moral wrong doing, nor does he see it as an epistemic category mistake or a repeated perceptual error made by citizens but rather that a more rational and more suitable outcome can be obtained for human kind when the commodity form is abolished as the organising structure. Reification enables certain pathologies of the social to persist (Honneth 2008). Here, as Honneth’s attempts to revive reification as a
useful concept in *Reification: A New look at an Old Idea*, he explains what he thinks Lukács’s approach amounts to theoretically:

Although Lukács abstains entirely from the use of moral terminology, his analysis of reification is obviously not without normative content. After all, his mere use of the concept of “reification” betrays his assumption that the phenomena he describes are in fact deviations from a “genuine” or “proper” stance toward the world… For Lukács does not regard reification as a violation of moral principles but as a deviation from a kind of human praxis or worldview essentially characteristic of the rationality of our form of life… In this sense, Lukács’s analysis can be said to deliver a social-ontological explanation of a certain pathology found in our life practices. (Honneth 2008 p95)

So reification classifies a kind of deviant behaviour which runs contrary to the type of engaged praxis which we are all capable of. At the outset of his critique of Lukács’s work Honneth is sceptical that in today’s world where *exacting demands* are placed on *strategic and calculating activity* it might be foolhardy to expect any return from the use of such an idea.

Everyone agrees that Lukács has strayed into psychological territory and that he is too rigid as regards the pervasiveness and totalising effect of reification (Honneth 2008). Later in this review we will discuss the work of Vygotskian approaches to social research and this ties in with the Hegelian, Marxist and Russian sphere of influence where historical and socio-cultural contexts for action are given more emphasis. Honneth is also accused of being too psychological, but also dualistic in his approach (Strydomn 2012) but he at least puts considerable space between his interpretation and that of Lukács on the subject of reification as he transforms it into a more tolerant and adaptable theory of forgetfulness coupled with the more desirable stance of recognition. Honneth here points to the psychological positioning of Lukács when considering the concept of reification:

the concept clearly designates a cognitive occurrence in which something that does not possess thing-like characteristics in itself (e.g., something human) comes to be regarded as a thing… for they can then no longer avoid perceiving the elements of a given situation solely in relation to the utility that these elements might have for their egocentric calculations. This shift of perspective leads in many different directions, which for Lukács constitute just as many forms of reification (Honneth 2008, P96)
This link to cognition together with reference to calculative behaviours and the multiplicity of operations performed will prove to be important for later comparisons of detached cognitive versus recognitional ways of approaching human action. It should become clearer to the reader as the thesis progresses that the above theoretical opposition may prove useful in finding an explanation for many empirically verifiable actions by the actors within alternative agriculture and its associated networks.

Honneth clearly lays out the extent of the behaviours which fall under the spell of a reified consciousness and these are things we take for granted in the competitive capitalist society of today, Lukacs (1968) calls this our ‘second nature’ subjugation. Although the recent threat of extinction as a species has given us another reason to question these norms of behaviour, we seem to be clinging to them all the more desperately (Collomb 2014). The kind of contemplation and detachment described by Lukacs is a distinct mode of passive unemotional observation of all material and social events forming part of ‘multi-layered and stable syndrome of distorted consciousness’ (Honneth 2008, p 99)

…. diverse modes of behavior ranging from stubborn egoism and detachment to primarily economic interests all come together in the attitude defined by Lukács as being “reifying. (Honneth 2008, p97)…..(the) shift of perspective is accompanied by a “reifying” perception of all relevant situational elements, since the objects to be exchanged, the exchanging partners, and finally one’s own personal talents may be appraised only in accordance with how their quantitative characteristics might make them useful for the pursuit of profit. (Honneth 2008, p99)

Honneth sees it as a tricky proposition to bypass the idea of determining which acts are morally reproachable, and instead concentrate on constructing a viable human praxis which appears to be concealed or temporarily out of sight. How do we know which is the proper praxis? In the case of agroecology, it may be a slightly simpler question to answer as the original peasant type farming is still in existence throughout the world (van der Ploeg 2018) and provides food for more human beings than industrial farming (Via Campesina August 2017). For other forms of production, and the complex institutional arrangements that support them, there may be a much higher level of normative qualification to contend with.
we are indeed confronted with the much more difficult task of demonstrating the existence of a “true” or “genuine” praxis over and against its distorted or atrophied form.... This kind of notion, however, draws its justification much more strongly from social ontology or philosophical anthropology than from the sphere customarily termed moral philosophy or ethics. (Honneth 2008, P100)

The fact that Lukacs suggests a world without reification would allow the individual to experience the world in an unmediated fashion compatible with the organic part of his personality, making his encounter qualitatively unique, is evidence that there are too many flaws in the theoretical justification of Lukacs’s project as far as Honneth is concerned. He nevertheless perseveres in his attempt to rehabilitate the theory for our time. Taking on board the work of Martin Heidegger (Being and time), John Dewey (Qualitative Thought) and Stanley Cavell (Knowing and Acknowledging) Honneth opens up similar notions of empathic engagement, acknowledgement and immediacy. Firstly Heidegger:

……by offering an existential-phenomenological analysis intended to demonstrate that the world is always already disclosed to human beings in their everyday activity. According to Heidegger, we do not encounter reality in the stance of a cognitive subject, but rather we always already practically cope with the world in such a way that it is given to us as a field of practical significance. (Honneth 2008, p104)

Heidegger’s notion of ‘care’ allows for engagement with inanimate objects and other non-human beings which again relates to this thesis as the actors (farmers and land based workers) spend much of their day in contact with these forms and in some cases put a very high value on the specificity of their condition. This must not be confused with the everyday use of the word ‘care’ considering his work was written in German.

both Heidegger and Lukácis intended their notions of praxis to encompass a person’s dealings both with other persons and with his or her surroundings casts doubt on this hypothesis. They did not conceive of the stance embodied by “care” or by “empathetic” engagement as applying solely to the other subject involved in human interaction but in principle to any and every object involved in the context of human praxis. (Honneth 2008, P108)

Again Honneth shows where both thinkers are heading, it seems very much an engagement with the full breadth of human interactions (included the mental
processes involved) whether they be with other persons, non-human life forms, or the material world. Finally, he combines Heidegger’s notion of care with Hegelian recognition to assert his central idea that the recognitional stance can be seen as preceding cognitive processes.

...the assertion that the attitude of care enjoys not only a genetic but also a conceptual priority over a neutral cognition of reality. I intend subsequently to reformulate this assertion by cautiously replacing the Heideggerian notion of “care” with the originally Hegelian category of “recognition.” In this way I believe it is possible to justify the hypothesis that a recognitional stance enjoys a genetic and categorial priority over all other attitudes toward the self and the world.  

Although not inclined towards the radical European idea of reification, Dewey was in tune with similar notions of engagement which, according to Honneth, was a remarkable piece of contemporaneous philosophising

Dewey’s reflections boil down to the assertion that every rational understanding of the world is always already bound up with a holistic form of experience, in which all elements of a given situation are qualitatively disclosed from a perspective of engaged involvement.  

Honneth determines that concern for human destiny expressed by Dewey and Heidegger ‘stood at the origin of the linguistic process of abstraction’, which is what was at the heart of Dewey’s work at the time. We can take it that abstraction is ultimately driven by a future orientated concern for human survival and enrichment, whereas immediacy, or the given, is more primordial and has primacy. Dewey’s notion of forgetting the original emotive or qualitative beginnings of a cognitive process as being detrimental, brings us to Honneth’s notion of forgetfulness as one of the key explanatory underpinnings of how he thinks reification could take place.

First of all, he concedes, where Lukacs stands firm, that the many complex tasks in today’s social organisational forms require a purely cognitive apprehension of the situation and this paves the way for a shared space between the polarities of detached and calculative mode on the one hand and the recognitional mode on the other. The latter, he identifies as having primacy over the former. The relationship between the two needs to be worked out as a theoretical project.
One possible way of avoiding Lukács’s mistake might be to draw upon external criteria in order to decide in which spheres a recognitional stance is required, and in which spheres an objectifying stance is more functionally appropriate. (p127)…… these two kinds of stances relate to one another: they are either transparent to each other or obscure, accessible or inaccessible. In the first case, the act of cognition or detached observation remains conscious of its dependence on an antecedent act of recognition; in the second case, it has freed itself of this dependency and deludes itself that it has become autonomous of all non-epistemic prerequisites. (Honneth 2008 p128)

In other writings Honneth asserts that the pathologies of the social (Honneth 2007) which inhibit a more natural and engaged praxis becoming commonplace, need to be understood in part as a withholding of recognition. Importantly, Lukacs implies something was lost. From this notion, Honneth raises the prospect that reified social forms also involves forgetfulness. In fact Honneth finishes by seeing forgetfulness of recognition as the central act of ‘his’ idea of reification.

Lastly, Honneth refers to Cavell’s work which suggest that we can only understand other people’s words and ideas if we have already accepted or acknowledged their emotional state or disposition towards a certain topic otherwise there are many aspects of our awareness which are disengaged. This goes beyond the idea that all I need is the pattern of your thought and actions and I can understand what you are about, something put forward ‘by those who claim that understanding other people requires nothing more than an understanding of their reasons for acting’ (p123).

we are able to understand the meaning of a particular class of linguistic propositions only if we are in that stance or attitude which he describes as “acknowledgment.” To put it briefly, the acknowledgment of the other constitutes a non-epistemic prerequisite for linguistic understanding. (Honneth 2008 p123)

The reader can see that it is possible to arrange as opposing forces a detached cognition or clinical thinking on one side, and a recognitional stance or engaged praxis on the other. Honneth has already relented, conceding that detached apprehension of human-input factors might have its place in complex tasks. He has also introduced the reader to the softer notions of forgetting or forgetfulness and of acknowledgement as being part of his rehabilitated reification. This softening of lines gives plenty of room for manoeuvre, but he
sticks to his assertion that recognition precedes cognition on a primordial or genetic level and although philosophically, this may very well be viable, for the purpose of this work it may be a bridge too far.

Here as I adapt Honneth’s and Lukacs’s work to a sociological problem, I need to emphasise that this could be considered as part of cognitive sociology of a real world scenario which can later be more closely identified with cognitive ethnography. I choose to see recognition and cognition as competitive ways of seeing the world. Mental processes that interchange very rapidly (inside the skull) are considered but also socially bounded processes where ‘rules of the game’ for one group prohibit certain forms of recognition being applied to specified others or things are scoped out. Reverting to Lukacs, I considered the emphasis that Lukacs puts on the productive process may suit the purpose of this work even though Honneth disagrees with some of his reasoning.

Farming is a productive process, even though alternative farming frames itself as neither productivist nor neo-productivist. This study, for instance, is somewhat producer-focused but from a non productivist perspective if you will. Interestingly, non-productivism requires a recognitional stance in order to function. To complicate matters, but also to take advantage of this proposed synthesis, hybridity, sometimes called ecological entrepreneurship, might be an (unconscious) methodology for incrementally slicing the recognitional wedge down to thinner and thinner slivers. I propose that some of the shortcomings of embeddedness theory applied to alternative agriculture and alternative food networks may be overcome by applying the work of these authors, but first there is the problem of cognition which happens outside the skull, sometimes referred to as extended cognition or distributed cognition. The next section deals with this problem by taking on a Vygotskian point of view.
Vygotskian Social Research and Distributed Cognition

Vygotskian social and psychological research
As stated earlier, Vygotskian approaches to social research ties in with the Hegelian, Marxist and Russian sphere of influence where historical and socio-cultural contexts for action are given more emphasis. In the west we instantly think of the scaffold theory of learning, the zone of proximal development and development psychology when we hear his name. In fact, according to Smagorinsky (2018), many of the finer points of Vygotsky’s work are perhaps misinterpreted due to mistranslation or a carelessness born out of a dislike of all things Russian.

ZPD gets explained in educational psychology textbooks, its presentation is (mis)presented to make it appear to be more of an information-processing, in-the-head phenomenon than the sociocultural, historically-grounded, socially-mediated developmental process that I believe Vygotsky intended. (Smagorinsky 2018 p71)

Vygotsky clearly took his anti-reductionist stance from Marx and his adherence to holism is attributed to both Marx and Gestalt Psychology. In keeping with the Marxist tradition, he was also mindful of 1) historical and socio-cultural impacts on learning environments, and the developmental process (social and individual). 2) the future observing aspect of human functioning as a natural part of our makeup. Daniels cites Lantolf (2004) referring to the socio-cultural not so much as a theory of social or cultural processes ‘but as a theory of mind… recognising the central role that social relationships and culturally constructed artefacts play in organising uniquely human forms of thinking’ (Daniels 2008, p 52).

As regards the future observing or planning component Vygotsky sees this as a key moment of development. This is interesting for the purposes of my research in the sense that the conventional approach to farming appears to prioritise the calculative mode of thinking when engaging in future observing or future planning. This is in accordance with the somewhat ‘prescribed’ entrepreneurial view of European farming (van der Ploeg 2018).
From a developmental point of view Vygotsky suggests that acquiring the ability to integrate the planning function of language into their approach to their surroundings radically alters an adolescent’s functioning. The way we use words can alter human activity. “Just as a mould gives shape to a substance, words can shape an activity into a structure. However, that structure may be changed …when planning for future action” (Vygotsky 1978 p25). (Daniels 2008 p9)

Vygotskian inspired research generally focusses not just on the developmental process of the individual in childhood or adolescence but both on a lifelong process and an intergenerational process which acknowledges the social context through which it learns and becomes a part of. The individual is for some socio-culturalists inseparable from the social context where it acts but others such as Sawyer 2002 argue that pitching for a dualistic take allows for specific kinds of research not least the area of micro sociological practices that mediate between the two.

Mediation processes which Lukacs (1968) spends considerable time discussing, is also part of the Vygotskian repertoire but, in Vygotsky’s case, these are more often referred to as tools or psychological tools. According to Daniels (2008), Wertsch claims that these mediational tools are historically situated and provide both ‘affordance and constraints on action’. Significantly, appropriation of these tools involves ‘makings one’s own the affordances and constraints inherent in the tool’. Also interesting from the point of view of this research he claims that if the tools have outlived their usefulness in a given situation, this will impede performance (Daniels 2008 p 61). As the thesis progresses, the reader will perhaps agree that the use of chemical fertilisers and the notion of maximising yield at almost any cost, even if it destroys the very soil that we all depend on, is probably a good example of physical and mediational tools which have outlived their usefulness.

Intrinsic to the Vygotskian way of thinking is that material and social artefacts are used as psychological tools, the socio-cultural context is at once a tool for learning and a space to do it in. But also, the learner acts within the space over a period of time, or an extended period of time. The situated nature of the learning also speaks to the irreducibility principle and a challenge to the cognitivist assertion that universal principles of learning apply everywhere, or
that set piece cognitive modules can, and perhaps should, be inserted to all cultural and temporal spaces. Even imagined futures can be seen as social artefacts in Vygotskian terms (Daniels 2008). Even this brief encounter demonstrates that Vygotskian social perspectives can be a rich source of holistic and social-developmental ideas which could complement or develop our understanding of the cognitive-cognitive divide Honneth (2008) alluded to in the previous section. I will now turn to another interesting facet of this approach which involves distributed and situated systems of cognition.

**Distributed cognition**

Vygotsky was an early advocate of extending the idea of the mind beyond the singular individual. Debates surrounding the boundaries of cognitive processes never really reached a conclusion and they continue to the present day. Understanding the human mind ‘as an emergent outcome of a cultural-historical process’ involving mediation by tools which are inherently cultural and historical is compatible with Vygotskian and Marxian viewpoints. Although Vygotsky being an educational specialist delves into the fineries of knowledge transfer noting that individuals receive the benefit of these mediations only if they have acquired the competencies to handle such tools, an acquisition which occurs in social settings with guidance of more knowledgeable others (Daniels 2008, p 76). Although for Dewey, who is also influential among distributed cognition innovators like Hutchins, knowledge transfer is not strictly speaking, a transferrable finished product but ‘a process or activity, rather than an acquisition’ (Osbeck and Nersessian 2014, P87).

Social and technical representations are co-created.

A central effort of D-Cog is to re-conceptualize representational systems as brain-and environment systems. A brain-and-environment differs from a brain-in-environment system because it does not assume or prioritize the brain or its representational processes. Instead, cultural and cognitive processes are not merely interrelated but are co-implicated. (Osbeck and Nersessian 2014, P87)

These external functions which go beyond the individual human skull are often seen as shared cognitive operations involving other people, technical inputs (including thinking machines or instrumentation [Hutchins 1995,
Hutchins and Klausen (1996), or environmentally embedded knowledges or signals, often non-human. They are also said to involve elements performed previously in a temporally or spatially distinct situation. To break out of the single-mind cognitive box involves entering into a recognitional or engaged praxis life world which is encouraged to be future observing. Vygotsky was by no means a cognitivist. According to Smagorinsky, his life was spent fighting this reductionist view of mental processes.

…..a fight against biological and cognitive understandings of human psychology. Instead, he was primarily concerned with how human environments are established and perpetuated through social practices designed to guide action toward cultural goals. In other words, the ZPD is more than simply what a teacher can do to help a student become more independent by first working collaboratively. It is far broader, deeper, and more complex than that conception. It has a developmental, historical, cultural, social, and future-oriented character that cannot be reduced to isolated learning episodes in classrooms. (Smagorinsky 2018 p71)

Daniels details that cognitive sociology, cognitive science and Vygotskian research strategies share some of the concerns about the shared, distributed or situated nature of cognitive processes which extend beyond the individual. Knowledge is co-ordinated between individuals and artefacts, between internal and external environments or structures, it is transformed through various representations and operations. Often seen as a socio-technical field, exemplified by the famous cognitive-ethnographic approach of Hutchins (1995), distributed cognition approaches to understanding multi-actor situations such as communities of practice are by no means a rarity, such as low-tech educational environments. Processes distributed over time can be thought of as having distributed cognitive occurrences if ‘earlier events transform the nature of later events’ (Daniels 2008, p 77 cites Hollan et al. 2000)

In Cognition in the Wild Hutchens (1995), describes how the human component amongst technical systems often provides the cognitional lubricant and micro level communications between all distributed elements of a human-technical assemblage as found in an aircraft cock pit or on the bridge of a ship.
This permits the human component of the system to act as a malleable and adaptable coordinating tissue, the job of which is to see to it that the proper coordinating activities are carried out. In their communication and in their joint actions, the members of the navigation team superimpose themselves on the network of material computational media. They provide the connecting tissue that moves representational state across the tools of the trade. (Hutchins 1995, p 888)

The reader may see common links between this kind of human-technical interface and the human-nature interface which happens on alternative farms. The farmer and his volunteers, employees and familial labour sources in some way superimpose themselves on the natural process or growth cycles when they say they try to ‘mimic nature’. Even more so when they execute coordinated (between many individuals) interventions while being mindful of planting times (seasonally and lunar cycles in biodynamic farms) soil temperature, moisture content of the soil and previous use of the soil over shorter and longer timescales. A cognitive-ethnographic study of this type of intervention would need to take into consideration the source of the skills and knowledge being applied in order to investigate if the cognitional event started somewhere else or at another time.

The subject of how distributed cognition and cognitive ethnography can be applied to the study of alternative farms will be elaborated on in chapter 6, looking at the interface between the human and non-human worlds, cognitive distributions over time and the deferral of cognitive tasks to other times or the tendency to delegate cognitive tasks to other (perhaps institutional) actors.

**Conclusion**

Although the literature on the fundamental nature of alternative food networks and the New Rural Paradigm has begun to fade in its intensity and in respect of the number of publications annually it remains a formidable expanse of literature with many contributors. In keeping with developments in the empirical world many writers have turned their attention to specific areas of interest uncovered by these approaches such as hybrid networks, food
sovereignty or food security issues, or the impact of global food systems on socio-economic systems and climate change objectives. One wonders if a new approach could re-energise the original debate pertaining to the fundamental nature of these alternative forms of agriculture and associated networks.

Perhaps seeing the whole spectrum through the recognitional lens may be a useful starting point if one were to pursue such a re-evaluation. Is there a way to perform essential tasks involved in alternative agriculture without the obligation to adopt a recognitional stance? In many ways van der Ploeg’s peasantries replicate the conditions for a cognitive frame of reference. The peasantries as a concept fall down, in my opinion, not on their own account but on the adjoining conceptualisation of their competitors, what van der Ploeg terms ‘entrepreneurial farmers’. It seems that entrepreneurship in the developed part of the world penetrates almost any walk of life and agriculture is no exception.

This can be problematic for theorists. For example, entrepreneurship is also present in van der Ploeg’s first world peasants, although it is framed as a type of ‘ecological entrepreneurship’, or some sort of redeployment of resources or reconfiguration of component parts. If converting half the farm into a tourist business allows the farmer to stay farming on the other half of his farm that’s a solution of a kind. Taking into account that this is in some way a reflection of a household economy approach, I nevertheless find it problematic to see this hypothetical tourist business as anything but entrepreneurship and certainly categorising it as ‘multifunctional agriculture’, ‘rural development’ or ‘peasantry’ has a certain level of validity, but it fails to identify obvious problems. Land is being taken out of production which means land from some other part of the world, probably formally peasant-owned, will have to be requisitioned for feeding the European consumer. The reader might agree that there are some ambiguities to be confronted in the literature on alternative farming in Europe. Hopefully this thesis can provoke some food for thought.
Methodology

Introducing the methodology

In this thesis the research process was guided by an ethnographic methodology but also influenced by grounded theory. Grounded theory ensured that the entire project functioned as an iterative process and was more concerned with constructing theoretical explanations rather than validation of evidence. Glaser (1967) reminds us that if one wants to generate meaningful theoretical categories from qualitative methods, evidence and processes geared to validating the accuracy of that evidence should not take on too much significance.

the evidence may not necessarily be accurate beyond a doubt (nor is it even in studies concerned only with accuracy), but the concept is undoubtedly a relevant theoretical abstraction about what is going on in the area studied (Glaser 1967 p 23).

The structural boundaries of the facts are established and reworked by revisiting the data and in some cases engaging in subsequent rounds of data gathering (Glasser 1967, Charmez 2006). Glaser again

The design involves a progressive building up from facts, through substantive to grounded formal theory. To generate substantive theory, we need many facts for the necessary comparative analysis; ethnographic studies, as well as direct gathering of data, are immensely useful for this purpose (Glaser 1967,p35)

At this point it is worth noting that ethnographic research methods which include participatory observation, interviews and conversations as well as discourse analysis, are not always compatible with a grounded theory approach and where such contradictions arose, particularly where testimony of informants was central, the ethnographic method was taken to be the primary method. As grounded theory emphasises the creation of new theoretical
categories as a central objective, I was keen to keep in mind and learn from some of its guiding principles. One is the above mentioned concern with validating evidence, and its deserved prominence in the overall strategy.

Although testimony is in some way self-evident, the interpretation imposed on the evidence may be questionable, or at least subject to interrogation, and this can then be seen as a validation process of sorts. There are also occasions where the testimony and its narrative qualities are not specifically targeted by the researcher, but they nevertheless arise as useful data. Here Adler et al (2017) give an example:

> It is also possible to conduct research on narrative identity on data that have not specifically been collected with narrative questions in mind. Many studies include free-response qualitative data, which may lend itself to narrative investigation (Adler et al 2017 p521).

From the outset I recognized that the field of rural sociology has certain unique characteristics relating to its highly dispersed sites and heterogeneous actors, characteristics which may also account for some of its conservative history and different developmental track in comparison to mainstream sociology (Lowe 2010). Still, the conservatism apparent in much of the literature justifies firstly taking a grounded theory approach, which is perhaps reserved for areas where little research has been done and secondly it calls for employing the concepts of mainstream sociology and social theory more vigorously to an area which is normally the domain of rural sociology. As Bourdieu (1975) says in *The specificity of the scientific field and the social conditions of the progress of reason*.

> “..epistemological conflicts are always, inseparably, political conflicts” (Bourdieu, 1975 p 21)

In other words we construct knowledges and interpretive frameworks from our own political perspective, and this can sometimes create conflict and less objective science. Methodology grounded in reality is in a better position to challenge the comfort zones occupied by previous researchers. I can assure the reader that nothing could be more politically influenced than the discourse on agriculture in the Republic of Ireland. At the same time, one must be
respectful of the good work done by geographers and sociologists working in this area and take notice of their methodological strategies.

The difficulties associated with getting to dispersed locations and dealing with informants who are fiercely independent and often resistant to mere academic inquiry (especially if carried out by a single individual), have to be factored in. It seemed that a policy of total immersion is good place to start, that is, participation on the farm itself. As the research progressed, it may be that the institutional or collective action “inside track” opens doors that provided easier access (farm walks, conferences, courses). Becoming a familiar face at these events helps, but in many ways, it was a case of getting as much data as possible while the window of opportunity was still open. It was my experience that accumulating ethnographic data in the form of participatory observation, conversations, semi-structured interviews as well as recording or note taking at conferences and farm walks or educational events was the way to go. The analysis of these notes and recordings at different stages along the way was conducive to building the picture, although it was by no means a static picture. Anyone involved in this kind of research in recent years will tell you just how fluid the picture is. Both conventional and alternative Irish agriculture are going through many changes.

In all I visited 25 farms in the Republic of Ireland. Many farms were open to several visits where one could drop by any time one was in the area, others required more formal access and permissions. I engaged in 100 hours of participatory observation shared between three farms. The geographical spread of the farms, west coast, midlands as well as northern and eastern counties allowed for a reasonably representative set of qualitative data. Also as the reader will see in chapter three, the types of alternative farms have been deliberately chosen so as to reflect many approaches including biodynamic, organic, the biological approach and CSAs. The structure of the farms in terms of ownership and labour patterns also reflected the heterogeneity that is present in the field. For example, familial farms operate differently to single person operations or collectively owned farms and this provided good opportunities for comparative analysis under different theoretical lenses. Also
there were the farmers whom I met while visiting other farms or while participating in farm walks or attending conferences.

**Ethical Considerations: Anonymisation of Data.**

Some would suggest that anonymity is impossible in qualitative research and that the high value placed on its use is purely utilitarian. For a quantitative researcher it is easily executed. “Indeed, it is simpler to erase or replace a name with ease and speed than to eliminate the distinctive characteristics of individuals” (Van Den Hoonaad 2003, P141). According to Van Den Hoonaad (2003) referring to ethnographic research the application of formulaic strategies, such as name changes, is not as effective as a more involved process initiated by the researcher and maintained at the various stages of the research process. Anonymity is generally seen as a continuum which slides along a scale where protection of the individual is on one end of the spectrum and maintaining the value and integrity of the research data holds sway on the other end (Saunders et al. 2015).

**Ethics Statement**

This research project will be conducted with full compliance of research ethics norms. As the sole investigator I will take full responsibility to explain, in appropriate detail, what the research is about to participants and describe how I intend to protect their identity. I have chosen three areas to be the primary focus as regards anonymisation. 1) Changing the names of all interviewees 2) avoidance of place-name identification of farms or naming on-farm or off-farm businesses where possible 3) avoidance of other identifying factors in cases where the informants indicate this to be their preference. All data will be deleted at the end of the study and participants are fully aware of their right to withdraw their consent at any time. These intentions will be communicated fully to the informants when seeking their consent. In the case where participants ask to be identified or named this request will be weighed against the desired uniformity of having all interviewees anonymised as a default strategy. It may be that changing the names of all interviewees could prove to be a better ‘message’ for the purpose of recruiting informants. Taking into
consideration that the subject matter of the thesis is not overly sensitive and
does not require confidentiality and recognising that the informants in this
sector of the economy appear to be relaxed about these issues it was thought to
be unnecessary to take extreme measures to conceal the identity of informants.
The exception to the name-change strategy will be those actors in the public
realm who give explicit permission to the author to quote from their
presentations or public discourse.

**Participatory Observation**

Fine (2003) refers to the opportunities for researchers to develop theoretical
structures by combining material from interviews with field notes but also by
taking into account the products of those being studied. Ethnographies which
emphasizes the value of spending long hours in the field allowing the
researcher to "explore the organised routines of behaviour" appear to be most
effective (Fine 2003 P 41). As I have worked as a volunteer and spent time
with the farmers, volunteers and other visitors to the farms, I have established
an understanding of how they work, and how they are connected to each other.
Observational techniques targeting practical skills and appropriateness or
effectiveness of specific actions (Zahle 2012) in the settings, allow for the
gathering of highly particularised data relating to practices, relational
knowledge transfers (Garicano and Rayo 2017), the status of practical
knowledge relative to other knowledge types, and perhaps to a lesser extent,
issues of subordination in this learning environment. Soon it becomes obvious
that tacit learning and informal instruction needs to be witnessed in situ. There
is certainly no substitute for getting your boots on the ground, preferably
returning to the same site multiple times. As one would expect, repeat visits
were infinitely more productive in terms of data retrieval at this stage of the
research. As I describe in detail below (see table 3.1), participation in, and
observation of, on-farm and off-farm activities is essential to get the desired immersive effect and make close engagement compulsory, for the researcher, if not for the farmers.

I summarise the usefulness and relevance of the various observation opportunities which occur between spring 2018 and October 2019 in the Republic of Ireland. The early part of this, spring and summer 2018, happened to be a traumatic time for Irish farmers in general due to extreme weather events, but less so for alternative farmers. One farmer gave me enough access during the early stages of the participation/observation stage to test strategies for deepening engagement with informants and allowed me to develop confidence as a "rural" researcher. It was also useful to me as I struggled to pick up much needed knowledge about organic farm practices. Apart from the crash course in farming, I soon became aware of the value of being present on a working farm as these observation opportunities could be used to check and cross reference what is being said with what is being done. Here Kawulich (2005) cites Marshall and Rossman (1995) in this regard:

Participant observation allows researchers to check definitions of terms that participants use in interviews, observe events that informants may be unable or unwilling to share.............observe situations informants have described in interviews, thereby making them aware of distortions or inaccuracies in description provided by those informants (Kawulich 2006 p3).

Likewise, social artefacts such as flyers, printed promotional material and websites, which are part of the product of the farm, may be compared with one's observations of the lived experience. The more time you spend on site the more the informant is likely to reveal. Not just by going about his or her business, but also by becoming a familiar face, you get to hear the gossip and you get to be there for the cranky moments. Often the revelation is not to the disadvantage of the farmer, they are merely "telling it like it is" without the filter.
Farm activities and observation opportunities

A list of observation activities combined as relationship building and data gathering. It involved gathering data relevant to the lifestyle and practices of the farmer but also how she may have changed and re-orientated her activities over time (See table 3.1). In some cases, the farmer may have substituted food production activities with other activities. The researcher needs to get some sort of detailed account of these changes. Alternative farmers, more than their conventional counterparts, have a theory of change (ideas around adaptation to social and ecological demands which manifest on multiple levels). Earlier in the formation of the methodology for this thesis the primary research motivation called for a contribution analysis approach and in this sense perhaps it should take account of the theory of change of the actors involved in the network. As the work progressed, preoccupations with the recognitional stance of the farmer became more prominent but I like to think that these approaches are two ways of thinking about the same thing. The contribution of alternative farmers outside of the provisioning of primary product is their demonstration that in certain sectors of the economy and in certain areas of human interaction, recovering recognitional systems of engagement and exchange is the most effective strategy (See Table 3.1).
Table 3.1 Participation in on-farm and off-farm activities: usefulness and relevance of observation opportunities (sample)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Opportunity</th>
<th>Usefulness to researcher</th>
<th>Relevance to Research Q</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>planting seeds, placing in suitable locations within propagation tunnels, replanting to larger pots within the tunnels</td>
<td>Propagation Tunnels Farm A</td>
<td>Observation of organic farmer in his work environment. Present during conversations and partaking in conversations</td>
<td>Relationship building with farmer and volunteer. Contact helps create a profile of the Farmer.</td>
<td>Organic Farm Practices. Propagation Skills. Mentoring of organic horticulture student.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Planting young plants out in main growing tunnels, old plants uprooted, and weeds taken out (all composted).</td>
<td>Main growing tunnels Farm A</td>
<td>Observation of organic farmer in his work environment.</td>
<td>Ask short questions about intensity of production at this time of year</td>
<td>Timing of planting to maximise yield while growing under plastic. Maximisation theory from anthropology of economics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Beds prepared with chicken manure pellets, sea weed dust added and covered with layer of soil</td>
<td>Main growing tunnels Farm A</td>
<td>Observation of organic farmer in his work environment</td>
<td>Ask short question about inputs such as manures and paper used to suppress weed growth</td>
<td>External inputs that are manufactured. Commodification of inputs in organic farming</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Interviews were semi structured and were done face to face, over the phone, or via email. The length of the interviews lasted roughly 30 minutes and, in many cases, these were followed up by either a further interview or conversations with the farmer or institutional actor. The interviews were coded using thematic analysis in the early stages of the research but later a cognitive-ethnographic approach (Hutchins 1995, 2010) was modified to include identification of both recognitional and cognitional patterns. The recurring thematic and recognitional-cognitional patterns were pooled to promote the formation of tentative theoretical hypotheses, some were modest relating to practices and closer to the explicitly stated objectives of the actors, others were a bit more ambitious casting the events as various forms of distributed cognition.

The farm walks and short courses were good examples of how farmers respond to institutional prompting. Considering how difficult it was to get access to a farm on one’s own initiative, it was immensely rewarding both in terms of data collection and for the purpose of building a list of possible contacts. It was also so enjoyable to just join in when you are not instigating the whole thing. Seemingly, once something is officially sanctioned by an institution of some sort it became safe to share secrets, although it must be considered that many of the people on the farm walks were also farmers. I can only presume this is related to a deep conservatism which is pervasive in rural Ireland, particularly among farming families but also there may be an element of shyness involved. It was always my impression, in rural spaces that propositions needed to be recommended by those who spoke with authority in the community. Once this happens it seems the average individual is willing to open up and have his say. At these events what is felt initially as hostility or defensiveness (towards those not part of the ingroup) can turn to a genuinely shared and sometimes humbling experience.

The discourse analysis achievable from data collected at these sources was of
a very high quality and strongly relevant and up to date. Where there are other farmers present, the host-farmers let their guard down on certain issues. A proportion of the farm walks were recorded and transcribed fully while others were either partly recorded or notes were taken on an ad hoc basis. Where permissions were obtained, recordings were made at conferences and these were also used as data sources in the discourse analysis and for generating further contacts. Conferences also helped to break down barriers between farmers and non-farmers although it would be wishful thinking to suggest that you were on the same level. Farmers relish the idea of talking to other farmers and not so much with lay people, if farmers are also present.

Online videos are now an important source for alternative farmers and activists for either spreading the word or picking up on latest trends. These sites are also visited by beginner gardeners, new entry farmers and conventional farmers who may be interested in conversion. Of course, websites constructed by the various farms as well as social media output emanating from the farmer, the collectives or supporting organisations are also sources suitable for discourse analysis. Everything available on-line forms part of the social artefactual environment surrounding alternative farms, and this is one way Irish alternative farmers link in with international exemplars. The online and print media output of the support organisations and their affiliates are another source of data.

I found these sources useful only if there was a link from a real-world contact I had already made. For example, if one of the Irish farmers says he is interested in trying a technique for mulching he picked up from an American grower (Dan Kitteridge) and I have also come across this Farmer-educator while researching in Ireland, then I consider his online presence may be worth looking at. So subject to common sense filtering, online material was subject to analysis via identification of the recurring thematic and recognitional-cognitional patterns. An ongoing categorisation of these patterns yielded opportunities for further refinement of theoretical perspectives.
Interpretation and Analytical Model.

A synthesis of the strands of data gathering and analysis was gradually produced through an iterative process. One has to be careful to avoid misdirecting the research process by applying established approaches rather than allowing for the development of your intended approach. For example, although an established rural sociologist may interpret an event or sequence of events as a “reconfiguration of resources” you may see some of these events as a capitulation to capitalistic entrepreneurship because the product is aimed at an export market. While some alternative farmers are against export agriculture, others are open to it.

To give an example, I took this excerpt from coding an interview with the Burke farm in Co Cork.

Grants are not worth it, the paperwork and red tape. It's more important to be inventive, create your own versions of commercial products sold to growers.

Autonomous response: relating to minimising input costs through craftsmanship and ingenuity.

The concept of autonomous restructuring is a common theme in European rural sociology and this example of farmers making their own polytunnels and avoiding third party certification and grants fits well with this concept. However, as the research progressed, I would be more interested in identifying the third-party certification bodies and their efforts to deploy rationalised structures which may weaken the recognitional process. I would characterise this as reverting to a static, formulaic way of making distinctions about what is worthy and what is not worthy of support. In this case the farmers actions could be interpreted differently. Not only in terms of common-sense economising, or a reaction against industrial farming and the distribution of products surrounding it, but as a reaction against norms within the alternative sector which have now become calculative and this in many ways can be seen as discouraging creative solutions by individual farmers. One could construe these events as ‘autonomous response’, ‘economising’ or ‘building a recognitional foundation for independence through the development of
distinctive competencies’. Here the latter would seem to be the most appropriate interpretation although this has to be under constant review.

One way of keeping the research process grounded is to pay close attention to the testimony of the farmer or network actor. Here the farmer is talking about the homemade tunnels:

But you see the thing is the way we look at it there is so much paperwork involved it's not worthwhile .......... (the grant) here on this farm is €3,000. Well you could get a grant put up a new tunnel, F*cksake I made my own polytunnel. I just went down to the Co-op and I got some metal and bent it. That's a homemade tunnel so if I put up any more tunnels, I'm going to make them myself much cheaper. And we are finding them really valuable because we call them a moveable tunnel. And you throw the plastic over it, so we found when you're growing courgettes or sort of delicate crops sometimes most Irish summers (apart from what we just had) most courgettes don't grow very well but if you throw a bit of plastic over them they grow grand and then if you need to remove the plastic you can remove it. And so we can get the rain then and all that. And so we've had great success with that. So we've made those up.

Here we see the farmer has not only saved money by developing manual skills but by being inventive on the use of the tunnel, what he calls a moveable tunnel, they were able to grow food differently, overcoming a problem in Irish growing conditions. Furthermore, they are able take these movable tunnels down before a storm, reducing damage due to increasingly frequent high winds. A rural sociologist like van der Ploeg might call this distantiation from market dominated ways of doing things (van der Ploeg 2010) or use this as an example of the new peasantries in European agriculture (van der Ploeg 2008). Alternatively, one can interpret it though a recognitional or situated cognitional lens. Problems are often solved on site and having the confidence to solve one’s own problems without upping the amount of financial support from or material imported from outside is indicative of a healthy response.

Vulnerability to distortion of the data can be countered by giving greater weight to the actual testimony of the informants and this is one reason why the quotations in this thesis are extensive. According to Borisenkova (2009, section 2.5) “the way to learn about experience is to learn about the way it is told and written by a person or represented as a collective memory by a social
group….”. She also references McIntyre (1981) to emphasise the importance of the narrative framing in understanding meaningful actions of informants as opposed to mere incidental occurrences or behaviours.

“…. the meaning of the action is constructed in the process of accounting by a subject for his intentions. A kind of story - ‘What are the reasons for having done this?’ - is proposed as being a condition of meaning production (Borisenkova 2009, section 2.6)”.

The above statement by the farmer goes beyond economising or autonomy seeking. He clearly wants to communicate that his robust and instinctive response to a frustrating situation was also part of a creative response over time. He is building competencies and refining approaches not just through masculine toughness but by being able to make discrete observations about delicate plants and their needs at various parts of the growing cycle.

The analytical model which one adopts can easily skew the interpretation of the data and change the ways that the data may either confirm or refute the many hypotheses or propositions the researcher may be pursuing. The model chosen should have compatibility with the data as it arises in the field. Being mindful of the overarching schema of one’s own thesis and how the data in question fits into this schema is a continuous and reflexive process.
Chapter 3 The Farms

In the first part of this chapter it is hoped that an up to date picture of alternative agriculture can be presented using qualitative data. All the farms are located in the Republic of Ireland and the data pertains to the time period laid out in the methodology chapter during 2018 and 2019. The second part is an attempt to answer the first research question relating to the distinctive nature of alternative farms and how they differ from conventional farms. As has been seen in the international accounts of similar farming styles, Irish alternative farmers are by no means a homogenous group. Depending on one’s definition of alternative farming it could refer to self-provisioning in urban spaces, small organic farms which only sell locally or largescale farms which cut costs by minimising agri-business inputs such as herbicides pesticides and chemical fertilizers. Included in this chapter is a broad sample of farms, separated in to three panels of four farms. Within these panels there are significant differences between the approaches and these contrasting farming styles and variations in socio-economic strata and politics of the actors provides interesting material from a rural sociology point of view. In the second part of this chapter, data from these farmers but also data from other farmers and actors within AFNs and state sponsored institutions, is subject to analysis and interpretation.

Introducing the farmers

In panel 1 dealing with beef and tillage farmers, the first two farmers use both alternative and conventional methods, while the second two are either certified organic or certified biodynamic. There are no strict guidelines governing the first two farmers as of yet, and this means they can to a certain extent make it up as they go along as regards navigating contradictory demands. If they want
to apply a chemical solution to a problem they can, whereas the latter two have to abide by strict rules as regards inputs, although their certified status gives them a good advantage in the marketplace. That said, there are derogations for applying limited quantities of forbidden chemical or pharmaceutical solutions for the certified farms and this in itself can be a contentious issue for those who are more concerned about quality of the food we eat. Both of these certified farms are involved in direct sales to restaurants or consumers.

Another generator of heterogeneity in this area is collective action orientated farms. CSA farms are a great example of collective action and there are two good examples of this presented in panel 3. But even within this category there are very different ways of organising this kind of affair. A lot depends on the kind of people that are involved and their circumstances and location. The Keane farm for instance, was started by what one farmer called a ‘younger crowd’ on a shoestring budget. They eventually cobbled together enough funds to buy their first patch of rough windswept land and went on from there. The Gallagher farm is a family affair but is organised as a CSA. Both farmers, or sets of farmers, have radial ideas about the future of food provisioning, both are interested in food sovereignty but the farms are very different places to visit because socially they are structured differently. There are also box collection schemes (weekly vegetable boxes for specific customers) that are not run by CSAs but are nevertheless community orientated. Some of these rely on strong personalised contact between the farmer and the eaters while others do not. So these community orientated vegetable farmers can be worlds apart in a number of ways, for example, extending their networks via social media is essential for some, while others rely solely on face to face contact and are certain they want to keep it that way.

The other panel gives a sample of horticultural farmers and farmer-educators. These farmer-educators put significant time and effort in to educating volunteers, trainees, teachers, consumers and other members of the public as well as engaging with institutions such as councils, schools and training facilities. In two cases the educational aspect of their on-farm and off-farm activities amounts to 40% of their income. The Scott farm, being connected
and institutionally bound up with a sustainable living community also has an educational dimension within it but more in the line with an advocacy role. Farmer Scott is very much aligned with the idea of collective action in the locale to change the way we do things in relation to food systems. He is particularly concerned about the corporate takeover of seeds and is ready to talk about a number of issues at the drop of a hat, like genetic pollution of wild plants for instance. But the Scott farm is firstly a food provisioning project. Significantly that food does not travel outside the village or the local town to which the village is adjoined. The Griffin farm is different again in that it is a family farm which supplies its own organic retail unit in the nearby town. Also farmer Griffin is involved in collective action but more as an institution builder on a local level.

**Clarification as to which parts of the dataset the three panels of farmers represent.**

The dataset for this research, which is presented in tabulated form in the appendix on P. 261, has many dimensions which combine to yield empirical and theoretical material thought to be relevant to the research questions. The appended table (see p. 261) gives an overview of how the various sources of data have contributed in practical terms and quantifies particular methods of data retrieval. Exemplars are also provided.

The dataset for this research, as mentioned above, combines many dimensions. The panels below are an intersection of various types of alternative farmers in Ireland (see table 3.1 part A and part B). The more strongly alternative farmers fitting in the category of “Local Alternative Farms” were more likely to be interviewed in person or over the phone. The rest of the farms like those in the category “Biological Farming Approach” were more likely to have been accessed via farm walks. Table 2.2 shows the proportions relating the diverse types of data retrieved. Assembling these twelve farms and presenting them in panels is an attempt to show the reader how the typology, developed as part of the thesis, usefully breaks down and re-contextualises the sources of the data (farmers, farms, social artifacts, visibility of networks) into something which is more easily and more quickly conceptualised. In short, the farmers have
either been interviewed by the researcher or the researcher has attended farm walks on their farm. Although the method of data retrieval varied the data is not presented in terms of how it was gathered. Emphasis here lies with the idea of typification. Fifty percent of the farmers who were interviewed or encountered at the farm walks or conferences are not presented as part of these panels but may be referred to elsewhere in the text or used by the researcher to check assumptions or generalisations and make judgments as regards boundaries of applicability of theoretical constructs later on in the process.

**Panel 1 Beef and Tillage Farmers**

This section introduces a sample of beef and tillage farmers who are involved in some form of alternative farming in Ireland in 2019. I was lucky to take part in very informative farm walks on all of these farms and to have follow up questions with the host farmer and other farmers, institutional actors or activists who were present on the day. All these farms had both tillage beef operations on their farms although not all were being carried out by the farmer or his employees. For instance, some parts of the Lynch Farm were leased to a tillage farmer while the rest was dedicated to his Galloway herd and the McLoughlin Farm sold grazing rights to a large beef farmer and concentrated on tillage.

The Lynch Farm

The Lynch farm was roughly 100 acres, with half rented out to a tillage farmer. Of the remaining grassland half of was marginal, being part of a low-lying strip of land referred to as the basin. There was a field near the entrance which was grazed conventionally the rest of the grazing land was managed as a holistic grazing system. Based on the holistic system popularised by the likes of Alan Savoury, the cattle are moved through very small paddocks every 18 or 24 hours where they have grazed and trampled long grass. The grass which has been trampled and manured by the animals is rested for two or three months before the animals return. Mr Lynch explained that longer grass has
longer roots which encourages filtration of the soil and builds up soil biology around the more complex root systems. The trampled grass acts as a soil armour keeping the soil from being exposed to the air and protecting it from excessive loss of moisture. He believed that these multi species grasses are better from an animal health and soil health point of view and he was amazed in the drought of 2018 just how much better it performed than the conventionally grazed system.

The only fertiliser the grassland gets is the manure of the cattle which graze that land although there is a flooding problem on the lower section where slurry overflows from other farms have occasionally spilled onto his land. Mr Lynch is very involved with his purebred animals, the belted and black Galloways which are very hardy animals. According to him they have not been interfered with by humans as much as other breeds. He compares them to Bison as they are very much independent and survive out of doors all the year round. One of his main objectives is to keep the cattle out of sheds and use the grassland and a bale grazing method to feed them. Cattle in sheds cost money and as Mr Lynch is a low input farmer he avoids these scenarios.

On visiting the farm one can see that Mr Lynch is committed to low stress stockman-ship, all his operations are tailored to fit the temperament of the animals. He said he has completed many courses and has accumulated a lot of experience throughout his career. The less stress on the animals the better and these breeds are a lot like wild animals (they like to calf and reproduce away from human observation). Although the health of his animals is largely driven by the health of the soil and the types of grasses and the management of the grazing and water distribution within the soil but also relevant are above ground factors such as frequency of rains, floods and appropriate water facilities for animals. In holistic grazing even a bunch of animals hanging around a water trough in summer is frowned upon as this will compact the soil and cause an uneven distribution of manure and grass growth. The seeds from seedy hay bought from nearby farmers who have the right kind of meadows are allowed to reseed the grassland naturally (the bale is spread out on the field and the animals walk on and sleep on that hay for one or two days).
Mr Lynch was asked about the maturation rates of these animals by the other farmers and he said that they are slow to mature and are generally slow at most things but once they are on the conveyor, and you have different animals at different stages, it does not make a difference. What was different, he pointed out, was the cost of looking after these animals. He avoided bills coming from the co-op (agri-business supplies) and the vet (agri-pharmaceuticals). Finally, his weed control became easier because these harder animals trample and even eat some parts of the weeds, the holistic method encourages longer grass to strangle the weed at the appropriate time in the weed’s life cycle, but also a more balanced soil biology discourages weed growth.

The Lynch Farm is also connected to the conventional beef sector in Irish agriculture. At the moment he does not have a Galloway bull in with the herd but a Shorthorn. This cross will be a sort of blue-grey colour for the commercial market. These are very popular with Irish farmers. Mr Lynch says that a dairy farmer will often buy a blue-grey cross, even if it is not suitable for dairy, just to have one on the farm. He also sells some of his Galloway bull calves on after weaning to a conventional beef finisher, who operates a very intensive system (bordering on a feedlot). So even though the Lynch farm is on the cutting edge of adopting Allan Savory’s methods to Irish conditions and is clearly committed to cutting out inputs coming from the agri-business sector, the farm also has some dependency on the conventional market. Mr Lynch is waiting to get his land back from the tillage farmer in 2020 and this will enable him to increase the size of his purebred herd and then he intends on converting the whole farm to holistic grazing.

The McLoughlin Farm

The McLoughlin Farm is one of the 12 midland farms chosen for trialling methods of biological farming. A member of the Danu Group which has funding from the EU regularly visits this 300-acre tillage farm. Mr McLoughlin is very excited about applying the principles of biological farming not least because even in the early stages it is saving money on agri-
industrial inputs without significant loss of yield. He uses methods like companion cropping (growing two species side by side) which harnesses the different characteristics, one crop to compliment the other. What one crop needs the other supplies in terms of nutrients in the soil, or by stimulating the soil biology in such a way that is advantageous to the other crop. Extensive use of cover crops is evident on the farm, supplying nutrients to the soil in between commercial crops and protecting the soil from leaking valuable biological and chemical components into the atmosphere but also minimising losses of nutrients in times of heavy rainfall. He was proud to tell me that his cover crops sometimes contain as many as eleven species and this was having a very beneficial effect on soil biology.

Dave Beecher from Danu Farming Group told the farm walk audience that the initial soil tests (viewed under a microscope) showed that very little biology or fungal life existed in the soil after years of agri chemical applications and compaction due to machinery. I gathered, from listening to the farmers speaking amongst themselves, that this compaction on the McLoughlin farm could also be a self-sustaining process as a result of the collapse of diversity on a microbial and root system level. Soils with minimum microbial life forms which are ploughed (killing earth worms) to facilitate monocrops usually have shallower root systems. These soils will have less organic matter and accompanying tiny air pockets which facilitate water filtration will close up, solidifying the soil. Mr McLoughlin was convinced that the new tactics he was using would build his soil biology throughout the farm over the next five years.

With the help of the Danu farming Group and by accessing data online from the “gurus” of soil regeneration, Mr McLoughlin has also been experimenting with homemade soil inoculants and teas. He has constructed a machine for making large quantities of tea which contains a large tea bag full of very good quality compost and small amounts of molasses. The mixture is aerated by pumping air from bellow (it is hopper shaped) and this might last for about twenty hours. The mixture is then sprayed over the fields. They also make homemade foliar sprays which establish fungal life forms on the leaves of the crops providing competitive environments for undesirable fungi which may
arrive later in the life cycle of the crop. Mr McLoughlin has also gone no till recently (no ploughing) and plants his commercial crop straight through the cover crop which has been terminated via crimping (stems bent or cracked with a roller) or with the use of products like “Round-up”. Mr McLoughlin showed us the machinery for planting the seeds which facilitated the simultaneous injection of inoculant with each seed and thus boosting its growth while denying advantage to its competitors. He was also saving his own seeds so they may adapt over the years to the unique demands of the soil and environment of the farm, although he is still obliged to pay the seed company every year for their use.

Mr McLoughlin was a real enthusiast for the Biological approach mentioning several times how he loved biology in school. Dave Beecher joked that he had told Mr McLoughlin not to buy a microscope, but the next time he visited, there it was. The cost saving element is a big feature of this approach and one being pushed by advocates, probably because it is a good way to get the attention of conservative farmers initially. Mr McLoughlin was also enthusiastic about the possibilities of selling high bio nutrient value grazing and fodder to other farmers and he already had a very successful beef farmer paying him well above the going rate for grazing. He also predicted that there would be a way in the near future to get a better price from (human) consumers, considering the bio-nutrient content of his product was superior, perhaps even superior to organically certified product.

An interesting feature of the McLoughlin farm walk was that there was a Teagasc advisor (Ireland’s extension service) present and it was decided that he should introduce himself and kick off proceedings by saying a few words. Throughout the walk he was often bringing the conversation back to conventional ideas about compaction and the agro industrial chemicals still being applied and was often quite bullish about quantifying things and being exact. Of the farms I visited, the McLoughlin farm was the farm which received the highest quantities of industrial chemicals. He himself described his farm as a hybrid farm but also wanted to go further to reduce the agri-business inputs. The meeting was closed again by the Teagasc advisor where
he declared that he learned a lot over the few hours, and he made a reference to his many amicable disagreements with Mr McLoughlin over the years.

The Quinn Farm

The Quinn farm is a beef and tillage operation which turned organic in 2006. The farmer said he turned organic in order to make more money and that has largely worked out. What he really didn’t expect was the increase in job satisfaction particularly in the tillage aspect of things. He found it a lot more satisfying to farm now because it is just the farmer and the soil. If something goes wrong, there are no quick fixes or easy solutions. Because one cannot use chemicals to eliminate the unintended consequences of some growing experiment, or some new strategy or other, the farmer might be stuck with a long-term erosion of capacity. The farmer has to figure it out by knowing what will work in tandem with improving soil biology and that will take a long time if he has farmed conventionally, particularly a mono-crop year after year.

He said it is basically about soil management. The exhausted soil will not have much biology left (that is the bacterial and fungal life forms). If one wants to bring that biology back it will not happen overnight. The farmer explained that it will take a lot of patience and this is difficult because one cannot see these civilizations that dwell under the ground. It is also difficult because the complexity is even beyond current scientific understanding. So the farmer is on her own trying to understand the soil on that particular farm, how it functions and which parts of the farm are worth improving.

In the case of this farm, parts of it has been grazed for hundreds of years and the soil contains silt or small particles which make it useless for anything but grazing. This silt gets washed into the air pockets and this clogs the soil making it unsuitable for growing crops. Mr Quinn thought it was just too much work trying to improve this aspect of the farm and so he leaves it in grazing. The permanent pasture has received no dung, slurry or chemical fertiliser since the 1980s. He maintains that these old permanent pastures should be left as they are and not reseeded. So the cattle which he says are not making any money are there and they also graze the clover and rye cover
crops which replenishes the soil in the tillage part of the farm. These tillage fields are given high quality compost every year and the farmer takes a lot of care with its preparation. He imports manure on to the farm which is a combination of horse, cow and chicken manure, all certified organic and this is kept in the sheds and turned a few times with a machine.

The oats from this farm are sold to an Irish company for the organic version of a popular breakfast cereal and this is the main income for the farm. The company leases the land from the farmer because that’s the way the contracts are designed. In addition, the farmer gets some of the oats dried by a contractor and this is brought to a unit in a business park where the farmer packages these oats for his own brand of breakfast cereal. He has many outlets and sells the breakfast cereal product all over the world via his website. He is very proud of the quality of his own brand product and he gets a lot of positive feedback from customers.

He believes the quality of the soils over years of improvement has led to a boost in the bio-nutrient qualities coming through and this improves the taste and texture of the grain-based product. He is also very happy about the health of the crops standing in the field and he always emphasises the risk of getting caught out in the organic system because there are not chemicals to burn off everything and start again. That is why the fine tuning in so important. The one on one locking-in of the farmer as an observer on one hand and the condition of the soil as an integrated biological ecosystem on the other, appears to be a unique talking point on this farm.

But the farmer is also there to intervene effectively if that is required and that may involve getting help from outside the farm. For example, he may get derogations from the organic certification body to use seeds which have been treated by some chemical agent not normally permissible on organic farms. Also, he is more than willing to accept advice from other farmers who he considers expert on some aspect of the soil management system and he always appears willing to humble himself and be communicative whenever his knowledge is in some way falling short. On the whole, one gets the impression that he enjoys the achievement of balancing natural forces and then to an
extent withdrawing and letting nature do its thing. Mr Quinn spends several months of the year out of the country and this can only be feasible if everything is ticking over nicely.

Mr Quinn is very pragmatic in his approach to farming and he is not in the business of improving the environment for everyone else at the expense of the farmer, if that means the farmer cannot make a living. He insists that you have to “put bread and butter on the table” and that is what it is all about. He got into organic farming to make more money and this has given him a chance at putting a unique product on the market. The company that buys his organic oats has had to import organic oats on many occasions as Irish farmers cannot keep up with the demand for organic cereals. He says there is no point in improving your grassland for beef production because the increased output will not yield appropriate financial rewards so it best to concentrate on an aspect of organic farming that pays. Improving the soil that supports the tillage aspect of the farm has been rewarded with greater yields with less input costs but in relation to a product that enjoys a healthy demand and has a future. So for this farmer going organic is the smart thing to do and provides one with plenty of opportunities as long as pitfalls are avoided.

The Ferris Farm

The Ferris farm is a certified biodynamic farm situated within a commutable distance of Dublin city. It comprises of tillage beef and sheep operations, but all are considered to be integrated as part of a living system which includes the hedgerows and the life beneath the ground. The farm is seen by the farmer as an organism which interacts with the world around it in complex ways which includes not only weather patterns and the like here on Earth, but also planetary alignments and lunar cycles. The biodynamic viewpoint also envisages energy patterns which radiate from certain substances as being involved in the exchanges between components of living systems on the farm. For example, remedies made from cow horn manure or cow horn silica and water is sprayed over the crops in minute quantities because one droplet can radiate its influence over a large enough distance that a few hundred grams can effectively treat many acres of crops. These solutions to weed, fungal or
fertility problems have been developing since the founding of the bio-dynamic movement in the 1920s in Germany. The cow horn manure for instance was sourced in a part of Germany where biodynamic farming is very strong. The spraying machine was designed in Germany and is ideally suited for these kinds of applications as well as being light weight so it can be pulled by a quadbike. As with many of these farmers the weight of machinery is a constant source of worry as compaction of soils leads to multiple problems. But unlike the McLoughlin farm which went no-till, the Ferris farm does some ploughing due to the soil type. But the farmer stressed that he does the ploughing himself and makes sure that it is adheres to a minimum depth and is done carefully at a very slow speed.

Dealing with different weeds has been a problem on the farm. Organic and Biodynamic farmers are not allowed to use chemicals to terminate weeds, so they have to invent other ways to deal with them. The Farm had been Organic for many years and the first years of this period proved to be adequate both in terms of output and ability to deal with problems like weeds and fertility shortfalls but then the farm began underperforming.

Mr Ferris took advice from different sources but to no avail. One such advisor suggested the application of dairy sludge to boost fertility and this proved to be a disaster as it knocked back fertility instead. The conclusion was that there may have been chlorine cleaning agents contained in the sludge. Sometime later the farmer decided to go biodynamic and the farm has steadily increased fertility over the years, but he is still learning. He was able to eradicate one weed through the application of a liquid made up mainly of stock made from boiling the weed itself and then spraying the field with that. He showed before and after photographs and the weeds had completely disappeared. He suggested that the weed germinated because there was a damaging surplus of a certain element in the soil and it thrived on those conditions, sucking up this element into its stalk. When capillary action delivered the dilute form of the element via the spray, the plant sensed that the conditions were not ideal anymore and it died off.
He emphasised however that one has to then correct the underlying imbalance in the soil. The biodynamic approach uses remedies that organic farmers would not consider feasible. On another farm walk, a Welsh seeds expert who is an advocate of organic farming said they see biodynamic farmers over there doing things that they think is crazy, so the two approaches do not always agree. Individual farmers may differ in their approach, for instance, Mr Ferris accumulates and turns his compost outdoors and does not consider the rain a problem whereas other farmers on these walks insist on keeping it covered or under the roof of a well ventilated shed. Currently the biodynamic certification of Irish farms is carried out by Demeter UK, but the Irish organic certification bodies are ready to take that task over in the event of the British withdrawal from the EU.

The Ferris farm sells its beef direct to restaurants mostly to one chef whom he was lucky to be introduced to by a friend. The chef is interested in the biodynamic approach and also in sustainability issues in the food system. For this reason, the chef uses the whole animal from head to toe and he has recipes to suit. The farmer said he would not have the time to package and sell directly to individual households, so this form of direct selling is the best option for him and the relationship with the chef is good. The restaurant is able to promote the uniqueness of the production and food preparation process as a selling point and this appears to work. Similarly, the Lynch farm was able to sell purebred animals into a scheme where restaurants were buying the meat for specific menus. This shows that although the beef market for mass consumption selling into the global and national market may be experiencing problems those who concentrate on quality both in terms of production methods and relational ties on local and regional levels have other options.

**Panel 2 Horticulture**

This section presents four examples of alternative horticulture in Ireland. The farms are smaller (the average being 20 acres) and the land is mostly marginal. Most dairy, beef or tillage farmers would not rate the value of such holdings very highly and extension services would recommend a conifer plantation of some description. The farmers are at pains to point out that this kind of writing
off of marginal land is foolhardy and excludes a whole host of options which

"can contribute to the local economy and help make the food sovereignty

"approach a viable part of our strategic thinking, whether we be consumers or

"policy makers. The farmer educators are contrasted with the activists or

"institution-builders, all horticulturalists but with different ideas of how to

"distribute surplus resources within the networks associated with alternative

"agriculture.

The Scott Farm (collectively owned)

The Scott farm is not owned by a farmer but by a community of people who

"have built a sustainable community from the bottom up. The farm is

"considered separate from the rest of the community assets and it is given a

"fixed rate for each adult it supplies with a weekly vegetable box. There is a

"committee selected from community members which oversees the running of

"the farm and meetings are attended by the two fulltime farmers who are

"employees. Mr Scott is the manager and the head farmer. Farmer Scott is

"acknowledged as the most knowledgeable person working on the farm,

"although the other professional farmer is a specialist on working horses.

Having studied and worked around agroecology and seed saving, Farmer Scott

"is well qualified no only to run the farm and take it to new levels of fertility,

"but also to impart much of his political-ecological and social knowledge to

"those living in the community, including the volunteers and the many visitors

"who see this as a model development in local food systems.

The Farm comprises of thirty acres with a half-acre of polytunnels where

"vegetables can get protection from wind and pest attack as well as benefiting

"from higher temperatures. The outdoor vegetable growing area has fairly

"extensive plantations of vegetables, with many rare heirloom varieties which

"the farmer is familiar with from his days with Irish Seed Savers. The problem

"with the outdoor section is that the season is short because it is situated in the

"centre of the country and the colder temperatures tends to hit them first. At the
same time nowhere in Ireland is immune to the winds as it is a maritime climate.

The same problems were pointed out by a nearby research and development project studying the various ways the people can grow their own food in this country (also part of the community). The lead grower in that project found that the polytunnel was the best solution despite his misgivings about the environmental downsides of using plastic. It’s important that Irish people gain specific information tailored to their unique soil composition and climatic considerations and both of these operations are clearly aware of the shortfall in detailed knowledge especially as both of the head farmers or growers are non-nationals. The other farmer working fulltime on this farm is a keen horseman and the working horses are not only an attractive sight to behold by visitors but a realistic alternative to tractors when the objective is minimum till. When I first started to study alternative agriculture, I was directed time and time again to this farm as a must see exemplar because of the variety of crops and the alternative stance of the farmers.

The farmers and volunteer workers are heavily involved in the advocacy aspect of alternative agriculture. For many years an annual conference is held on the grounds and there are courses on seed saving available several times a year. Mr Scott is a founding member of an organisation for farmers who are interested in challenging the dominance of an export-led capitalist agriculture. This was launched in 2018 where Mr Scott introduced himself as a landless first-generation farmer who settled in Ireland and wants to see us develop local economies built around agroecology and mutual respect.

Mr Scott for example resisted attempts to mobilise farm resources to engage in some forms of entrepreneurship. The idea was to supply a nearby relatively large town with vegetables as a way of securing revenue for the farm. His point is that they have their own farms nearby and it’s not their job to grow them food. If anything, it is their job to show them that this is possible. He pointed out the inhabitants of this locality had traditionally been deficient in certain nutrients and these deficiencies originated within the soil structure of this bio-region. He has taken steps to correct these micro-nutrient shortfalls on
this farm. At the present time, he points out, the local populace is not suffering this deficiency as they are not eating vegetables out of their area, they are eating vegetables out of Spanish soils. So the corrective measure will not be felt throughout the community.

To spread the success of the food provisioning transformation to the next sizable town is a denial of the fact that they have their own land right next door and the provisioning task would only burden his farm with commercial pressures and productivist goals. It seems that some observers are seeing the capacity of the land and those who work there as a functioning system which is so successful that it is effectively a surplus producing entity. But the farmers don’t see it that way, they are seeing it through a different lens.

The social farming component of the farm is another way that the farm performs a social function. This is now becoming popular in Ireland and it need not be an alternative farm. The idea is that farms can form a therapeutic space where disabled or older people come to experience the nurturing process of working on a farm. There are now incentives available through institutions, some of which provide funds for alterations to the farm, making it safe and accessible in line with the needs of these visitors. Through its social farming, training programs, co-ordination of volunteer workers as well as its strong involvement with students and members of the community, the farm has a very strong social footprint and is building a very strong brand. The Scott farm’s recent connections with the National Organic Training Skill-net, an organisation funded by the Department of Education, and its decision to embrace organic certification and the more recent biological farming movement, is further evidence that it sees its role growing as an advocacy specialist while at the same time hanging on to a more radical activism.

The Griffin Farm

The Griffin Farm is small family farm established ten years ago by first generation farmers. Fifty percent is permaculture and the rest is laid out in organic vegetable beds. The farm produces a minimal amount of poultry and pig meat. As the family also runs a health food store in a nearby town, they
have a ready outlet for their produce and they also take produce from nearby organic producers. The shop imports certified organic fresh food from Europe, and this allows them to keep customers supplied all year round.

The emphasis on health promoting properties of food, which has higher bio-nutrient content, is one of the points Mr Griffin is keen to emphasise and the health consciousness aspect of things may have played a role in the creation of one of his food-products which is said to have powerful impacts on a person’s health. The nutrient dense product is first grown in tunnels, harvested, transformed into liquid form and frozen. It can be either ordered online or purchased in supermarkets throughout the country. Also, a favourite with customers is Mr Griffin’s rare species mushrooms which he has become pretty expert at growing.

The family have also developed derivatives of heirloom seeds which have developed into unique sub-species over the years. They claim these plants are more suitable to their soils and climatic conditions. The farm which is situated in a valley is visually pleasing when viewed from the roadside above the tree cover, which has been emerging since they took the farm over twelve years ago, stands out in a fairly treeless windswept landscape. The social media and internet presence of the business is well co-ordinated and emphasises the connected nature of the farm, the health food store and the online business.

The farmer also engages in collective action and institution building. He is a member of various boards in the organic and bio-dynamic organisations but involves himself on community and local government level. In terms of advocacy, he is deeply involved in transition projects for his county and is a founding member of Tallamh Beo, an agroecological farmer organisation created in 2018. He recently obtained funding from various government bodies to promote biological farming in his area. Speaking at a recent conference on behalf of Tallamh Beo he promoted the idea of regeneration of depleted soils and restoration of local markets for fresh products from local farms but probably exceeded his remit by making claims for the psychological benefits of eating fresh food, particularly as this was pitched as a preventative
strategy to avoid mental unwellness. I am not aware that there is any evidence to support this, but let’s just say the conference was a ‘preaching to the converted’ affair on some levels, so there was room for going that bit overboard.

Mr Griffin has told me (perhaps in jest) that he had been obsessed with alternative agriculture for fifteen years or more in an effort to gain as much knowledge as possible. He comes across as a fierce advocate for the cause of alternative food provisioning and food sovereignty for the locality and the region. This has to be admired. What was interesting, and this can be compared to other similar first-generation farmers, was the balance between food provisioning using the primary source of the farm as a starting point and other activities.

The balance on the Griffin farm appears to be towards brand building and institution building and this differs strongly from other alternative farms where they specifically state that they are there to provide food at alternative venues and to connect with customers (have discussions there) and that’s the end of it. Mr Griffin is of the opinion that you have to get into the system to change it and that needs to be respected. In any case, looking at other countries, this type of actor is part of the mix, alternative farmers are in no way a homogenous group. All in all the Griffin farm is a stand out example of doing what many people in that area would have thought impossible as the farm is located in a fairly desolate windswept landscape and in an area where one would have thought there was little or no market for alternative products. Luckily the nearby town was there to supply those willing customers but that in itself had to be a calculated risk. As far as I know there was never a health food store in that town which also specialised in fresh local food supplemented by fresh organic imports.
The Ward Farm

The Ward Farm is a thirty-acre farm on marginal hilltop land, which was acquired by this farmer and his partner thirty years ago. The farmer had already been involved with market gardening in the southwest of Ireland but had decided with this marginal land he could not compete with mainstream growers and decided to create a forest garden growing system which could supply nearby restaurants and health food stores and also be used as an educational venue. He also invested in eco-cabins and so tourists as well as those involved in the educational aspect of things and courses stay in this accommodation. The farm is also involved in social farming and has been even before that term was invented. The farmer has more or less specialised in education at this stage and the amount of his business dependant on sales of fresh food is less than ten percent. He is also a seed guardian for Irish Seed Savers and this means he grows out and multiplies the stock on behalf of this organisation for a minimal fee.

Biodiversity is a theme which is given central place in the educational work of Mr Ward. He has proven the standard advice wrong when it comes to elevated windswept sites with acid soils. He said that his land would be suitable for a conifer plantation if the department of agriculture had their way and if it was used for grazing it would be very unproductive. By planting deciduous trees and adding imported nutrients like seaweed and chicken manure the soil has improved. The trees, due to their falling leaves, have also produced nutrients as well as shelter. The root systems of multiple species which are more typical for a mixed growing system has helped to expand the diversity of microorganisms under the ground and increased the soils ability to cope with excessive rainfall or drought conditions.

Green manures, composting and homemade teas (comfrey seaweed and nettles), are a feature of the growing system which further enrich the soil structure. This process has taken thirty years to develop, but it is a wonderful place to visit and learn. Many of the original walls and ditches still exist since the time where part of this farm was a bog where the people of the townland came to cut turf. These walls and ditches are part of the ecosystem and if one
goes on a bio-diversity walk with this farmer he will show you the plants and animals which inhabit the nooks and crannies and darker corners. One of the skills which the farmer teaches on the farm is the skill of making living fences out of hawthorn or willow. These fences do just the same job as wire and treated wood but are far better looking, forming part of an integrated habitat for insects and birds and they do not rot. The woodland also provides the dwelling house and the cabins with firewood.

The farmer has managed to become part of the mainstream educational system by doing projects in many primary schools and some secondary schools in the area, he also teaches trainee teachers on his farm for several weeks of the year. This integration into the mainstream is quite an achievement for a British hippie farmer but anyone who spends time on his farm will soon find out that he has a talent for getting people to open their minds to other possibilities when it comes to food systems or biodiversity. He is also an inspiration to other people which is why students from an organic college in county Limerick often seek to volunteer once a week. Mr Ward is also a very amicable and gregarious character and easily communicates with children and vulnerable people as well as reluctant adults. He has won many awards for his efforts over the years and has often been consulted by the County Council for advice in relation to planting more diverse species on public lands. One of his favourite photographs is a picture of himself and a few others on a stage where he is seated next to the bishop, proof that he is now an accepted member of the broader community.

Mr Ward is also quite strident in his views about the educational system as a whole and how it is supportive of the productivist food regime. The government, he claims, does not want to be embarrassed by the idea that the type of agriculture they are promoting produces food of an inferior quality, so it is reluctant to tell the real story. The secondary schools have agricultural science modules but omit Organic or biodynamic models. They are teaching a method which has failed all over the world. In the primary system there is a lot of freedom on paper but young teachers who are enthusiastic, like the Teagasc advisors who might veer off the standard script, are gradually brought to heel. He admits that things are changing because of the threat of fines and some of
the climate emergency narrative is getting through but as far as the food system goes, as long as young people vote with their feet for the super market there is not much hope for anything happened soon that could remedy the situation.

The Maher Farm

The Maher Farm consists of several acres at the farmer’s home and usually twenty or thirty acres of rented land a few miles away. This farmer was born into a farming family in the west of Ireland but decided to train as an organic farmer. His father was not amused so he had not the advantage of inheriting the family farm, nor did he have the use of it. He is considered one of the most knowledgeable people in Ireland on the subject of organic horticulture. Forty percent of his income comes from teaching and the rest comes from growing. As you might imagine, there is no shortage of students or volunteers to work on his farm. There are many tunnels at his home farm, and he is forever experimenting with different methods. For example, at the moment he is evaluating the use of spoiled hay or haylage as a mulch which is an idea he got from a visiting American farmer who gave a talk at the Biological Farm Conference in the previous year. He is also doing some trials for demonstrations for the National Organic Training Skill-net (NOTS). NOTS has funded several courses which are now available at this farm and the farmer jokingly referred to the tractor that NOTS bought him. However, the manager of NOTS made it clear that it was the money from the courses that financed the new tractor. More attractive than that tractor and what catches people’s eye when they visit his farm, is the beautiful horses he uses for ploughing. The Maher farm takes ploughing or any other disturbance to the soil very seriously, it is always kept to a minimum.

When Mr Maher was offered his current rented farm as an option a few years ago he was not at all put off by the fact that it was covered in briars and ferns. This was perfect for him as he knew no damage had being done in the previous few years. The root systems of the weeds would have encouraged filtration and secretions from the plants, and the decay of organic matter from
previously growing cycles would have deposited at least some level of healthy activity on a microbial level. Nothing could be worse than a highly compacted chemically fertilized land. He has been bringing the soil biology on this piece of land on, year on year, and it’s not easy because it is on a hill. This is only marginal land and it gets too much rain as it is a westerly county. Despite these disadvantages, the yield he is able to attain is impressive. He says that growing here is quite different from say, the south east of England and that sowing outside in Ireland is down to three things - moisture, tilth and soil temperature. It doesn’t matter what the book says, if the temperature isn’t right, he does not sow. It is important to avoid a percentage of the seedlings rotting so he is using a soil thermometer a lot, looking for that nine or ten degrees. In 2019 all his plants were behind due to a cold start, some crops sown in February, according to books, had to be planted out or sown in May. So one of the things that this farmer brings is a meticulous attention to detail but tailored to Irish conditions, or even west of Ireland conditions.

Another example is the situation as regards green manures. The way green manures grow in the USA and in England is very different to the way they grow in Ireland, according to Mr Maher and that is because of the climatic conditions and the soil types, they behave a little differently for horticulture and agriculture in the Irish context. He says the individual program of green manures are also applicable to differing soils, weed problems and deficiencies associated with particular locations in the same field, so these kind of natural remedies or solutions require very particularised knowledge and skillsets. Some can be taught by spending time with someone like this farmer, others need to be developed on site by the grower or farmer who is dealing with these conditions every day. If the farmer can really understand the potential of these green manures, you can use them to fundamentally change the biology in the soil that you are working with.

Mr Maher is not against conventional farmers and he has great interest in what they are up to and has good contact with many of them. Even his neighbour (as regards the rented land) is a very big dairy farmer with a vast acreage and milking cows with robotics and he still has a good communication with him. He thinks that the whole mindset of Biological farming a very
exciting development in horticulture and agriculture relating to increase bio-
nutrients in the food, how to have weed control and how to reduce tillage
(ploughing etc). He contends that he used to be preoccupied with weed control
and twenty years ago when they used black plastic to supress the weeds. He
does not use these methods now and he is of the opinion that if your soil
biology is highly tuned and the amendments you are choosing are getting
better, you will have less of an issue with weeds. He showed us a field full of
vegetables without plastic or mulch and there was hardly any weeds. He
assured us that there was little, or no hand weeding done. This is because he is
using different methods and he is thinking differently. Mr Maher thinks that
organic farmers should take a look at what the biological farmers (some of
them are still conventional at the same time) are doing.

Panel Three: CSAs and “Veggie Box” Collection Operations

The Gallagher Farm

The Gallagher Farm is an organic CSA farm on 26 acres, half of which is
mature deciduous woodland planted by the farmers’ parents when they bought
the property. They planted 30,000 trees back then and the children grew up
with the trees and as the farmer says, this left a deep impression on him. The
farm supplies its members with a weekly box of vegetables known as a share.
Members commit to collect the box from drop points every week and most
pay on a weekly basis. The CSA system is new to Ireland, but in mainland
Europe and North America, it has been developing steadily since the late
eighties. The farmer and his partner are influenced by a southern European
take on this kind of operation and are very much involved in the Via
Campesina movement which supports a re-peasantisation of agriculture in
Europe.

Some years the farm had up to 30 members, which was hectic according to the
farmer, so they had to balance the income generated with the life they wanted.
Being able to choose was probably helped by the land being passed on from his parents. They envisage that about 25 members paying approximately €25 per share for the full 32 week a year season, seems like a good compromise, but they are doing slightly less than that at the moment because they recently had an addition to the family.

Harvest day is the best day for visitors to come and see the goings on at the farm. If one wants to volunteer for the day harvesting, washing and packaging the vegetables into shares, this is probably a good way to experience the farm and you will be offered a share of your own to take home. If you are lucky, you will also get a walking tour of the mature woodland and some of the stories that go with that. The farmer has recently built an out-house for the preparation of the shares and he also bought a saw which connects to the tractor for cutting logs, making the farm independent as far as fuel goes. They are looking in to getting a better press for making apple juice, which they produce at the moment on a small scale. The farm also goes to the farmers market with surplus vegetables and he also supplies one restaurant with these surpluses. It’s important to make a return on crops that have matured too quickly, or if there is a bumper harvest in one particular season. As part of the exchange, he agreed to compost the entire green waste from the restaurant.

I asked him about start-up costs, and he showed me the tunnels which he got second hand. He had to spend a few days taking it down, cutting steel poles with a grinder, but he was reluctant to get into debt. The operation, all in all, is fairly streamlined and the couple are pretty laid back. Luckily the farmers’ parents live on the same property and they are keen to pitch in when he is short staffed on harvest days or the like.

The couple were instrumental in the founding of the Tallamh Beo farmers organization which came into being in 2018. He had been working for collective action organisations in mainland Europe for years and she had been working for European Co-ordination Via Campesina and still has a part time job editing the newsletter while living in Ireland. The farmer says that this organisation has made the link between social struggles for equality and environmental justice. He found this inspiring.
The new organisation aims to support farmers who want to use agroecological methods and re-engage with local markets. The organisation is also influenced by the Land Workers Alliance UK which also supports labourers and employees working on farms and other land-based activities like commercial forestry plantations. The couple have adopted a fairly explicit anti-capitalist stance as far as food systems and food sovereignty is concerned and this may be as a result of their involvement in the anti-capitalist protests in Europe several years ago. The farmer made it clear that the idea of the CSAs, the food sovereignty movement and Tallamh Beo is to occupy a political space and develop awareness in as many people as possible.

The atmosphere on the farm was one of mutual respect for all present on the day and seemed to be a place where everybody can learn something every day. It is certainly not a place where the transfer of knowledge is seen as something that needs to be controlled, or that the farmer must benefit from it financially. The farmer did mention that education on the farm, as a part-time revenue stream, is something that he might consider at a later stage. But for the moment staying relatively debt free and enjoying the experience of sharing knowledge and enabling people to be an inspiration to each other seems to be at the core of everything that happens here, apart from the daily grind of farming.

The Keane Farm (collectively owned)

The Keane farm is also a CSA in the west of Ireland. Mr Keane grew up on an organic farm in Ireland, it was one of only a handful of organic farms in the country at the time. After having a very successful water sports career he decided to come back to Ireland and grow vegetables because this was the only other thing he ‘definitely knows how to do well’. He started off helping friends grow vegetables in urban spaces and back gardens and this led to the setting up of a community garden. The community garden involved cook-ups once a week and other get togethers for local people, as well as showing non farmers how beneficial it is to grow their own food. It was from this platform that the idea of a CSA farm took hold and a few enthusiasts put everything in
to buying some very rough land on a windy hill. Over the years ditches were constructed and thousands of trees were planted to help protect from the wind which blasts in from the coast. The Polytunnels also provide protection from the wind, helped boost growth and extend the season, but then there was the problem of poor soil. Seaweed and manure were spread but it was hard to get enough nutrients on the scale that was needed. On one of my visits to this farm, 3LM a holistic management group which encourages their own version of agroecology, were there to do some tests and their conclusion was that the farm needed animals to boost the bio nutrient qualities of the soil. It seems that the Keane farm took this advice and started a funding drive to acquire more land nearby. The second farm is now up and running and there is a minimal level of livestock on board.

Part of the logic of having local members and volunteers participating and observing on the farms is so they can learn the realities of primary food production including the drudgery of labour-intensive systems, seasonality of fresh food and its limitations, and finally the low levels of income often experienced by farmers. It is the farmer’s opinion that a sizeable proportion of a country’s population needs to involve itself in the food provisioning system if it is to be sustainable. Mr Keane’s politics and that of the communal effort that runs the farm is clearly opposed to conventional food production which they considered to be harmful to environment. The way it is grown and the way it is distributed are also seen as detrimental to human health because of the resulting low nutrient quality. They also complain of the unfair tactics used by big business which is subsidized by governments, giving it the financial muscle to create cheap food and capture the market. He argued that alternative farms create more employment and if the mindset of conventional farmers would shift just a bit, it could lead to designated portions of land being devoted to community agriculture (US farmers have been doing this for years). This could significantly improve prospects for local food provisioning and improve the ecological capacity of the land as well as triggering local economy regeneration on a modest scale.
The farmer and his fellow workers went on a tour of British CSA farms a few years ago and witnessed some pretty amazing farms with very well-developed systems. One farm demonstrated the benefits of alley cropping (planting rows and rows of trees and growing in between these) and hedgerow planting. The farmer claimed he was not just growing crops, he was growing biodiversity. The farm was said to be virtually free of pests and diseases due to the balance of competing natural systems. Their own farm(s) in the west of Ireland is out to prove that you can do this kind of thing anywhere in the Republic of Ireland. The relatively tough conditions are certainly a big test of their resolve, particularly when you consider that some of the core group live on site with minimal comforts.

The farmers have enlisted the help of the public through crowdfunding and they also use the farm to teach yoga, stage entertainment and more recently with the help of NOTS and 3LM they are hoping to establish the farm as an educational venue. Their online presence is obviously a big part of their strategy, but they also have and open gate policy which welcomes visitors and volunteers from all over the world. Not only do they exploit their own labour to keep the farm going, but they compromise the privacy of their living and work environments. The ethos which is common to CSA farms is to make the farm work as a collective affair and that appears to be the first priority on this farm. It is pretty well known throughout Ireland and the UK as a young person’s answer to the failing food provisioning system. Mr Keane is also a founding member of Tallamh Beo.

The Malone Farm

The Malone farm is a single person vegetable growing operation situated near a major tourist town in the southwest of Ireland. Ms Malone inherited two acres from her uncle and she is growing on one half of this at the moment with 0.25 of an acre in polytunnels. She supplies local restaurants and hotels with fresh salads and recently began supplying a major supermarket chain with salads. She also supplies two health food stores with product.
Originally, she was very much driven by the idea of bringing fresh food to the community in which she lived and this has survived in the form of a box collection scheme where about 16 households are supplied with a weekly vegetable box. The boxes are collected at her parents’ house, or at a nearby health-food store and all arrangements with the grower are done by email or text message. The Malone farm is not organic but is committed to using zero chemical fertilizers, pesticides or herbicides. Manure from a nearby conventional farmer is used for the moment, but she is looking forward to the day where the farm will have built up to a sufficient level of fertility enabling it to operate without importing these inputs. She also uses a liquid seaweed manure which is a standard fertility product for organic and chemical free gardens and farms.

She is known as being a very hard worker and to do this kind of business on one’s own requires a huge commitment and a willingness to work very long hours in the growing season. Her reputation for being a hard-working, reliable supplier of fresh product is an important selling point, even more so in the very competitive area of the hospitality industry. She is proud of the product, of the freshness in particular, and this is another selling point in the commercial sense. Chefs are not impressed with salads that die on the plate and she has to convince them that her product will literally “stand-up”.

On the box collection side of things, what is surprising is that the whole scheme seems to advertise itself. People who are happy with the service just spread the word and this has been steadily growing. For the boxes she has to go beyond just salads and this requires some long term planning. The customers can tell her via text if they prefer one thing more than another and she can tailor the box to their needs to an extent. Providing for local families gives her immense satisfaction although this is not the money-making part of the business. She says that everyone starts out a bit idealistic. This scheme is not what we call a CSA arrangement as the customers do not have to commit to stay with the scheme for the whole season, nor do they want to be part of the decision-making process or pick up the tab for any shortfalls. Ms Malone does not have face to face contact with the customers of the box scheme as the money is left in an honesty box. She is interested in the idea of promoting
local provisioning and her method of communicating the viability of this is to do it and show that it is viable.

“It has to prove itself” is a phrase I remember her saying. So her approach is very pragmatic and this is more likely to succeed in an area where people are very conservative. Knowing the area myself, I would hazard a guess that if one were insisting on face to face contact and plenty of chat every time a transaction was taking place, it may not go down too well. On the most part people in that locality do not have much time for radicalism and so a simple “just do it” approach suits them. So there are horses for courses and Ms Malone is very much suited to selling something alternative in this locale. She comes across as a very down to earth and friendly person and does not really take to the elaborations on the whole alternative food network narrative. In short, she does not network with other producers or activists although she does have farm walks now and again to facilitate the local transition movement.

The Burke Farm

The Burke Farm comprises thirty acres located between a market town and Cork city. Six acres are set out in vegetables at any one time and about half an acre in poly-tunnels. This is a family farm which was bought from a conventional farmer. It is run similarly to an organic farm, but they are reluctant to go down the road of certification as this is too much red tape, plus it is an unnecessary expense every year. Mr Burke says that they have their own brand and the regular customers trust them. The annual farm walk is when the customers see the way they do things, but they also stress that if anyone has any concerns, they can visit the farm and see what they are doing.

Both of them put a lot of weight on relationships with customers and the neighbouring farmers. Another very important element for this business is consistency of supply. Everything revolves around the farmers markets in the market town and in the city market at the weekend. They have put a lot of strategic thinking into being able to supply fresh product for fifty weeks of the year and that is unheard of in this climate. They make good use of their
tunnels and winter varieties that can grow outside the year round. There are plenty of customers who take a box of vegetables every week and this is very reasonably priced. They both work extremely hard throughout the year to achieve this kind of consistency. To help they have four or five volunteers who live with them for a few months at a time.

As an investment the couple bought some rough land about fifteen miles from their farm to plant trees. They planted 45 acres of deciduous trees although they were advised to plant spruce by the agricultural advisor. This was in addition to the agro-forestry type planting on the farm. The plantation was part of a scheme and the only part they regretted is that they were not allowed to plant the trees themselves. They were not happy with the way the contractor planted the trees, or that the company used frozen plants to suit their schedule.

I was fortunately present on the farm on one of the days they were bringing the volunteers on a trip to this woodland. The farmer talked for about two hours as we walked, knowing everything about the species of trees and how they were planted and the plants in the clearings. As a bonus, a group of near wild ponies appeared, taking exception to our presence, they were there as a gesture to a nearby landowner who deals in horses. This plantation is part of their retirement plan and the farm is hopefully being taken over by their son and his girlfriend in the next few years. The fact that income from the farm could finance this investment and then be handed over to the next generation is a testament to how viable an operation this alternative farm is. According to them, close proximity to the urban markets and an understanding of the importance of relational ties appear to be as important to their success as their hard work and ingenuity. This farm was also visited regularly by a UCC food system specialist who also stressed the importance of these relations. His work is important on an international level.

As with the Malone farm these growers have little interested in the institutional supports or the collective action initiatives. I understand that they were involved for a period of time but were turned off by the superior attitude of some of the ‘leading lights’. As one alternative grower in west Kerry said “If you know how to grow it, you know how to sell it, and people want it, then
that’s it. There is nothing else, and if there is network needed it will just happen”. These are the pragmatic actors in the alternative food provisioning scene.

Networks

As networks play a significant role both in terms of resources flows and in building complexity for some of the above farms a brief word about networks seems appropriate. Diagram 3.1 above shows how the farms in panel 3 are connected to networks. The most obvious of these networks are the internal networks comprising of customers farmers and land-based workers (see the star-shaped symbols indicating size of network). The diagram focuses on the external linkages to collective action organisations, third-party certification bodies, professional advocacy groups and entrepreneurial advisors as well as state sponsored institutions involved in the network in one way or another. Those institutions or groups involved directly with the farms having a strong sustainability agenda can be identified by the green cubes. Other actors such as international advocacy groups are identified by the grey rectangles. Finally the grey cubes depict state actors. The diagram is merely a heuristic device to show the reader that these farms approach interaction with non-customers in very different ways. For example the Burke farm has a comparable number of customers as the collectively owned Keane farm, but has a different philosophy as regards engaging with pre-existing or emerging institutions, advocacy groups or collectives. It’s easy to see from the diagram that they are very independent. Other farmers I interviewed, or had conversations with, but
who are not included in the above panels, confirmed that a similar latitude is afforded to all alternative farmers. It is up to them how they distribute their efforts. Some find an outside impetus or encounter ‘energising’ others, the pragmatists think of the farm as something that should stand on its own two feet as it were. Later on in the thesis the issue of farmers belonging to multiple networks simultaneously will be revisited.
Diagram 3.1 Panel Three Networks

Keane Farm

CSA Ireland

Tallamh Beo

Gallagher Farm

Access to Land

Urgenci

Savory Institute

Organic Trust

3LM

NOTS

Teagasc

Wash Farm

Kerry Transition

Burke Farm

Land Workers Alliance

Via Campensia

50 Households (CSA)

18 Households (CSA)

16 households

75 households

50 Households (CSA)
What’s distinctive about alternative farms

The first research question, or rather its answer, puts the remainder of the thesis in perspective. It provides a base line as regards methodology and the content (types of available data) in the field and confirms that Irish alternative farmers exhibit distinctive patterns of social and ecological adaptation to scenarios deemed impossible or uneconomic according to conventional advisors. I’m thinking here of small scale farms on marginal land where the farmer chooses to avoid integration with mass distribution systems. The question is as follows: How is Irish alternative agriculture distinctive, how does it differ from conventional agriculture? On pages 112 and 113 are tables which expresses the variations within the boundaries of what is considered to be ‘alternative’. It serves as a typology of Irish alternative farms from local alternative farms (in Green) to the farms converted to organic and farms using the biological farming approach (in blue). Ecological entrepreneurship is a category which has been referred to by Marsden and Smith (2005) which I think is useful. In panel number 2 the Griffin farm is an example of this, but one could also fit into this category the alternative farmers receiving a good proportion of their income from enterprises, which has the effect of diverting resources away from primary production of food and fibre. The farmers who converted more recently to organic and those experimenting with the

biological approach (I will include holistically managed grazing in this for now) would be similar to conventional farmers in terms of basic motivations and incentive mechanisms. They are also similar in terms of generating food miles and using mainstream distribution systems that use many intermediaries. But they differ in that the farmers become used to thinking in ecological or biological terms as a matter of necessity.

Their tasks are littered with considerations that mainstream farmers do not have to contend with. Although the biological approach allows for ‘termination’ of a cover-crop or a weed problem using chemicals the farmer is probably putting a lot of work into preventing those sorts of occurrences. On the other hand there are lots of restrictions on the organic farmer even if his goal is to get the premium rate for his product. I talked to one sheep and beef farmer not mentioned in the panels above who had only converted to organic a
few years ago and he said that the farm was the better for it. He said it was more satisfying to be a farmer once he got used to being organic.

On the other hand, the local alternative farms are more of a radical departure from the conventional system. They are closer to the customers geographically but also in terms of relationships and this brings with it many advantages. Local social infrastructure can be rebuilt, something that has all but disappeared in recent years, at least relating to food provisioning. At one time these pioneers were seen as a small number of people attempting to ‘go back in time’ (Tovey 1999), but it has proved to be the beginnings of something much more vital with a much broader appeal. Proximity to urban markets seems to increase the chances of success although rural communities are now composed of a fair amount urban people. The growing phenomenon of utilising rural spaces as a consumption landscape also adds to the viability of these small alternative farms, but also allows ever more complex hews of alterity, where tiny farms can cater for small amounts of discerning consumers. The more radical of these farmers are involved in the food sovereignty movement and envisage post capitalist futures with renewed socio-ecological systems. These kinds of farms, the local type, couldn’t be more different than conventional farms and for that reason perhaps the relationship between them can sometimes border on hostility.

Coded interviews, talks with farmers and participatory observation on the farms: What did the data reveal about the alternative farmers and the supporting networks?

What it reveals about alternative provisioning

1) Ecological capacities improved

Firstly there appears to be a fairly pervasive commitment to the long-term regeneration of the ecological balance on the farm as a whole, which is expected to lead to improved ecological capacity of farmland across the board. The literature supports the notion that alternative farmers believe that they are
improving the capacity of the farms that they own or occupy, and this is vindicated by the growing support for agroecology on the international stage, not least because it is better than conventionally managed land at coping with the more recent extreme weather events. The level of commitment is nevertheless variable. There are for example ‘converted to organic’ farmers who struggle to become believers, although continuing to work to the letter of the law as regards certification, in other words they are reluctant practitioners. There are ‘farmers’ who don’t do much farming but know how to leverage their organic image for the purpose of selling at AFN venues, again this phenomenon is supported by the academic literature and in public discourses.

2) Trees

Alteration of the impacts of extreme or harsh weather patterns on farms due to strategic planting of trees is a typical feature of alternative farms in Ireland. Trees alter the composition of soils in some circumstances as well as creating shelter belts and serving to extract excessive water in some locations. Changing the farming possibilities by changing the landscape is how one farmer put it, he said it opened up new possibilities. Chambers (1993), has referred to the tendency of poorer farmers to be more comfortable with the interdependency implicit with tree, animal and crops existing side by side and this seems to be the pattern here, except it is being regenerated after a significant time lapse.

3) Social farms

Using the farm as a liberating space. This concurs with the government strategy on social farming ventures as an additional source of income for farmers and with available literature on social farming, multifunctional farming and entrepreneurial learning on farms (Seuneke et al 2013). It, nevertheless, is a diversion of resources away from food provisioning. I was surprised how quickly the government deployed resources and how quickly the community mobilised their own resources to enable these types of spaces
to develop. However there is very little that could be considered oppositional about this kind of rural development and so it suits a broader section of the population including conservative actors and those who are committed to a productivist food provisioning future. That said, the farms that I visited that were involved in social farming were more generally involved in educating the public and this was just one component of that pedagogical role.

4) Self-Organisation and Autonomy

Communicating a sense of urgency along with a level of reassurance that inexpensive, non-technical solutions are available was pervasive. Self-provisioning reduces the cost of living for the farmer in the sense that fresh food and a source of fuel are often available on site. Also, self-provisioning of farm inputs such as homemade manure and fertility treatments which almost all of the above farmers are involved in, cuts costs and leaves the farmer with a better chance of surviving difficult times. Autonomous responses to stresses and difficulties typify the alternative farmer’s repertoire. Particularly relating to minimising input costs through craftsmanship and ingenuity but also time saving tricks for growers who have very small holdings and need to maximize results from labour. Again there is a lot of support for this in the North American and European literature.

Providing an alternative supply of vital food chain resources is quite another matter and this is exemplified by those farmers who either save their own seed, or those involved with Irish Seed Savers. Surprisingly this is not a subject that is frequently referred to in the academic literature, but those advocacy groups and collective action orientated organisations that publish material, often take up the seed saver and access to land issue.

5) The Common Good

Another outstanding feature of alternative farms and strong AFNs is that knowledge and communicativeness are seen as a common good. A communicativeness and sense of connection that is in constant flux appears to concern itself with adaptation to climatic variation or other potentially disruptive variables. The resulting knowledge which is evolving and building
itself within the structures of the community is transferred as a common good.

6) Profit Sufficiency and the Diverse Economy

Alternative agriculture provides employment opportunities that are not available on mainstream farms with equivalent or even markedly better land and resources. Also food security, food quality and food system sustainability factors are positively impacted by local primary production according to Irish alternative farmers. The Irish academic literature supports the notion that conventional farming on a small scale is unviable (Macken-Walsh 2017), meanwhile there is little research into how small-scale organic horticulture businesses and CSA operations could supply fresh food to most urban population centres. The restriction of the research agenda in this regard coincides with alternative farmers reluctance to prioritise the agenda of maximising output or to elevate profit accumulation to be a central concern and this is incompatible with institutional strategies.

The latter is similar to what Cantner (2016) referred to as cognitive proximities in innovation communities. Profit sufficiency or subsistence philosophy are not acceptable to institutional actors in Ireland even if tied to an ecological outlook. Land Workers Alliance UK has called for support for these types of farms in the UK, stating that these micro horticultural operations might require start-up grants for new entrants to farming. It’s a question I asked on a casual level to many farmers. Is it feasible, I asked, that every town in Ireland might have a small organic horticulture operation supplying it with a proportion of its fresh food? Almost all answered yes, with the exception of one who felt that young Irish people had already decided to shop in budget supermarkets. He said they were interested in organic food and nice bio-diverse farms, but only in the shop window of their own ideal world.

Some writers suggest that one of the solutions is to foster new relationships between rural and urban dwellers and to build upon previous successes layer by layer, thus constructing synergies and complexity (Brunori and Rossi 2000). Certainly supermarkets are now seeing more organised and more entrepreneurial alternative farmers as an opportunity to transform a once threatening narrative (local fresh food) into a success for their own
organisational and marketing skills as these alternative suppliers join the mainstream distribution system. Some alternative farmers see this as a worrying development, and this backsliding is represented in the literature as either the *mainstreaming* or *conventionalisation* (Guthman 2004) concept or is captured by the theoretical category *weak AFNs*.

7) Co-Production with Nature

Co-production with nature as an ongoing discovery process is one of the more common themes discussed by Irish alternative farmers when they are talking to the less knowledgeable, such as myself. Discovering that nature can cope with variation is one of the first lessons it seems. Natural cycles of birth and death among weeds and crops works well with less human intervention. Minimal or no-till, less disrupted grass growth, via holistically grazing or short stay grazing, companion cropping and tolerance of a certain level of weeds, are examples of how alternative farmers are learning to leave things as they are as much as possible. However, strategies vary in relation to soil and climatic conditions and relating to the specifics of what the farmer is trying to achieve. As one experimental farmer in the Midlands found many different approaches, sworn by their advocates to be the optimal method, may work out to be mediocre when applied where slightly different conditions prevail. The literature also provides evidence that some alternative methods still await scientific validation as they depend on ad hoc adaptations to too many variables, all happening in real time (Bradly Gannet 1994). Co-production with nature is one of the features of peasant agriculture as articulated by van der Ploeg (2018).

**What did the data say about the conventional food provisioning system?**

Much of the discourse about conventional food systems centre on a layman’s take on the political economy of food systems. This takes into account that many of the farmers and actors are well educated people often with college degrees and professional qualifications. Habermas held the view that a popular
sociology was part of the solution to the problem of how to communicate important features relating to workings of the capitalist system. Alternative farmers believe that big business is subsidized by governments, giving it the financial muscle to create cheap food, capture the market and buy up any available land, some of which has become available because small scale farmers have had their livelihoods undermined. They also believe the conventional food system is harmful to the environment because of the way it is grown and the way it is distributed and is harmful to human health because of its low nutrient quality. According to one alternative farmer, the consumer using his or her famed rational choice mechanism, sees it as making good sense to eat cheaper supermarket food. He implied that very strong relational ties are needed to overcome the enticement of cheap food and that meant that eaters had to be ‘die-hard fans’ of the alternative farming style. Another farmer pointed out that the vast array of choices laid before consumers has raised expectations of variety to unreasonable levels which ignores the notion of seasonality and local availability.

A Midlands farmer commented on the deficiencies in local soils noting that there will never be remedies as long as the negative consequences are distributed far and wide in the conventional system. The kind of international risk pooling that the conventional system offers that this farmer was talking about, distributing minor hazards in food stuffs like micro-nutrient deficiencies having a diluting effect, is also happening in other ways. A horticulturist informed me about the fodder imports of 2018, where Irish cattle were eating Malaysian palm oil husks that were imported on a massive scale to literally save them from starvation. Contemporaneous to this, during the same dry period on the German Friesland Islands, there were brown fields burnt by the sun and in the neighbouring farms there were green fields. The neighbouring farms were organic. Like fishermen of old, farmers of a previous era knew that if they depleted local capacities they would be in trouble, but international risk pooling (Wackernagel and Rees 1997) ensures that one can always get produce somewhere else if you have money to buy it.

Alternative farmers know that they are dealing with a very ruthless competitor
when they observe the conventional system. They know it is harming the soil, harming biodiversity and that it is one of the engines of man-made global warming. The harm they witness happens in all sorts of insidious ways. For example one farmer who is from Britain showed us a weed that is a native brassica in Ireland and Britain. According to this farmer, GMO rapeseed seeds have been dispersed into verges and ditches, crossbreeding with the native weeds resulting in genetic pollution. Now when an English farmer spots this weed, he is not entirely sure if it is not GMO contaminated. In short, alternative farmers are aware that material incentives on their own leads to greedy investors and irresponsible practices.

What does the data say about consumers ability to resist conventional and conventionalised product over time?

On the consumer side the interest in AFNs comes in waves of enthusiasm followed by a certain amount of complacency, according to some farmers I spoke with. Nevertheless, when the enthusiasm is connecting farmers and eaters, many of those eaters stay with the farmers for many years. Habitualisation happens on both the alternative and the conventional side. Sometimes when consumers feel they are ready to go with alternative products they cannot find the food because the grower who tried to earn a living there gave up and went somewhere else, perhaps nearer to an urban population. In this case, people have no choice but to go to the supermarket or order online versions of alternative food.

This then becomes habitual and the next time an alternative farmer sets up in this location she may have problems getting these customers to disengage from either the conventional system or the ‘conventionalised’ system. But, according to the AFN actors I have spoken with, the type of consumers who are inclined to get involved with AFNs are already suspect of conventional or ‘conventionalised’ foods and will do what they can to avoid them. Some lower income groups find this difficult, a point not lost on the conventional lobby who accuse AFNs of being elitist. During the conduct of this study I have not recovered any data on the consumer side to suggest that this elitism actually
exists.

Many alternative eaters have told me that switching to an alternative whole food diet is not more expensive because the sugar-highs and gluttony that they experienced while eating the ‘cheap’ food actually drives unstable consumption habits which are a waste of money. It was found that people who buy through AFNs evolve a stable strategy of how they will source and consume their food and this begins to build into their understanding of how nature works (seasonality) and how people may be able to work with it, and co-exist with it. Part of that stable strategy is to refrain from getting angry about the conventional food provisioning system which they see as being self-destructive. Instead they keep an eye on how bad it is actually getting, how far the conventional system will go to save itself from current challenges.

**Conclusion**

Irish alternative agriculture is distinctive, but also less homogeneous, than one might expect. Within any sub-category one cares to examine within the alternative sector there are variations in the way farmers and consumers choose to distribute their resources and personal efforts. Sometimes the outcomes are unstable and the farm’s connection to the consumers is too tenuous. The examples presented here are success stories, even if the food provisioning dimension has been reduced. Those alternatives which are closely aligned with the conventional production and distribution systems have also introduced hybrids leading to what some regard as a confusing array of actors and approaches. Alternative farmers are a relatively small group in Ireland and the combined acreage of the farms is certainly less than 3% of productive land. Although it is understandable if there is a tendency to get frustrated when one considers the complexity of such a fragmented and scattered community of actors, it is also important to be patient. Those who are improving the ecological capacity of farmland while they go about their daily routines are performing a valuable task against the odds. The next objective is to find out if there is a theoretical construct which helps us to
make sense of all this variation and redeployment of resources. I think the up
to date assessment of alternative farms in this chapter will provide a good
platform to further examine the data in this regard.
Table 3.1 Typology of Irish alternative farms (2018-2019) part A

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Local Alternative Farms</th>
<th>Ecological Entrepreneurs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Geographical Proximity [1]</td>
<td>Short supply chains (Maximum 50 miles) [1]</td>
<td>Local and national (maximum typically 250 miles) Add on import options</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic Rewards</td>
<td>Low wage, Below minimum wage, volunteer workers [3]</td>
<td>Adequate wage plus surplus value realised as reinvestment or profit take</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Land Ownership</td>
<td>Lowest level of land Ownership. Rented or sometimes Borrowed or leased from council. Poor quality. Not enough land. [5]</td>
<td>Land ownership high. Often Investment from previous business or property sale</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possible Advantages</td>
<td>Proximity to urban markets knowledge transfers from producer to consumer. [7]</td>
<td>Innovation, identification of dynamic synergies with other rural activities. [8]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 3.1 Typology of Irish alternative farms (2018-2019) Part B

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Farms Converted to Organic</th>
<th>Biological Farming Approach</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Geographical Proximity [1]</td>
<td>National and international Markets (no Max mileage)</td>
<td>National and international Markets (No max mileage)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relational Proximity [1]</td>
<td>Many intermediaries</td>
<td>Many intermediaries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic Rewards</td>
<td>Farm income supported by subsidies plus pluri-activity [4]</td>
<td>Reduce costs at farm input level with minimum loss of yield</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Land Ownership</td>
<td>Land ownership very High (Familial property) [6]</td>
<td>Land ownership very High (Familial property) [6]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possible Advantages</td>
<td>Scale, access to credit and advise, reliant on organisational ability [9]</td>
<td>Healthier soil, plants and animals. Bio nutrient content of food increased [17]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paradigm or Ideological Stance</td>
<td>Modernisation-productivist response to food quality preferences or Neo-productivist [16]</td>
<td>Productivist farmer’s response to cost escalation. Agrichemicals route to inclusion in agroecology. Or Neo-productivism</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chapter 4
Exploring the Recognitional Stance

Introduction
Honneth (1996), in updating Hegel’s earlier concept of the struggle for recognition, seeks to transform it into an ‘empirically supported phenomenology’ in order to test it, or indeed correct it. He discusses Hegel’s assumptions, or tendency to assume, a ‘sequence of recognition relations in the context of which individuals reciprocally confirm each other to an increasing degree as autonomous and individual persons’. He goes on to suggest that in earlier Hegelian logic a ‘systematic compartmentalisation of the forms of recognition’ is necessary to conceptualise the formative process of ethical life (Honneth 1996 p69). In this chapter it is hoped to reveal some of the instances that can be construed as alternative farmers and the actors in the supporting networks exhibiting a recognitional stance, both towards each other and towards the natural world. They may indeed follow a sequence, but one that has many different permutations. This phenomenon may display an almost infinite number of possible combinations, although this does not exclude the possibility of typifications being identified. Typologies or typifications, according to phenomenological sociologists, are unavoidable in any case. Kim and Berard (2009) cite Schultz as saying that typification ‘(is)...a quite foundational practice underlying socially competent perception (and) understanding...’ (p 266). As the chapter title suggests this part of the research is limiting itself to being exploratory in nature. To this end it is thought to be sufficient to a) Justify in the broadest possible terms that this kind of topic is usefully engaged with using a recognition-theoretic approach and b) to identify possible areas of interest.

Some of the proposed areas of interest pertain to acknowledgment flows from person to person and this may involve knowledge transfers or the creation of spaces for engagement. Other areas of interest may involve looking more closely at the social structures typically found in these communities of practice
and whether they are open or closed networks or whether the size of network is important in recognitional terms. Some of the conversation is only possible via negation, that is, seeing the alternative as something which is ‘not’ conventional or mainstream (Tregear 2011) but there is sufficient supporting evidence to justify the proposition that alterity has achieved significant alteration of practices such as the grounding of human and social capital via reciprocity dependent ties which is just one aspect captured by the term *recognitive stance*.

**Acknowledgement-flows from person to person**

Acknowledgement of other persons, involving emphatic engagement and identification with the other’s historical-socio-cultural as well as their pragmatic-materialistic reasons for acting, is interesting subject matter from a recognition theory point of view. The following question is worth asking. How does alternative farming differ from mainstream farming in Ireland in terms of acknowledgement flows from person to person?

Firstly, as suggested earlier, conventional actors are supported by many institutional forms, from interest groups to state institutions but also by corporate and commercial interests. Bétriseya et al. (2018) cite Judith Burke in relation to connecting recognition patterns to dominant institutional structures which are said to direct flows of both acknowledgement and resources. The support available to conventional Irish farmers obviously involves direct payments to farmers of public monies[^8] in addition to taxpayer funded marketing to help the agri-related export industry and to enable national level innovation in the food sector. Publicly funded extension services which have been tasked with providing advice and training to farmers in the conventional methods of intensive, productivist farming, can be viewed as both acknowledging and supporting conventional farming methods. Of course it is

a malleable situation with corporate and other private interests having quite an input into policy shifts (Rowe 2015). Privately the conventional farmer is supported (his choice of method is confirmed as viable) by farm input supply chains available in every corner of the country, by publications targeting them as a market segment, by private advisors and equipment maintenance specialists willing to come on site, and by many more commercial actors. From a cultural point of view the Irish farmer is an iconic figure, traditionally seen as the very soul of the country which is still viewed as land based and strongly agricultural (Browne 2017). Historically the agrarian reform movement formed the backbone of an Irish struggle for liberation from British rule and one could argue that the historical memories of the land wars lingers in social memory. Although the President of Ireland, who happens to be a sociologist, has stated in one of his recent talks that farmers and farm labourers were under represented (in terms of being less involved than they might have been by virtue of population size) in the War of Independence which culminated in what is now the Republic of Ireland emerging from British rule post 1922.

In terms of international negotiations, particularly with EU partners, Ireland has done spectacularly well in defending the interests of its conventional farmers. The interest groups supporting Irish agriculture as well as the state, when acting on their behalf, are seen as punching above their weight. I have had conversations with alternative farmers who were in the process of getting articles published in European journals which were critical of conventional agriculture in Ireland. They reported that their efforts were blocked by persons representing Irish mainstream agriculture. This in itself can be seen as an act of misrecognition. It was made clear to me talking to alternative farmers that the mainstream farmers and their supporters generally adopt an intimidating posture towards them, although this is beginning to change for reasons that will be discussed later.

Institutional actors who position themselves midway between alternative and conventional approaches, like those in the National Organic Training Skill-Net (NOTS), appear to have trouble grasping the true nature of the recognitional stance of alternative farmers, although they may be promoting some of the
positive outcomes of the alternative farming styles. Goodman et al. (2014) cite Buttel (1993) for identifying LISA-like technology (low input sustainable agriculture) as being adaptable to methods which ‘disempower holistic practitioners farming in natures image’(p138). It can be argued that NOTS fits into the LISA category. It is evident that Irish conventional farmers who are interested in cutting back on agri-business inputs or have more than a passing interest in organic and biological methods also fail to grasp why alternative farmers do what they do. They often seek to box-in what is good about these farmers, reducing it down to a singular attribute.

For example, I met one conventional farmer while on a farm walk where some prominent alternative farmers were present. He was singing the praises of one of the alternative farmers present, saying that you would have to be spiritual to do what that farmer was doing. To say that the only way one could do this is to be a spiritual person is rich praise but could also be considered an incorrect appraisal of both the man and the professionalism involved. The set of skills and knowledges at issue equips a person to grow bio-nutrient rich food successfully on marginal land. Lukacs or Heidegger might see this as subjecting to a kind of mystification something which is perfectly accessible to us all. It’s worth remembering that this is how most of the people in the world get fed, through peasant small farms using honed down agroecological methods (GRAIN, 28 May 2014)

The academic literature and other discourses reveal that there are farmers all over the industrial world who, without being exceptionally smart or spiritual, have gone about their business re-invigorating soils, putting forward sensible ideas about how nature knows best and using observation as the default knowledge generating mechanism. They have made great strides in putting small portions of the total land available for agriculture back to work. These methods appear to work very well. Mainstream producers and consumers have many entrenched views and perhaps need to box in their idea of the alternative farmer in some form of cliché. Aggrandising fits that profile.

Alternative farmers and people in the supporting and associated networks are fallible, sometimes they don’t have what it takes, even though they are strong
willed and up for the challenge. They often fail and throw in the towel, like in any other sphere of provisioning. One successful alternative farmer in County Cork told me that in recent years there were three bad summers in a row and four of the fifty or so alternative farmers that she knew of in Ireland gave up farming. They just could not bear the hardship anymore.

There is no mystery here, and contrary to some commentators (Goodman et al. 2014) very little evidence of fetishization particularly on the producer side. It seems that the conventional thinking allied to commercial practices and calculating thinking can’t but package this good fortune (the existence of a spiritual farmer) as something inaccessible. These farmers in county Cork survived making alternative farming their way of life and they were able to build up relationships with customers over the years.

I was on this farm for a day and as I recall, people were behaving very much like farmers of old. I used to visit my mother’s uncle’s farm in West Cork. They still ploughed with horses and milked cows by hand, no engines. I’m referring to the respectful relationships between people, the quietness and more than anything, the steady pace of life. While I was on this alternative farm, I learned that Collin Sage (formally working in UCC) who is respected internationally as a geographer, spent lots of time on this farm researching his work on alternative ‘good food’ networks in the South West of Ireland.

On the subject of subsidised farming, Farmer Burke (f) told me that she thought the anger frequently expressed by conventional farmers was related to subsidy chasing and the different competencies but also the ‘luck’ which was involved in maximising the take from these pay outs. These competencies had nothing to do with farming skills or being able to establish relationships with customers and other farmers. What she was referring to was in effect a perverse incentive to become very good at getting grants and to keep your methods between you and your accountant. The relationship with customers that Collin Sage was talking about, I suggest, is based on acknowledgment flows and these can counteract both co-optation strategies and competition from imported organic sellers at the farmers market (achieved in part by
exploited labour in the south of Spain and excessive food miles). Here Farmer Burke \( (m) \) speaks about how they feel secure in the presence of such threats:

**Farmer Burke \( (m) \)...** Yeah look to be honest about it We have forgotten about all that. That argument. We just get on and do it. And we have our own brand. And I'm afraid I think it has moved on from the organic

**TF...** Yes, it has

**Farmer Burke \( (m) \)...** People want to know (that) you don't have plastic bags. They are looking at a new thing now. And, this organic...... people running around, oh organic, organic shit. They know that Organic Nation is imported stuff and look, fine they do; they make a good business. And some people love that. And there’s discerning customers who say no we're not interested.

The discriminating customers he is talking about are tied to the ‘brand’ of that farm, which is essentially the relationship between eater and grower and the understanding that certain principles are applied. On that day I had lunch with both farmers and the five volunteers who live on site and work a few hours a day. The atmosphere was very good and very open at the table and the food was obviously great. Later we went to their other holding which, as mentioned in chapter 3, comprises of a planation of 40 or so acres of deciduous trees. Farmer Burke \( (m) \) had a very good knowledge of the plantation, he also told us of the story of a certain level of hostility from a local who didn’t want it planted with trees. The available fodder was being grazed by a neighbour’s ponies. As with the main farm, the relationship with neighbouring farmers is very good. At the farm they often swap grazing for manure as they do not have any animals of their own. Here he talks about the swapping and bartering and experimenting with agroforestry.

**Farmer Burke \( (m) \)...** I don't spend very much money on machinery €250 (he points to an attachment for tractor) Grazing, a fellow had grazing off of a field for a couple years and he gave me that (he points to another attachment for tractor) So bartering. This is a kind of experiment we have done. It's called agroforestry. So you grow trees, and this is about 5 years old so it's just establishing (he shows parallel rows of trees and grassland in between). This summer my neighbour he had cattle that were looking very miserable inside (in sheds) and he got a visit from the hygiene people. So we put them out here from April and throughout a dry summer and everything not a problem. Because they have shade and plenty of grass growth in
a field that would have been a bog (before) and can you see any rushes in that? No you know. So the old agroforestry certainly does improve the land. So this was always very wet land not really very usable and this is more developed, and I will be cutting that we will get six or seven bails of silage off here but it’s better than nothing isn’t it? And it has had cattle grazing all summer.

It is interesting that the relationship with neighbours and customers at the farmers market is a transfer from an experimental, alternative group of people trying out new or alternative methods or reverting to abandoned methods to a group of people who bear little if any of the risk. The receivers acknowledge that the experimenters have achieved something. It is something that they can benefit from and so the exchanges are repeated year on year. One of the experiments, building a small lake on the farm, saved the harvests during the 2018 drought and allowed them to continue to supply their customers, this is another case of pre-emptive action where common sense is used to good effect by alternative farmers, he also expresses his exasperation with the housing crisis in Ireland. It’s very rare (in my experience) for conventional Irish farmers to express sympathy for urban dwellers and the poverty and inequality issues that exist there, or at least having an origin there.

**Farmer Burke (m)** So this is we built this lake here really to increase our…. we had always had problems with the well, so we put this in, and it saved our bacon this year, really has saved our bacon. So what we want to do we are taking off all this soil (points to excavation works near artificial pond/lake) to get it a bit deeper here (Yeah) and we will spread that on the fields so its

**TF** Yeah that guy in Kerry he built his own little lake as well and he was using it during the drought. It kind of saved him.

**Farmer Burke (m)**… Yeah it saved us and you see with wells…………wells are not replenished yet. So we could not irrigate even after all the rain. The well… the telling sign of a well is now, and it will then replenish at the end of October November and we can irrigate from that but at the moment we are still irrigating from here

**TF** Oh right .. very interesting.

**Farmer Burke (m)**…An’ you see that’s the thing “Oh there is rain” and they have stopped the water ban. Well it’s not a good idea. It’s a good idea to hold fire until you get to the end of October cause then you will know what you have. You know. Look. The future is this (*points to lake*) You are going to have all these little things and then this is a lovely habitat in here.
Sure. It’s the same thing the trees create a habitat, and this creates a habitat and you get the biodiversity thing going.

Farmer Burke (m)…Oh big time and this is our little, we have a party house, we have a person Mary she is staying there needing a place to stay because the terrible thing in this fucking country now is that people can’t find accommodation.

I remember leaving the farm and the woods that day feeling quite sad that I had to go back out into the main road and get back into the industrial landscape even though it is considered rural.

So alternative farmers create their own brand which is acknowledged by their customers. It is often the case that the customers, like their neighbours, eventually end up becoming friends or at least enjoy mutually supportive levels of exchange, not entirely conducted on the economic level. Other supportive arrangements which are institutionalised, rationalised and bureaucratised are more common in mainstream agriculture. Next, I will look at more particularised forms of these acknowledgement flows such as acknowledgment of the socio-cultural context of the knowledge, respect for the more knowledgeable other as a person and establishing and maintaining place based opportunity.

Acknowledgement of the socio-cultural and historical context of the knowledge

Firstly, as we are talking about context, it might be appropriate to note that during the course of this study, when data was collected (Spring 2018 - Autumn 2019), significant shifts in opinion were noticeable in Irish agriculture and the political and economic discourse that envelopes it. Mounting pressure
on conventional systems was evident not least from the response to extreme weather events such as longer colder winters followed by drought. These combined weather events evoked the now all too common metaphor ‘the perfect storm’. Significant fodder shortages followed as well as mounting EU pressure on Ireland to reduce greenhouse gas emissions (mainly coming from agriculture). These were some of the trigger points of heated discussion during this period although not everyone connected extreme weather and the emissions. I was very aware that no matter who was talking on behalf of conventional farmers whether it be the farmers themselves, support organisations or state institutional actors they never mentioned methane gas, even though that is known to be the outstanding problem. In this case scientists are the knowledge providers and they are ignored. Industrial systems and transport systems are the main producers of carbon emissions in Ireland, but in the agricultural sector, it is methane gas which is the most problematic. State institutional actors and farmer’s representative organisations know very well that they should be talking about methane emissions, but they are largely silent on it.

The legitimacy of the industrial agricultural system was at stake and certainly the defenders of this legitimacy were made to work harder to avoid certain subjects and lean heavily on others. For example, sustainability issues were cast as a technological and public resource allocation problem rather than needing a radical turn away from high-input, high-emissions agriculture. Farmer Scott told me how during the summer of 2018 the system was on the brink of collapse in the midlands where co-ops (local agro-industrial suppliers) insisted that customers booked several days in advance for the collection of animal feed products. At another farm in the south, one horticulturalist was astonished that Ireland was now importing palm oil husks from Malaysia to feed cattle. In the end corporate actors connected to the dairy industry went to Britain and elsewhere to source fodder in large quantities and sold it on at cost to the farmers it did business with. The government funded the transport and distribution of this cheaper fodder with taxpayer’s money. So the government, during this period in 2018, were unwilling to talk about agricultural emissions in a meaningful way but then they were prepared to subsidise the losses
(attributable to overstocking) for what van der Ploeg (2018) describes as *entrepreneurial farmers* who were already significantly subsidised by both the EU taxpayer and the Irish taxpayer.

In recent years there was a push towards more sustainable methods. Often this resulted in greenwash projects, but it also resulted in at least some movement in the right direction. NOTS which is funded by the department of education, set up training opportunities such as fulltime organic farming apprenticeships and third level organic production courses. They also organised or part funded conferences, shorter courses, one day courses with ‘experts’ and farm walks focusing on biological farming.

At the conferences it was very apparent that NOTS and the institutional actors present were mainly talking to conventional farmers and targeting a pretty conservative audience. Firstly, the *Biological Farming Conference (2018)* was chaired by a prominent Teagasc (agriculture and food authority) employee which, in food provisioning terms, would be identified as a right-wing organisation by many alternative farmers. Secondly, many of the speakers were taking pot shots at the organic movement, saying for instance, that the organic-conventional divide was ‘too polarising’ or that organic was just an ‘input-substitution’ exercise. This despite the main organiser being named National Organic Training Skill-Net. The speaker from NOTS said their main aim was really to ‘save farmers a bit of money’ by reducing inputs. No mention was made of the pioneering work of the organic movement in Ireland (and post-organic alternatives), and no mention was made of the real sustainability issues involved in conventional agriculture, especially as they related to Ireland or the current climate emergency. The only problem mentioned with any frequency was the poor diversity of biological life forms in the soil due to some conventional practices. Not once, in the two-day conference did anybody say, ‘This has to stop, this is wrong’. There was a feeling among alternative actors I spoke to that the narrative was controlled. When a scientist from Teagasc got up to speak a conventional farmer sitting next to me said “now for the politics” meaning there was nothing interesting coming out of this part of the conference. The most radical thing the chairman
(also from Teagasc) said was ‘don’t treat your soil like dirt’ which actually makes pollutants sound strangely organic.

Although the American speakers were entertaining and knowledgeable there was not enough discussion about origins, such as where the biological farming solutions actually came from. This is billed as something that in many ways has surpassed organic, but very little clear historical account has been given as to actually how this has happened. Like where when and how and by whom were these discoveries made? Organic is normally associated with European and North American hippie sub-culture in the 60’s and 70’s and most people know that Bio-dynamic and Organic methods were founded early in the twentieth century. I think most people know that Organic has been to a certain extent taken over by big business or that those corporate actors have at least managed to taint its separatist image. To be fair, Garry Zimmer a farmer-educator who now is an advocate of biological farming, (see Zimmer 2018) spoke at the conference and did acknowledge, in passing, the organic and countercultural roots of the whole biological farming phenomenon. However he also spoke about the conventional education he received as a dairy nutritionist and about the institution-based experimental farms he worked on. So he spoke about many aspects of his education and the evolution of his knowledge particularly relating to his own personal history. He put a picture on the screen from the seventies where he and others drove a truck around town to promote organic farming.

Some of us have been at this for a long time, I have been doing this from the seventies that is me driving the truck (shows photo of a lot of people on a truck) now those are my students and I said the health and the wealth of the nation is in their hands. A bunch of old derelicts and hippies that old jeep of mine it had a wood back and we nailed this outhouse on the back of it to see if I would drive around town for three days on the back of my truck. Which they don’t know me of course, I did. And then we put a sign on the back put your organic fertiliser here and we drove around town three days with that. So I have been in this for a long time. So that was the mid-seventies and yes, I came from that generation and these people are now old and overweight and farming, so you are all going to get there ……… I read a lot of stuff besides agriculture, so I read this book Made to Stick well what stuck? (1.14) (Zimmer, Biological farm Conference Tullamore 2018)
Dan Kitteridge also spoke at the conference, concentrating on the horticultural aspect of biological farming. He grew up on his parent’s organic farm and decided that this was not the optimal way to grow food. Some of the plants were dying, the weeds and the pest were getting the upper hand on too many occasions and the labour input was too gruelling. So he started to look into improving things and eventually came up with a very dynamic type of natural growing system. So did he actually improve organic farming and rebrand it as something else or did he start from scratch? He didn’t make that clear, but his talk left one thinking one of two things, that either his parents were useless farmers, or that the organic method was not worth the bother. This I found perplexing. I was concerned that some speakers were treading a fine line between disrespecting organic farming practices, even if they were reared to it, and suggesting that it had become largely obsolete due to the discovery of ‘new’ practices which have been perfected and refined by practitioners. To my mind they needed to explicitly say that organic didn’t work and explain their reasons for making this claim.

Kevin Scott was speaking at the Feeding Ourselves Conference, Cloughjordan (2019). When referring to the conventional-alternative farming divide, he pitched it like this: ‘we are all farmers’ and he implied that the alternative farmers that he knows are now comfortable being classed as biological farmers (putting them in the same category as some ‘conventional’ biological farmers). Eventually a farmer in the audience spoke up and said that pretty much everything in the biological farming methodology had already been practiced in organic farming. She was in Irish organic farming from its genesis and she specifically called it a movement. That word, movement, sort of took some of the gloss off the biological farming rhetoric and tilted the conversation towards acknowledging that there is more to the story than dreaming up new names for old or ever-present practices. It’s like she was saying that this stuff has a bit more history than you guys are giving it credit for. She took exception to the speaker referring to ‘organic’ as being a mere marketing tool. She said that she was part of the organic movement all the way back to the split between IOFGRA and Organic Trust (Tovey 1999). Interestingly, the idea of recognition implies revisiting something that has
already happened, be it a cognitive or physically experienced event. Bétrisey et al. address the issue thus:

The term “recognition” refers to both a cognitive action (the awareness that something we perceive had been perceived before) and to the act of someone’s affirming the existence of someone else. (Bétrisey et al. 2018, p 135)

As we are talking about not just other people in this instance, we could modify the last part of this to: ‘affirming the existence of someone else or something else.’

It seemed the historical account of where things came from was being skewed to appease a more conservative audience. Is it possible that the social and cultural origins of those pioneering efforts and the, at times, subcultural pathway it traversed is now being treated as a taboo subject? I think the evidence could be interpreted to confirm that retrospective withholding of recognition is indeed taking place. For example, another (organic) farmer talking at a farm walk in 2019 said that the biological farming phenomenon was ‘very interesting and an exciting development from both a horticultural and agricultural point of view’, this I found surprising but to be fair he did emphasise that this was just his opinion and he was still thinking it through. He also said that perhaps the organic vegetable growers were a little bit behind the curve in relation to soil biology and that perhaps ‘they could learn something from conventional farmers’. It occurred to me that the level of ambiguity circulating must start to have a destabilising effect sooner or later.

Nobody has of yet has stated clearly whether organic, biodynamic, naturally grown (Fukuoka 1978) or agro ecology, as defined by traditional peasant agriculture, has had any bearing on the biological farming methodology. Is it conventional or not, has it been developed by conventional farmers or not? It would not be so blatant if those pushing the biological farming approach acknowledged that many of the features of biological farming were already here in some shape or form and then said that ‘some’ conventional farmers with their vast farms started to use ‘some’ of these methods and got ‘some’ very good results.

The problem is that there is a lot of vagaries relating to authorship. The basic thrust of the approach as I interpreted it is that biological farming and it’s
methodologies and practices are a conventional farmers invention and these farmers are going to give the organic farmers a bloody nose by beating them at their own game. Conveniently, making the disrespect shown to organic and bio-dynamic farmers down through the years a justified bullying, is perhaps a good sales pitch. That is, casting your target audience as the winner is good salesmanship. This to me seems like a recognitional black hole, unless someone is willing to clean it up.

I recently asked farmer Ward what he thought of the whole biological farming approach and its recent ascendancy. He said that they are doing it, the rebranding, in order to corner the market and charge a fortune for courses. He gave the example of the permaculture movement in Ireland and the price of the courses. Yesterday’s permaculture heroes are today’s biological farmers as far as he was concerned. I easily confirmed this by checking the overlap between those promoting biological farming methods and permaculture in Ireland, noticing that there were indeed persons appearing in both camps simultaneously. The internet can be useful for quickly checking dual or multiple allegiances. Many of these allegiances are not necessarily incompatible. Many of the brands try to cover as many strands as possible. For instance, Permaculture embraces Organic and Bio-dynamic together with other landscape concerns beyond the farm. Certain interpretations of agroecology, but also the biological farming approach and regenerative agriculture, try to embrace almost everything that is not conventional agriculture, although biological farming sees itself as conventional also. If the reader is confused within the above intersections of identity or branding, I sympathise but suggest that there are ways to untangle the lineage and determine where opportunism meets genuine convergence. I will offer a theoretical solution in due course which I believe is more applicable to the Irish setting than embeddedness or conventionalisation theory.

Let’s remember that forgetfulness (Honneth 2008) is part of the misrecognition game as much as it is part of the Lukacs’s reification process which banishes the engaged praxis, even the awareness of self, to somewhere behind the veil of reified practices. The same (organic) farmer mentioned above did say that in solving some of his problems ‘we have to go back to our
horticultural first principles’ and seeing as he was trained in conventional horticulture and later turned organic, that was certainly an admission that he did actually forget something and in this case, it was something relating to the germinating of seeds. Granted in this case he didn’t mention whether forgetfulness related to an organic horticulture or a conventional horticultural rule of thumb.

Although, to counter this trend another speaker at the *Feeding Ourselves Conference* (2019) gave his opinion. Hans Martin Lorenz is member of ARC 2020. He is a person who has been at the heart of negotiations in the EU which sought to rid the organic business in Europe of corruption and sharp practices. He said that we should remember ‘that organic was the original agroecological movement’ and seemed to be suggesting that it was worth respecting. He had been talking with me earlier that day and said that the organic producers themselves were causing obstruction to the reform of the governance structures of organic certification in the EU. They were almost willing to accept a level of corruption in order to continue as they were. Although he seemed to imply that these were at the higher end of the income bracket as organic producers go. I think the reader will appreciate that there is a tendency on the part of farmers and farmer educators to roll back on previous acknowledgements (by disrespecting the socio-cultural origins of the knowledge and ecological values of previous generations of alternative farmers). However it needs to be looked at carefully. As I said earlier, it is a fluid situation in Ireland at the moment and many farmers are going to change their position to a greater or lesser extent. There are those alternative farmers who are more comfortable with the ecological point of view and they see these developments as political and marketplace trends which are not really worth keeping track of.

Sociology and social theory provide several theoretical explanations for rolling back or back sliding on previous acknowledgements of the sources of knowledge. One is the Habermasian idea of legitimation crisis, (Habermas 1973) which sees the capitalist system as being in a constant state of near
collapse. According to Habermas, the only way capitalism can continue to function is to legitimise its existence through the creation of misleading discourses and this is a relentless activity, often representing moral or political choices as narrow technical problems. In agriculture for instance, if ‘normal’ logic were to apply, alternatives to conventional agriculture should not include the conventional approach itself, yet that is exactly what the biological approach seeks to achieve (such as use of herbicides on biological farms). More hardcore alternative farmers, those who are aligned with strong AFNs, would see this as an attempt to reinvent the indefensible as somehow acceptable. The application of herbicides like the infamous ‘Roundup’ brand could never be acceptable to these farmers. To cast it as a viable option for a biological farmer would be compatible with Habermas’s legitimation crisis model.

Another less contentious rival explanation is provided by Ronald Burt (Burt 1980) when he explains (relying on Simmel) that actors who co-occupy several positions simultaneously may achieve a certain level of autonomy, in the sense that they are not held responsible for their actions to the same extent that those occupying only one network position. In adapting this network theory explanation to the case at hand, it would be in the interest of the actor (back slider) to deny complicated origins and to simplify her message. Shortening the message is perhaps seen as a kind of reductionism, which is necessary for making the pitch. I’m sure the network manager of NOTS would prefer this explanation. In Chapter 6, a third possible explanation will be explored drawing on the recognitional stance (or the lack thereof) of the actors.

**Conclusion**

On a practical level people are lured by so-called new approaches and are perhaps tired of, or have a cultural aversion to, the organic or biodynamic concepts. Some alternative farmers are eager to seize an opportunity for funding by getting in on the greening of conventional agriculture in Ireland, something that the state appears to be pretty desperate to achieve. At the same time they can retain their organic certification, if they have it, or their
reputation as good alternative farmers if they are regarded as such. At the *Feeding Ourselves Conference* (2018), the speakers talked about the multiple crises facing the farmers of Ireland and the Irish population. I have detailed some of the response of the conventional farmers and their supporters as being defensive in nature during the 2018 drought. I suggest that a denial of the origins of certain knowledges may be part of that defensiveness and this represents a misrecognition of sorts. Reconstruing socio-cultural origins of certain practices to suit ones ideological stance or one’s strategy to safeguard the perceived legitimacy of the conventional approach is well represented in the AFN and food systems literature (Montenegro de Wit and Iles 2016). Goodman et al. (2014, p138-139) cites Vos 2000 and Allen et al. (2003) on how the emphasis on *inputs* rather than *process* preferred by the USDA during the founding of the national organic standards during the 1990s undermined the original and more progressive approaches which sought to constantly improve the organic approach as an agroecological and social justice orientated movement. The rush to institutionalise the organic concept was partly motivated by a threat from the USDA to ban the term organic. To ban the term organic would have been a most severe form of misrecognition, but it could be argued, it may have saved the movement from co-optive forces.

*The more Knowledgeable other*

The more knowledgeable other is a common term in Vygotskian research. It is assumed that people learn effectively, achieve their next developmental progression, when a more knowledgeable person is present to demonstrate how that specific task might be approached or how complex problems might be interpreted. As referred to in the literature review the Vygotskian approach sees the encounter of the more knowledgeable other and the pupil as a developmental and longer term relationship which is historically situated and subsumed in the sociocultural context. Of course the shallow interpretation of this and other developmental, future observing paradigms, is to strip out the
historical and socio-cultural baggage and extract what it is that we need to know. In western culture we tend to think of knowledge in more universal terms and not belonging to anyone. Rarely if ever do we see a single person as the bearer of knowledge. In the instances that we do, the work ‘guru’ comes to mind. I have encountered the word quite a bit wherever conventional and alternative farmers or institutional actors cross paths. This word can have different shades of meaning. It can mean a very knowledgeable person or a person who falsely portrays themselves as a very knowledgeable person. It can be a term that expresses ones desire to engage with that person or a term that expresses a curiosity about what that person might know while at the same time wishing to stay away from the socio-cultural attachments that surround that person. Perhaps, in order to distract from the evident failure of typically western universal knowledge systems to provide everything or almost everything we need to know. In this sense the term may be a comedic response.

A more personalised treatment of the more knowledgeable person is common when the audience is mainly comprised of alternative farmers, AFN actors or sympathetic members of the public. I will assume that seeing the more knowledgeable other as a person is an important indicator of an engaged praxis. In contrast, the provisioning of knowledge in industrial farming happens on a conveyor. Clinical scientific thinking is generally impersonal and does not usually require any personal engagement to apprehend, or so it is understood. What has been scientifically proven or approved is seen in the world of conventional agriculture as being a trustworthy source of knowledge. In alternative farming the personalised message of the teacher or practitioner makes it all the more attractive and comprehensible. Another aspect of the knowledge transfer in AFNs that seemed relevant was a deeper identification with the more knowledgeable other in the context of the time and place of the valued learning events. The more knowledgeable person often describes the unique context of the discovery or ongoing discovery. This might include details of the field, the habitat, socio-cultural events that may have supplied motivation, the climatic variations at the time, the prevalence of pests or diseases at the time and more than likely conditions relating to soil health.
The deeper identification with the more knowledgeable person may be emotional. It may involve getting to know how this person interprets problems or whether or not they even see problems as problems. In fact the disengagement with the Cartesian, problem solving mindset might be part of the lesson for some. In many cases informants may refer to a cluster of more knowledgeable others brought together by some synergistic learning events either spread over time or as part of an organised coming together. Although whenever there is a concentration of these more knowledgeable persons this may be the beginnings of a more institutional or routinised response.

The more knowledgeable other can in itself be a motif which might be exploited in utilitarian terms. A quick look the websites of some of these more knowledgeable persons reveals that quite a few have made a substantial business from the transfer of knowledge, some charging several thousand euros per day. Although the businesses are sometimes structured as non-profit, there does seem to be a trend towards ratcheting up the scale of the operation and the fees charged. Many of those who travel to present at conferences are only too happy to reveal how they travel all around the world and have business interests on several continents.

Garry Zimmer speaking on a podcast about regenerative agriculture, tried to demystify the process that made him a very knowledgeable person, probably because many people see him as the father of biological farming. He did coin the phrase, but he did that in order to get the point across that it is not chemistry farmers should be looking in relation to soil health but biology. Here is Gary talking about his experience at an experimental farm.

I learned an awful lot from some really good mentors I always tell people I didn’t create or develop too much I paid a lot of attention and I think as time went on I think we all got better at understanding soils and so on through soil Bio and I had some really good teachers in the beginning through that Brookside experience (an experimental farm). (Zimmer 2018)

I’m not sure if this kind of synergistic learning experience ever took place in Irish state funded institutions but a reliable source has told me that it would
never happen because if a person showed that much enthusiasm and imagination, he would not be promoted to any position of significance. I think this goes beyond the view which sees bureaucratisation as something that stifles creativity. It sounded like the informant was intimating at a deliberate strategy to impede sustainable solutions which could be to the disadvantage of big business in the short term. One organic farmer who farms near the border with Northern Ireland was shocked to find out that the head of some sustainable project or other promoted by the state (the project related to tillage) never heard of companion cropping (planting two species like oats and peas side by side). A well-known entrepreneur in the field who had joined in on the conversation remarked that it might also be possible that it was the institutional actor’s way of saying ‘we are not going to run with this’. Either way the prevalent opinion is that if you have a government job you tow the government line until told otherwise.

Consideration would be given to new practices only if it became part of the policy of the department and those policy changes happen at higher levels. More recently, pressures to deal with the high greenhouse gas emissions that Ireland is deemed to be responsible for has caused some movement on the policy side but it’s too early to say how these shifts in thinking, if they are indeed shifts, will manifest themselves in changes in practices. In relation to Gary Zimmer and the biological farming approach I find it interesting that the Irish state through NOTS has been busy promoting this as an idea on the fringes, whereas it gives direct grants to the organic sector. Garry Zimmer has come from both conventional and organic learning environments but is very much tied into the conventional idea of scale. He told us at the conference that he is involved with capitalist farms (van der Ploeg 2018) with vast acres in Eastern Europe. European land grabbing, which happened in the early years of the EU enlargement to the east, is a contentious issue, and one that has been highlighted by Access to Land activists in the EU. Obviously, Garry Zimmer is not aware of it. He also told stories of how his son was lucky to snap up cheap land in the US and now enjoys a tenfold increase in its value. It would seem that overextension of the motif of the more knowledgeable other, a type of knower who until recently appeared in the context of smaller scale
alternative agriculture, has now become a recognisable pattern on the world stage. In other words the motif itself and the very existence of these unique actors has been co-opted and transformed into a business. It's useful to go on the internet and see how many of these financially well off more knowledgeable others are willing to fly anywhere in the world to give a talk, some charging €3,000 per day.

**Examples of influences from these others**

Ian Ward, another farmer-educator, discusses his background and gives credit to his mentor in London. Here he was discussing the beginnings of his interest in farming which is supportive of the idea of seeing the more knowledgeable other as a person.

**Farmer Ward:** I started growing there's a photograph of me there in a vegetable garden when I was Planting leeks apparently. And I sort of had it in the back of my mind always because my first mentor in life was an old man in London who had about 3 different allotments…. And unlike allotments here now these little beds these were legal size full grown which would feed a family of six, so I sort of grew up with him multi-tasking, learning growing and at the same time doing the woodwork clipping the hens wings and doing that sort of thing …. so I grew up in London in quite a sort of gardening atmosphere and it was just me and him most of the time and his wife ..who was a real country woman as well…. so I grew up in the atmosphere and I always had the idea of living in the country and growing things. So I just started that way. (interview: Ian Ward 2018)

A year or so later I asked him again about that mentor but also asked him how that tied with other sources of knowledge.

**Farmer Ward:** Oh Mr Beven yes I reference him all the time yeah. As a child from the age of four till probably about twelve I spent a huge amount of time in his garden and in his house and I just used to garden with him sort of.

TF: But it rubbed off on you.

**Farmer Ward:** Yes oh totally he taught me how to play chess and draughts and we built a table tennis table way too small in his back garden and I had to clean out his chicken house you know crawl into it because I was smaller than he was. And you know we did vegetables.
So he laid that foundation in me as a child and he also left me fifty quid in his will, I hadn’t seen him for ten years. I had gone delinquent you know, and I got this cheque saying do something useful with it, and here we are ha ha. No but he laid the groundwork. I grew up in a city and he was a country man. I don’t know if he is a country man by nature or by birth, his wife was the same. So yeah, I give him huge credit even in the *Irish Times* in the days when we were more national with our stuff and they ask me these sorts of questions. So I give him credit. I’m trying to think then. When we went to Ventry quite young, we just started working it out. We used to buy magazines like *Common Ground*. But in Ventry then I didn’t do much travelling, I didn’t want to drive to far to workshops. We went to a great workshop, an alternative guy…. about planting in extreme climates in County Clare in the mid-eighties and I got some good ideas about how to plant trees in extreme climates and it worked. it was good stuff.

Farmer Keane tells his story. His father came to Ireland from England and set up an organic farm, he was one of a handful of people to farm organically in Ireland at the time. So obviously farmer Keane’s first mentor was his father but other influences including a visit to Ireland by an activist-farmer from Germany who told them all about the CSA system. There was also the factfinding mission to Britain where he and a small group met experienced CSA farmers. These encounters seemed to make a big impression on him. Here he talks about visiting one of those English farms. These references support the idea that not only is it a more personal contact but the deeper identification with the more knowledgeable other is conveyed within the context of the time and place where the knowledge is developed. This in itself is a cultural construction. The developmental process is being conceptualised and conveyed.

**Farmer Keane**  
And another thing is whatever you grow, your willow is another crop something to use, fell or burn or whatever and that is another thing in farming we went to an amazing farm in Reading (England) and the farmer there is a genius, and he is a vegan farmer there is no animals but he does not grow vegetables, he grows biodiversity, he grows hedgerows and his wild flowers and banks and he grows green manure, he grows everything, and it’s just as important as growing vegetables.
Farmer Keane  That’s the way we got to start thinking like you know. You look after your hedgerows and you look after you beetle banks and all that, he doesn’t have one pest he doesn’t have any insects that damage his plants.

TF Oh alright.

Farmer Keane  Because he has got such good biodiversity. The place is just thriving like it’s all the wild-flowers you have never seen before all these rare birds. It was amazing to watch a quarter of an acre of cauliflowers and everyone picture perfect not a disease on one of them.

Farmer Lynch was asked by one of the other farmers to talk about Alan Savory and his work and I think this example supports the idea of seeing the knowledgeable other in utilitarian terms, as Farmer Lynch quickly moves to the implications of this learning on his farm and seems to be aware that you have to take that knowledge and do something with it, make it come to life, not just lavish praise on the originator. It seems his connection to the more knowledgeable other is not very personal, but farmer Lynch is not what I would regard as strongly alternative. He is talking here about different parts of the grassland on the farms some grazed conventionally (over grazed) and some holistically (long-grass grazing, trampling and manuring by animals on very short stays, 18 -24 hours) and how one survived the drought and the other perished like the new trees he planted.

Farmer Lynch: Well I can pretty much tell you that we were really enamoured at Allan Savory think the guy really needs to be listened to. But we really didn't know how good it was until the drought. When the drought came in, we have seen things we only saw in the States. Where we had this round here, which I will get into. Where we had, we had grazed conventionally and holistically that you …….and holistic grassland with more perennial type grassland that was coming back because it had to pull the organic matter apart. It was still nice growth in the grass going through the patch. Whereas with the conventional grazed stuff, because of the circumstances we didn't have much of an option with the weeds. We said are we going to just have to do it, to sacrifice you know (stay conventional for that part of the farm), but when we did that we had burnt-off ground. So we had a farm in two halves. And that was a real eye opener. It’s the way to be and this is why it is so big in them countries (the Savory method in hot, dry countries) Your annuals for one thing, were heavily drawing they were just burning off……... You get sunlight down to the side, your letting off carbon and you're wearing out your microbes. So like the whole aspect is on fire but like his stuff, I'd
advise anybody doesn't know Allan Savory TED Talk to watch that and then you go from there. The Allan Savory TED Talk and he killed 40000 elephants before he realised what he was trying to accomplish for environmental and animal rights reasons. Ended up changing the way things are done so he's really somebody, good luck to you. Like I wouldn't be any kind of soil guru.

Also on the farm that day was a guy working for one of the national parks in Ireland where they sometimes have grazing animals. He was interested in getting holistic grazing going in the parks. Here he spoke about Allan Savory and how these methods were stumbled upon and developed. It’s possible that Savory comes across as arrogant and that’s why there is not much identification with him as a person. A deeper identification with a white man owning a 30-thousand-acre farm in Africa and being responsible for the deaths of the elephants may also be anathema to some. Here the national parks employee speaks about one of the key discoveries attributed to Savory and institutional resistance to ideas:

**National Parks Guy**: He (Savory) is the guy that propagated it but then again, he got it from somebody in the field that didn’t know what he had actually hit upon. It came from a NASA satellite and there was a green patch in Africa and they sent it to have a look and he said what you doing? He had like the wheel and he was rotating cattle they were going through it and that is when Savory picked up on it.

**Researcher**: So he scooped it up and now he is accusing other people of plagiarising him.

**National Parks Guy**: That’s how things evolve it isn’t coming from institutions, there is only half a dozen farmers doing it (in Ireland) and that is why I’m here. And when these ideas arrive on the ground often government institutions are blocking them from moving forward, and that’s a global problem. Holistic management international was one brand, there was one guy banging his head against the wall. Look its fucking working and they are like you have to do it like this, in the box, don’t mind the evidence. When Alan Savory was doing it, they were calling him a mad man, a hippie and all the rest but then there was too much evidence, that could not be refuted. There was like desert and then its fucking lush.

Some names such as Elaine Ingham and Hugh Lovel popped up quite a few times when farmers are talking about the soil. Farmer Maher mentioned Elaine Ingham in relation to no-dig no-till approaches to vegetable growing saying
that she would get fantastic results by letting nature sort stuff almost unimpeded by human intervention, save some high-quality mulch and the right combination plants. For example, the chemical deficiencies that conventional farmers worry so much about are not so much a problem in her method because nature just rebalances what’s going on via multiple species inputs. He also mentioned that she was so proficient at looking through a microscope at soil that she could just look at the soil and immediately tell you what would grow well there. Farmer Maher certainly spoke about her with due respect and on personal terms.

On a separate occasion Farmer Quinn reminded his audience that the reason we haven’t been too good at thinking about the biological aspect of farming is that you just can’t see it because it exists on a microscopic level. This was an interesting insight into the discovery process itself, in that you are discovering things that you will never see, or perhaps never fully comprehend, but you can understand certain lines of causation. Farmer Ferris co-designed his remedies and sprays with Hugh Lovel, a name that was also mentioned by Farmer Lynch. When you see successful alternative farmers referring to these internationally renowned holistic experts you can see that the level of specificity that can apply to overcoming problems relating to soil biology is far beyond the chemical ‘corrections’ that have been touted as essential for good farming for the last hundred years or so. I see the references by many farmers of these more knowledgeable others as also supporting the idea that deeper identification also relates to ascribing time(s) and place(s) to these ‘others’. This recognises that these others have been involved in a developmental process that spreads over many years.
Establishing and maintaining place-based opportunity

Providing opportunities locally, it might be assumed, is one of the most fundamental actions of any alternative farm, although not all alternative farms are dependent on, or tap into, local markets. Some, for instance, use the internet to extend the network and bypass this aspect of things, a set of activities thought to qualify one’s operation as being part of an AFN (Jarosz 2008). I look closer at the actions which may have led to the establishment of these opportunities and consider which, if any, lend credence to the idea of a recognitional stance being adopted. In this sense looking towards the material manifestations of this ‘stance’ seems like a good place to start and that involves the provision of spaces and places but also the provision of the product which lies at the heart of it all, food. The consumer or consumer-citizen needs to be lured by something attractive, perhaps something unique, but with well-constructed and realistic narratives surrounding it. Those who arrive as curious onlookers should be tempted to indulge in this space and listen to the narrative little by little. To convert a consumer to a consumer-citizen may be the result.

As I have referred to in the literature review, the alternative farmer often takes on a pedagogical role and this has been borne out in the data gathered in the Republic of Ireland during 2018 and 2019. For those consumers or consumer-citizens that are interested, there is a world of knowledge to delve into. As a culture we have been blinkered by the rhetoric of conventional food systems and consumer choice narratives. It seems our knowledge of how organic or bio-dynamic food is produced and distributed is extremely limited. The mobilisation of the dynamics of change often starts with those who have willed themselves to become farmers, despite having non-farming backgrounds, in order to actualise their ecological goals. In this section I apply the term transformative dynamic to mean the impetus that alternative farmers give to consumers and consumer citizens to engage with the food system and
with the ecologies of their locale in the spirit of creating new socio-ecological relations.

Firstly, I should explain what is meant by a place-based opportunity, *Spatial Dynamics of Care* according to Goodman and Goodman (2009), is achieved by both material and discursive means. Relating specifically to alternative food systems they claim ‘the situatedness of food in agricultural nature, social labour, and culture gives rise to multiple material and discursive constructions of quality’ (p5). This echoes the socio-cultural context of learning environments and the use of social artefacts as psychological tools referred to in the literature as being compatible with the Vygotskian approach, but it is further complicated by its necessary connectedness with the nonhuman world of natural processes. Whether the interface between the natural world and the human world is interpreted in ecological terms or seen as a battle ground for dominance (the anthropocentric view), is one of the central issues in the alternative versus conventional agriculture debate. Certainly conventional agriculture and its networks create opportunities and some of those opportunities create employment for rural actors, but I might add, on an industrial scale. It also produces an abundance of product at certain times of the year, which is useful for processing industries. The same can be said for the more entrepreneurial versions of alternative agriculture.

What alternative farmers allied to strong AFNs do differently in this respect is that the opportunities created are not available for scaling up or for widespread distribution. Their physical produce, like the fresh food, is not transported beyond the locale so the product does not disappear into an anonymous distribution system. One only has to move to an area which does not have an alternative farmer within thirty miles to see how the availability of this kind of fresh produce is by no means guaranteed. The ‘farm’ which has value not just as a site for production purposes, may be developed with many functions in mind including its animation as a source of shelter and sanctuary for man, beast and fragile plants (Polanyi 2001), a learning space where the pedagogical role of the alternative farmer comes into being and a site for a quiet revolution, a transformative dynamic.
This is the kind of revolution which cannot be judged by its capacity to ignite the passions of the many but by its ability to deepen the knowledge of those who are willing stop, to get off the treadmill for a time. It's a reversal of what Polanyi describes as a spontaneous disposal of common sense (Polanyi 2001). Making time available in order to learn and to engage, referred to earlier as an engaged praxis, appears as a common thread on these farms accompanied by a developmental approach to the social context of knowledge transfer. Building a coalition of the willing, to borrow a geo-political phrase, is something that happens slowly and haphazardly in the spaces created by alterative farmers.

It is important in this section to demonstrate that opportunity is not confined to or created for the benefit of the opportunistic individual or group. It is not limited to those who are likely to apprehend what is most available with the least effort and to move on before any obligations to reciprocate emerge. It’s useful to see it like this: persons who wish to initiate transfer events where the systemic outcome aspired to is a recalibration of socio-ecological systems are providing the rest of us with an opportunity. Hopefully this is in agreement with our common-sense notions of fairness. A place-based opportunity stands out in the sense that one cannot experience it just anywhere, but crucially it involves the development of dependencies between potentially equal partners in the locale. In these socio-ecological systems actors are not typically fearful of dependencies, although this may take time to evolve.

The termination of what Simmel (1950) termed the privilege of suspicion is one of the unsaid goals of these collective action orientated affairs. Honneth stresses that recognition-based relations may involve ‘…duties to care emotionally, duties that apply in a symmetrical or an asymmetrical manner, to all partners.…’ (Honneth 2007 p140) may be significant. Two points are worth making at this juncture. In the farms that formed part of the data gathering exercise for this thesis, it was the farmer who initiated the process between producer and consumer. The beginnings are almost always asymmetrical affairs, where the farmer creates the space, a farm or market stall, and bears the cost of poor returns initially. This initial low rate of returns phase typically lasts longer than any entrepreneur would be willing to endure,
perhaps because in the alternative farmers case there is a higher motivation involved.

Honneth (2007) also stresses that the recognitional stance unavoidably intersects with moral prerogatives and if we are dealing with a type of mutual recognition, where the moral autonomy of the individual is strengthened, then we are obliged to afford that individual equal treatment in terms of moral accountability (Honneth 2007). I have seen this with my own eyes on many of the farms. Farmers have to wait for the consumer, volunteer or apprentice to catch up. One can interpret this as being patient or exhibiting a duty of care towards the other, also the farmers and experienced workers or members are often making allowances for a certain lag. They are perhaps waiting for the aforementioned autonomy to develop and they have to be prepared to accept the outcome. Whatever decisions the newcomer makes is valid for them. They have to be mindful of the fact that some consumers or consumer-citizens might revert to conventional standpoints on many issues, or worse, they may be reabsorbed into the malaise of fads and fetishes common to the conventional provisioning system.

The opportunities which are selected for analysis in this section were chosen because they are not easily (or profitably) replicated by actors who are living beyond the locale, hoping to sell into the area. One also has to take into account the qualitative differences of the locally generated exchange event or experience when compared with an internationally tradeable product. Lukacs (1968) talks about the ‘decomposition’ of locally generated exchange mechanisms as the commodity exchange structures of the capitalist system permeated new spaces. This seems relevant to the points being made here.

Ward farm creates a unique space for learning.

Farmer Ward turned his farm from a barren hillside into a forest garden growing system. He preserved the old walls and ditches but then superimposed his own idea of landscape on the space. As I spent many days working on the farm, I got to know one of the volunteers. She had spent many years working in Brussels as a teacher and was now back in Ireland. We often discussed how
the time spent on this farm was a big eye opener for both of us. We were intrigued as to how much could actually happen in a relatively small space, how the changes made by the farmer had transformed into something unrecognisable to us. Irish people see farms as open windswept fields of grassland or tillage, horticulture being exceptional. Apart from commercial and almost universally despised coniferous forestry plantations, the idea of the farmer planting trees and reducing the area of his grazing land as a result would have been unheard of in Ireland until recently. Every day we spent on this farm revealed new aspects of diversity. Biodiversity was one of farmer Ward’s most fundamental passions, but he was also strongly interested in seed saving. He also educated us, through our participation, about the many approaches one can have to boosting soil biology and creating a circular system of nutrients. The decomposition of one plant followed by the germination of others, the manure from the donkeys and the ducks as part of the cycle, water harvesting and natural pest control were elements that did not occur to us previously, at least not as an integrated system. The volunteer owned twenty acres, so she was tinkering with the idea of using some of these techniques. She did draw the line at planting trees however saying that the neighbouring landowners would complain. Here is farmer Ward taking about tree planting

**Farmer Ward** So then, when we moved I was looking for another place to grow with my partner and she is a grower as well but we had no money so we bought this piece of hilltop and it was bog, a PH of 4.7 which is one off toxic to normal plants apparently. There was about five or six trees maybe up on ditches and it was a bare hilltop mostly on rushes brambles and gorse so the general impression was that you can grow nothing there so my project for the last nearly thirty years was to prove everyone wrong, not deliberately but I’d learned about tree planting in exposed sites but basically because I believe in trees and I believe that trees are the balancing plant on the planet. If we grew more trees, we would not have climate change and we have been replacing trees with meat production, which most of it is completely unnecessary. See we have absolutely, just from the agricultural point of view disrupted the planets climate.

The protection offered by the several thousand trees they planted has created a new space

**Farmer Ward** ….given us shelter we can see the Atlantic from here but we can’t feel the Atlantic its now gone over our heads. Any strength is not threatening to the farm. The highest
gusts we have had up here were probably something in the region of 170 km/hr…. David or something three or four years ago and we lost about three trees.

**TF** Yeah?

**Farmer Ward** It’s just because they have grown close together their roots and everything are interlocked, and we literally don’t grow tall trees we want them low. So now we are pruning them down, so they are all stubby and protected from wind.

The road going through the farm leads to a disused bog. The road widens at the end where the families would stack their turf on the side. The first day I was on the farm, it was part of a biodiversity walk organised by the farmer. The hedgerows which flanked the old road were a great source of biodiversity, so we spent plenty of time stopping here and there to look at the various wild plants. As we passed the sheds where tools were kept there were plenty of hand tools visible. Hoes, spades, rakes, slashers all piled in a corner, upended wheelbarrows, picks and shovels, bowsaws and loppers. It was hard to fathom the need for so many of the same tools, unless you had visited these kinds of farms before. It still looked appealing, it looked like something from what we used to call the third world. You might be thinking ‘perhaps things were like this before tractors and chemicals took over’. The whole farm looked interesting. It was later I understood that this farm in its entirety was a tool for learning, a psychological tool as Vygotskian scholars might put it. Parts of the farm are laid out with specific teaching tasks in mind as well as production. These include the composting area and potting shed, the tree nursery, the permaculture area with forest garden, the herb garden and tunnel, the propagation tunnel, the production polytunnels, the wildflower meadow and wind shelter, the vegetable rotation, the layered blackthorn hedgerow and the hazel coppice. More recently, over a year since my volunteering had finished there, I asked the farmer to explain why his efforts to establish locally based opportunity were successful.

**TF:** So, you turned this barren hillside into a forest garden growing system. Apart from fresh food provisioning how did you create opportunities for the local community and why in your opinion were these efforts so successful?

**Farmer Ward:** I think it’s an example how biodiversity creates wealth to put it simply. So, this place was a more or less degraded farmland. Overgrazed bog land also it was invaded
with rushes and brambles, grazed just in the winter because there was no water supply and one of our inspectors at one time said that this farm of nine to ten acres would have been valued in terms of productivity at about half a cattle unit per year so by planting the diversity we knew it’s just the way my thinking has been since childhood maybe that if we planted trees restored hedgerows created shelter we would transform the area. At the time, I’m not saying it’s the same now, the department of agriculture forestry service came up because I wanted to plant trees in situations that could possibly be viable for a grant and we were told spruce only, nothing else would grow here. I argued the point, he says no. Those few trees you see there they are in the haggard along the banks they won’t grow in your soil so we said goodbye to them and proceeded to plant thousands of trees in the fields to create wind shelter so we planted in strips and blocks so we created what I realise now from aerial photography is that we have more or less created a woodland with paddocks in it. We have produced nearly commercial quantities of food in that we sell some, but it has not been our primary objective. So we are doing that as a demonstration, and we are showing all of the other types of wealth generation that can happen locally.

So Farmer Ward first explained how he regenerated the space as a viable small farm and planned for dwellings for three different households in pleasant surroundings, but the opportunities made available by creating a site for learning and knowledge transfer were equally important as far as he was concerned, and the pursuit of biodiversity made all of this possible.

This year we are running workshops in basketry in woodland skills and woodland management because of what we have done and over the years we have employed other people and allowed other people to use the sites so it has become a training centre of sorts where people can access this knowledge. So from the position where this was a derelict farm with a derelict house there are three different households living on it one living directly from the farm who was trained who gained here knowledge here and has access to the farm and has her own garden now as part of the farm and one person who lives here but is involved with us. So in terms of habitats we now have outdoor cropping vegetables we got fruits which we learned to grow up on banks not on our soggy ground we have got indoor cropping polytunnels we have got woodland crops now, we have got coppicing hazel alder and oak. So we have got timber for firewood and timber for crafts. You improve the soil the worm life increases you have better banks and you have more life there. So within this whole carbon sink of a farm now instead of being a soggy bog we are sequestering tons of carbon every year within all of that we have got woodland skills crafts teaching opportunities learning opportunities vegetables fruits timber, firewood and all of these things so I don’t know but if you wanted to quantify it as opposed to half a cattle unit.

TF. I expect it’s quite a bit more?
Farmer Ward: Yeah its fifty or a hundred times more valuable and it’s all done from, if you like, giving the land the opportunity. Instead of just being grassed out and if a tree grows up cut it down because its firewood and allowing the cattle to graze the stumps so it won’t regrow, so you end up with that barren bog land then and it has become a vibrant piece of land. This could be replicated and what we are doing now is looking at every town you go through is closed shops close communities everything else because the farms have become industrialised and with a four hundred dairy cow farm selling powdered milk to China you probably got two workers whereas here this nine acres farm is a job and a productive one and in my opinion is more productive than powdered milk for China. So we are looking at a new, well actually not new or old just sensible. It’s a sensible way if you increase biodiversity its good for the planet and good for human beings. This technique can restore rural community and industrial farming won’t. It won’t restore anything over night because it takes people time, they have to get it, heart mind everything they have to get it. And see that this is the possibility you know.

Farmer Ward started teaching night classes in the nearby town and this led on to teaching in nearby schools and setting up an education business which also brought pupils onto the farm. The farm itself became a tool for learning about growing organically and biodiversity issues but was always a place where persons with disabilities were welcome. Now there is the social farming development where the state is involved in funding farmers to improve their holding, making them safe for disabled people and enabling them to have access and comfort while spending time there for therapeutic reasons.

More recently the farmer told me that the social farming phenomenon has become somewhat institutionalised. He was asked to attend long meetings that go on into the late evening and soon he tired of the idea and told the organisers that he is not on a crusade for social farming, ‘it’s just a nice thing to do and I have always done it’. This is another example of alternative farmers knowing the limitations of the processes they are involved in. It’s like they can sense where the quality is starting to deteriorate in favour of quantitative concerns.

Here farmer Ward talks about the educational aspect of what he is doing and how that evolved over the last twenty years.

Farmer Ward …So we were doing organic gardening night courses but again I tried to give a more broad picture not just how to grow a window box or how to grow vegetables but the whole picture from trees hedges woodlands biodiversity and growing vegetables within that and composting and stuff so I was doing all that sort of stuff. The same in the 90s and then Niamh (a teacher in a community college) down the road came on board she was in the
college and she had skills. With her we had the manpower and we started looking at schools and we went into primary schools and we went into primary schools and some secondary schools so that got us involved with the heritage and school scheme which has been running now for about seventeen or eighteen years. So we have been in it since then. Going into primary schools and we have been going into Mount Hawk School on a weekly basis for transition year students.

The other thing we try to do is run courses on the farm. So we do run Saturday courses here when I have got time. And that might be in environmental things like hedgerow planting or hedge laying and often then how to set up an organic garden or fertility or you look at things that could be useful for people to grow organically and again because we are trying to look at the easy maintenance no dig systems I almost find it hard now to break it down into separate classes for fertility sowing seed you know to find a way it’s more of a flow however you would have to do that to some degree.

So then the Farm is also a site for biodiversity walks we often two or three times a year. Any way we would have just walks on the farm through the heritage council or through the biodiversity week run by the council we would have open day bio-diversity walks to the farm looking at all the habitats and what not and stuff and out of that we also do bio-diversity plans obviously for the schools we go into but also for community groups and anybody else who wants them. Private gardens or factories you name it doesn’t matter we do bio-diversity plans and as part of that then we often interact with the council.

Farmer Ward says that going into the educational system as a non-teacher can present problems as many teachers are quite conservative in their views and many of them come from a conventional Irish farm, so they are not so sympathetic. In fact sometimes the children themselves argue for the conventional farming side and give him a bit of opposition there. However all this is part of the challenge and he does not see it as a negative. He gets a kick out of the children taking him on as they defend their fathers farming methods. He has a way of avoiding confrontation but still allowing the debate to happen.

Mr Ward often makes bio-diversity plans for the schools or starts school gardens. In starting the gardens he tries to include as many micro-environments as possible, for instance there may be some mature trees on site already and the children need to be aware of the value of those, so he integrates existing structures into the plan. That also goes for social structures. He says that you have to blend in, to an extent, with what is there. You have to be flexible as there is not much consistency in Irish schools when it comes to
enthusiasm for the ecological point of view. Although this is changing. New teachers can often be great, but he says that eventually the system wears them down and they just ‘curb their enthusiasm’. Here he talks about the kinds of varied responses likely to be encountered.

**Farmer Ward** You might have a principal who is into it and drives the project despite no interest from any of the teachers, you might have a couple of teachers driving the project, you might have a few parents driving the project, might have a couple of volunteers down the road driving the project, a combination of all of those, or maybe just one of those, and if it's the right person they can make a project run. One person can make a school garden, or a combination of god only knows how many. There is no set outcome

Farmer Ward is quite a persistent person and wishes he could do more but because he lacks the qualifications and status he is limited to certain inputs. I think he has made quite an impact nevertheless and his input is transformative. The Education and Training Board recently refused his resignation as he was getting tired of some of the obstacles put in his way. The manager told him he was far too valuable and that they could not afford to lose him. Where I live, forty miles away from his farm, you can see the various places where he either planted trees or encouraged his friends back there to make plantations. As he said, you can actually see the tree line from Google maps, where those people planted trees because there were all living on the one mountainside overlooking the harbour. He also influenced the council’s biodiversity plans in that county and is a member of Kerry Transition. Here he talks about mobilising people.

**Farmer Ward:** Yeah And what we're trying to do is say look climate change isn't an add-on. Understanding our environment isn't an add on. It's the absolute central issue today It's more important than anything else. Because without it we have nothing. And it's coming down the track. So we have to sort it out or you're wasting your time teaching. But you can't quite say that. Because I do sometimes If somebody annoys me you know So yeah

TF… So the difference between what councils would do now and what they would have been resistant to do 15 or 20 years ago Where do you think that came from?

**Farmer Ward** … I think there is an awful lot of good people out there and an awful lot of people constricted by their jobs, teaching or council engineer. It is an awful lot of them out there and you can see that the awareness of the climate is just growing all the time and it's growing right across the board almost all the time for some of us are probably pushing it a bit. A bit harder and I think that is happening in most institutions as well Some people don't want to push it because you know they don't want to be known as the… (rocking the boat) or the hippy in the council
So the local environment benefits from the presence of this alternative farmer. County Councils and local schools have hired him to advise on the planting of more biodiverse shrubs trees and grasses, he has also educated adults and children alike as to the value of agro-biodiversity and variation and higher levels of nutrients in the food chain, but has emphasised that this can only be achieved by having a fundamental rethink of ways of producing and that involves having a respectful attitude to natural processes.

I think he definitely gets the point across that this realignment is not just going to be beneficial for people and local economies, but also an enjoyable experience. Even changing from being negligent towards nature to being respectful towards it can be an interesting and a somewhat pleasurable reawakening. I think this farmer achieves a lot as a communicator but never loses his foundation as being rooted on his farm and in the natural processes happening around him.

His farm has also been the inspiration for a nearby alternative farm. The people who started the new farm did their work experience at the Ward farm and later asked his advice on how to make their farm viable. His advice was firstly to create biodiversity and shelter by planting trees, and he went on to design the layout of the farm and advise on the species of trees that were most likely to benefit the long-term development of the farm.

Another incarnation of the Ward farm had occurred almost thirty years ago forty miles to the west. His previous farm, which was more like a modest sized market garden, tapped into the local market, particularly the developing restaurant businesses in a thriving tourist town in the South West of Ireland. I knew from several sources that, in addition to his own small farm operation, he was offered the opportunity to design and manage a new project by the local Development Co-operative. The Co-operative was called the Comharchumann and was part funded by the larger development agency for Irish language speaking areas, which is known as Uduras na Gealtachta. I was given conflicting information by locals concerning which part of the project farmer Ward was getting involved in at the time, so I asked for clarification.
**TF:** You know when the Comharchumann were doing something back west of Dingle with you. Was that connected with the glass houses back there?

**Farmer Ward:** No. They had twelve acres of land near the glasshouses and (it was) the Uduras politician guy who got me started. I did a plan for these twelve acres, to set it up. He was forward thinking for an Uduras politician. He set me up with that…. with the idea of developing this whole organic market garden back in Ballyferriter to supply the Dingle market, because it was just starting. It made absolute sense but there was nobody to drive it after I left. I was slightly conflicted at the time because I had the market garden, I would be competing with myself. Having said that it would not have taken much to say well I will just put an orchard in my place and concentrate on that then. It would not have been a big deal. It would have taken a few years to set that up, but it would have taken a lot of funding. But by the smell of it, it was there it was still happening, if somebody made it happen, but there was nobody to do it when I left.

**TF:** So that glasshouse business was well gone by the time you got there, that was already over was it?

**Farmer Ward:** No that was still there, it was an absolute nightmare. They were growing tomatoes for the Dublin market and I think in that twelve acres they had also been growing other things for the Dublin market. They set themselves up as a demonstration, as a co-operative, as good farming practice. And of course, it was all wrong….every vegetable….they were losing money by the time the product got to Dublin. Instead of assessing the local market, (and saying) let’s supply them first and get full whack for it without having to go to a wholesaler and distributor and a dadada and be wrapped and so on and get to Dublin so it didn’t work. It did not make sense.

This is a good example of how the alternative farmer knows both the benefits and the limits of the local market. Its seems obvious enough that the politicians were trying to find an alternative to the failing ‘glasshouses’ horticultural project aimed at the Dublin market. According to the farmer, the same twelve acres had been used by the failing project and then it would seem, they looked at the only vegetable growing operation that was working and that was the Ward market garden. The timing was unfortunate as farmer Ward was close to leaving the area for reasons unrelated to his work. Nevertheless the idea of trying to force something into existence by building glasshouses in one of the most westerly parts of Ireland where there is a low level of light intensity relative to the east coast seemed unwise. The local farmer who bought the remains of the glasshouses from the Co-op ended up selling the
glass off, one pane at a time, and the concrete and aluminium framework which remains is certainly an ugly remainder of what happens when industrial thinking is misapplied.

**Farmer Keane and friends create a community space and mobilise collective action within it.**

The Ward farm put the habitat first and worked outwards from there, he learned this from the book he later lost. In contrast to this the history of the Keane farm demonstrates that some farms are created with a social purpose as centre stage. Farmer Keane grew up on his parents organic farm and after a successful surfing career came home to do something different. Farmer Keane and friends discovered that by creating a community garden, the impetus led to many other developments including buying land for the creation of a community supported farm and establishing a CSA on very difficult terrain on the West coast of Ireland. Later still, the purchase of a second farm nearby was possible through exploitation of extending networks beyond the locale. Here is some of what Farmer Keane said about the genesis of the whole process.

**Farmer Keane** Then people were getting word of it (**helping create gardens for local people**) and people were asking help and stuff and then a local businessman had a half an acre he wasn’t using it and he said we could have it. I said great and I said we would start doing something but the land was terrible and I just thought at the very least we could just plant an orchard and that was the original plan just to put in an orchard people could come and sit and hang out but soon as we started clearing the place there was such an interest maybe we could make a community space just to bring people into a garden and basically a community garden and we, the big thing we started from the word go we had weekly cook ups. Every Friday from April to Halloween we always have a cook up and that brings the community together regularly and all the ideas start happening. We have little workshops for kids showing them how to sow seeds, just ideas hub about food or not just food but sustainable building and rainwater harvesting that we all bits and pieces of people know these things but if you bring...
The Keane farm motivates younger people to get involved in alternative agriculture and uses its connection to the surfer community to achieve this. The ability to tap into social capital through network bridging (Burt 2005) between previously unconnected actors has helped enlarge the online support which it enjoys. When the core members are travelling to other CSA groups (in the UK) they sometimes give talks about surfing the big waves in the west of Ireland. Building on existing networks is common practice for collective action orientated actors (Olson 1965). Crowd funding has been a big part of the financing of the second farm and this could not have happened unless the actors were very well recognised as an advocacy and collective action orientated group. As well as this the farm has an open gate policy, so if a young person is travelling and wants to see the farm they can just arrive and join in as a volunteer. The CSA aspect of the farm has definitely helped put the location on the map, it is perhaps the most well-known alternative farm in Ireland. They have certainly injected a transformative dynamic into the local community and beyond the area they have managed to build a credible narrative which among other things allows for flows of resources from urban dwellers to this alternative rural space.

**Opportunities emanating from the Scott Farm and the nearby REDs project.**

The Scott farm is part of a larger project and so it is hard to separate the achievements of the farm from that of the eco village. That said, it forms part of the educational project emanating from the eco village. The small town to which the village is attached has had its fortunes revived as a result of the siting of this sustainable living project on its doorstep and other conventional businesses have benefited as a result. Local shops now stock the vegetables

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9 Recently internships have formalized some of this type of experience.
and bread which is produced by the sustainable communities. A democratic system runs the farm and employs two full time farmers. The farm is run as a separate entity and sells the food to the village. The food is sent up to the members every Monday and Thursday and they wash and divide it. Farmer Scott says if the farmer washes the food then he is subject to more regulations. He says the farm is about to convert to organic even though he was reluctant to do so. Generally, he is against export organic, according to his thinking it should all be consumed locally.

They were asked to send some of the product from their farm to Nenagh, a large enough town nearby, but he and others opposed that move. They said Nenagh has to have its own community farm. Just like the baker in that village who delivers not more than twice a week and bakes only 300 loaves of sourdough. He could bake more but prefers to bake enough, a kind of sufficientism. According to farmer Scott each village should have its own community of food producers like farmers and bakers. He believes that each area has its own bio-character. For instance, there is a lot of lime in the soil in that part of the midlands and there is a history of an iodine deficiency which at one time caused illness in the population but now people do not eat from the area so that is not a problem. He said it would have to be taken into account if they went back to eating in the area, from the ground there. On the farm I have spent time as a volunteer and there is a good respectful relationship between the farmers and the volunteers. They are not just producing the food for the locality they are very conscious of the fact that they are role models and teachers.

I was there early one morning and had the opportunity to talk to one of the volunteers before the others came along and that was very informative as to the benefits she had received from being immersed in this lifestyle for 12 months. She had spent a year on the farm and said the standout thing for her was how much food you can get from a small space throughout the year. Normally there are four volunteers working five hours a day, five days a week and then there are the two paid farmers. She said the work is not that hard if you have people who know what they are doing leading the project. She said this is how she wanted to live now, a kind of homestead philosophy. ‘Once
you have your house there is not a need for great amounts of income if you can grow your own food’. She said she does not want to be a specialist. She wanted to be able to provide for herself in many different ways like growing food and making clothes or whatever one needed. Even though your skill level would not be that high it would be enough to provide for yourself and dependants without the need for endless money grabbing. She saw monocultural farming as incomprehensible. She could not understand ‘why they continue doing it’.

I later learned that another one of the volunteers from that time, a young Turkish man, decided to join the community and live there permanently. All in all, I thought the volunteers held the farmers in very high esteem and enjoyed the experience. It appeared that being on the farm was changing the way the young people looked at things. They were visualising how they could live. How they could live making sufficiency a central theme of their lives rather than the more usual accumulation of credentials and experience relevant to the demands of the commercial world.

In addition, the farm has invested in equipment to engage in a social farming project and is host to many courses including seed saver courses run by Farmer Scott. By giving consideration to the combination of all these actions, it appears that this farm and its support network mirror many of the same achievements of the Ward and Keane farms but may approach them differently.

Another educational project which exhibits a transformative intent is the RED garden Project which is sited near the Scott farm. RED stands for research education and development in relation to people growing their own food, literally ‘people feeding themselves’. The grower is from Canada originally, where he worked as an architect, but had also been involved with sustainability projects before settling in Ireland. I have met him a few times and I have seen his tunnels and outdoor growing spaces which have an impressive variety of crops using many growing systems. These systems are varied specifically to test methods for local and national conditions. Although the videos are available world-wide, the purpose is to use a stationary local
project to increase our knowledge about growing in a specific set of soil and climatic conditions as well as providing food for the farmer’s family and his neighbours. The provision of a space where education happens in conjunction with food provisioning is imbued with political intent and tries to motivate others to self-organise and utilise existing resources. He made the point that many Irish people have access to land and not just their garden, this was reiterated by the farmers at the Tallamh Beo meeting, 2018. So overall, the intention of the RED garden project is transformative but not so much confined to that location but nationally. Here he introduces his You Tube channel:

**Farmer Frank** A number of years ago I started to understand the relationships between the many problems of the world and our seriously flawed food supply system. I realized that changing our food system was essential in order to mitigate against climate change and adapt to climate change, to deal with energy depletion and resource scarcity, to adequately manage waste pollution and land degradation and addressing poverty and corporate control. And fundamentally the resilience of our lives and our communities. More specifically I came to believe that many of these problems could be partially or substantially addressed by more people growing more of their own food. That is why I am here that is what I do now and that is why I stared a You Tube channel

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**Farmer Cullen creates a farmers’ market mobilising support via social media**

Farmer Cullen was inspired to grow her own food by virtue of her proximity to an organic farm in her youth. Her friends’ parents farmed organically and so she became interested. Luckily, when she was ready to give it a try, her uncle was able to give her the use of two acres of land but the problem was that the nearby town did not have a farmers market and to her way of thinking, that kind of venue was the ideal way to establish a small vegetable growing business. In the end she had to go out and create the farmers market herself. This is a good example of how people use their ingenuity to establish some of the spaces needed for local food provisioning. It appears there is the demand for this kind of venue, but it sometimes needs a determined person to bring it into being.
Farmer Cullen There is maybe 3 or 4 stalls now it’s not all food stalls. Like it was difficult in the beginning to find a location for one there wasn’t. like if I give you a bit of history there was a market square here in Bally… but the market is very much gone out of Market Square because it was developed a few years ago and all that was left to represent the market aspect of the town was three miserable trading bays and they are not even all beside each other

Farmer Cullen So, you know and then I approached the council early last year and you know really it was impossible in the early days It took weeks to even get a reply from them. I had a meeting with them or whatever they just were not help ful em with regard you know, providing a location

TF Yeah

Farmer Cullen Then eventually they came up with a location but then they got back to me and said well it is going to take two years to change the bye-laws so that that can happen.

Yeah you know. So this is what you are coming up against you know you are trying to and not alone do they tidy up the area and completely kill the market square and then there was no support for a person that was taking the initiative to start this off like. So at that point I just said…. I started a big appeal on Facebook. Now we had also approached other big landowners who really could have big areas of land and they could have given us a little corner of. But again no interest.

And then I just put a big appeal out on Facebook and this current location a restaurant came forward because they have a courtyard so that’s where we started off last July and so at the moment there are two steady food stalls and then there is maybe a willow stall and a kind of a baked goods slash crafts stall

Farmer Cullen So it’s a very slow process to get food traders on board it’s kind of gone a bit you know, the supermarkets, people have gone directly to the supermarkets with the local product. Not everybody but a lot of people do.

Also people are not enamoured by the idea of serving out in the cold and it is a commitment to make because you have to turn up every week and you have to put a bit of work into it to build you customers. Its slow but I’m pretty stubborn and pretty determined.

Conclusion

The examples referred to above provide useful insights into specific actions undertaken by the farmers and their employees and volunteers, which can only succeed if the actors first adopt a recognitional stance towards the natural world but also towards the community it is involved with. This goes someway
to confirming that alternative farmers in Ireland do employ cognitive approaches to engagement and exchange.

There is also the implication that an actor who does not genuinely assume this posture of engaged praxis would more than likely fail or have limited success in terms of establishing enduring place-based opportunities. I think the ‘glasshouses’ story referred to above is an example of this. That said, there are many other reasons why an alternative farm might fail. For example, farmer Burke (f) has indicated a succession of bad summers put some of her friends out of business.

Nevertheless the farms that do practice an engaged praxis, as exemplified in this thesis appear to have an inward orientation, a point made by van der Ploeg (2018) when referring to his new peasantry. The internal system of validation appears to extend to the communities they are engaged in a sort of network closure (Burt 2005). These actors need to first of all open themselves to new relationships with people who may not be easily approached or persuaded. Perhaps at a later stage they need to get realistic about what is achievable and unsurprisingly this is more evident with the older alternative farmers.

The Burke farm keeps their prices low and supply most of the year, farmer Ward seeks to influence food system thinking through broadening the frame to include bio-diversity which is more acceptable to conservative listeners. Farmer Reid used to do box schemes for local residents but now almost exclusively supplies restaurants. Farmer Malone did not set out to concentrate on restaurants and hotels but the pressure to survive financially seemed to skew things in that direction. It appears that networks operating locally on such a small level need to close ranks in order to survive. As attitudes change there is the potential for more nodes in the network to appear (scaling-out) but as van der Ploeg (2018) has suggested, these developments are contemporaneous with capitalist, commercial-entrepreneurial and eco-entrepreneurial developments (Marsden and Smith 2004). All of the later are better capitalised and more credit worthy in the eyes of lending institutions. However, the transformative dynamic is, according to observations made in
the course of this study, always focused inwards on a closed network and it seems that this is the only way that these networks can survive to act as exemplars. Many of the farmers are new entrants or first-generation farmers and anyone who tries to follow their example will first have to get access to land.

The expectation of solidarity and reciprocity.

This section casts the exertion of power derived from tacit mutual obligations and the creation of durable relational ties as being possible only among those who adopt a recognitional stance towards each other. It is assumed that the more objectivised, calculative mode of decision making, acts on a shorter attention span and dissolves rather than constructs relational ties. In terms of consumption, a tendency towards impulsivity is openly encouraged in conventional food provisioning, leading to excessive displays of product (50,000 items in a small supermarket, Schwartz 2016) and ecological problems due to huge amounts of waste (FAO 2014). Socio-technical transitions literature reveals that consumers exert selection pressures on producers through their decision making (Geels and Schot 2007) but it does not specifically deal with low tech solutions or small worlds like farmers’ markets. The niche in the sociotechnical transitions literature is disruptive in a conventional context. In strong AFNs a microcosm exists where people experience solidarity and mutual respect free from the impulsive and self-serving caricature of human exchange.

It can be assumed that the alternative consumer exerts influence through transfer events (LeClair 1969 p 202) that may form part of an agreed strategy (with producers) to help filter out moral arbitrariness and impulsivity. Moral arbitrariness could manifest itself as a carelessness on the producer side relating to maintaining strict ecological standards and a failure to communicate such lapses to the customer. On the consumer side, impulsivity could mean negligent behaviour, like failure to show up at the farmers’ market or not collecting your CSA share at the drop point without good reason.
Chapter 4 Recognitional Stance

Conventional production and consumption patterns have on many occasions created conditions for the development of certain sharp practices and concealment of falling standards by producers (Kailemia 2016). These events, if and when they are eventually exposed, can generate an ever greater demand for regulation and standardisation with associated costs to the EU taxpayer. On the alternative side, it can be assumed that reciprocity demands, and the power derived from the implied obligation generated within relational ties, exert “communicated” restrictions on both consumers and producers simultaneously. Scholars of political consumerism such as Holzer (2006) grapple with this conundrum as does the sociotechnical transitions literature previously mentioned (Geels 2010, 2011). Holzer refers to choice-delivery within the provisioning systems:

> If the consumer wields any power at all it must derive from the ability to choose among a range of options. Yet if those options are dependent on the range of choice offered by the producers, what remains of the power and influence of the consumer? Is it a mere illusion? Or does it exist, if only in a limited and secondary form? (Holzer 2006 p405)

It is assumed, in the case of AFNs, that the consumers expectations and the producer’s expectations are in some way locked-in via relational ties, but this is not formulaic or rationalised. The relations are normally conducted on an ad hoc basis, even if they take place over extended periods of time. The exertion of power derived from implicit obligations between AFN actors and the duration and solidity of ties are deemed to be an important signature of these operations. In this section it is not assumed that every relation is conducted on a face to face basis, but normally this kind of contact is very significant at some stage of the process. The demands for reciprocity, when properly articulated, is seen here as a significant factor which keeps impulsivity and careless allegiance switching at bay.

The Gallagher Farm turned their farm into a CSA because of sporadic buying patterns at the farmers market. They considered a farm shop but thought that inconsistent patterns would be disruptive to daily tasks about the farm. I did volunteer on this farm on one of the harvest days. It was the day before the CSA shares were dropped off at various destinations (7 in Galway city and the
rest are more local). And even though there were only 18 shares, that was fairly intense work for the farmer, his mother (who lives on the farm and helped for a few hours) and three volunteers. The organisation of the work was done on a very friendly and democratic basis. I think the switch to CSA was more or less a move to bring certainty and encourage people to make a commitment to the farm and this supports the notion that AFN actors have developed mechanisms which overcome a tendency towards impulsivity, but because the drop points in this case are not manned by someone from the farm, customers and farmer do not have weekly face to face contact. Although the selling of the CSA concept may have been a face to face affair.

We were toying with the idea of opening a farm shop when we first moved back from Europe. We thought it would be too disruptive having people calling all the time as in having to stop what you were doing (if you were open every day) …also we had no infrastructure when we started, least of all space for a farm shop. We tried the market, but it was very variable, you could harvest 300 euros worth of veg and end up bringing it all home. Again, no storage infrastructure. So a weekly harvest worked well in terms of planning quantities, harvesting regularly and minimising waste. We’re still working on trying to find the sweet spot. The CSA has gone from 20 up to 35, down to 18 shares from year to year. We may have to adjust from year to year or we may decide to increase the numbers…we’re still working it out. I think certainly it’s easier to do a smaller number of large shares and charge more rather than loads of small ones, but maybe then people expect more. Like an exceedingly high standard.

Farmer Gallagher also supplies a local restaurant which is a good part of their overall business. He says the chef there will change the menu to suit what is available on the farm, which is great. They also send an intern out to the farm one day a week which is an additional help and also beneficial towards developing the awareness of future chefs. Another connection involves the farm taking all the green waste of the restaurant and adding it to their compost mix at the farm.

The Ferris farm, which is a biodynamic farm, sells their cattle to a restaurant in Dublin as bio-dynamic beef (certified by Demeter UK) and this is going really well. They can afford to have less animals and still make a good living out of it now that the restaurant is involved. I asked him how he made that contact and he said it was a friend of a friend who connected him to the chef.
The chef, he quickly gathered, was very interested in sustainability. The chef has many menus which he changes to suit the various parts of the animal. He says the chef uses every part of the animal from head to toe which is great because he can get quite a good price. The relationship is very easy going and the customers like the product and also the fact that it is biodynamically produced. He hopes that the biodynamic ‘brand’ is going to develop stronger recognition as time goes on and that he could get a bit more money for his efforts.

Both the Gallagher farm and the Ferris farm have seemingly developed a synergistic relationship with chefs and restaurant owners, but in both cases, they only deal with a single restaurant and there are no third parties or middlemen.

**Farmer Ferris** It took a while to get that system in place and for it to work so that we could sell it direct to the restaurant selling it direct to them is the way forward when you are doing something biodynamically you need to have that connection with the customer

**TF** Did you make that connection yourself?

**Farmer Ferris** I did yeah well actually I had a friend who knew the guy who owned the restaurant and that got me in the door and sure then we spent 18 months chatting to each other and then we got an agreement

**TF** And are they buying the whole carcass?

**Farmer Ferris** They are buying the whole carcass yeah. So the chef, me-self and the chef have figured it out, he is very amiable anyway. He seems to have a great way about him, and he is very focussed on sustainability and he wants to use from the tail to the nose, he wants to use the whole animal. It’s a Japanese restaurant and he has various ways and means of using the whole animal. That is great to be honest it is the only way it will work in a small system like this you know you cannot be a butcher and you can’t be selling a steak here and a bag of mince there, and what have you, because it is too time consuming so if you have someone that you can sell the whole animal to.

These contacts can be seen as face to face contacts which are repeated regularly so there is the potential to have very durable and strong relations of exchange with good evidence of reciprocity above and beyond normal commercial relations. I therefore see these relations to be supportive of the notion that face to face contacts are important for building durable ties in strong AFNs. These exchanges are also an example of building complexity
within recognisable cultural codes as discussed in the literature. Here Brunori and Rossi suggest that rural actors can create hegemonic cultural codes:

The more complex the network, the more synergies can be activated. In order to create the context in which synergies can be activated, rural actors should be able to create hegemonic cultural codes (Brunori and Rossi 2000 p 421)

However, they can also create affiliations with established cultural codes such as the Japanese restaurant and the distinctive methods for retrieving more value from the primary product produced on the farm. The same can be said for the Ferris Farm’s connection to the distillery where he finds a market for his grains. Incidentally, the research also found that Ireland’s smallest commercial brewery influenced the fifth largest malted barley producers in the EU to change its tune in relation to supplying micro-breweries and this resulted in organising the farmers in the South East of Ireland to create a brand known as the Hook Head Series. These kinds of synergies can often be the result of the exertion of influence, even where the minority partner has no right to be influential in the commercial sense. That corporate actor is now developing heritage Irish seeds for the Irish brewing industry.

**Considering the restrictions placed on the AFN consumer**

Consumers may experience commitment to alternative food networks as restricting. Through the research process I managed to identify factors that might be relevant: 1) Reduced purchasing options to overcome scarcity, or lack of usual abundance of specific fresh food items at specific times of the year. If the farm performs poorly, they have to accept less product in their weekly or bi-weekly share. Similar pre-arranged buyer-supplier agreements apply to food co-ops and to a lesser extent at farmers markets. Even though it is a less formal agreement the relational ties between farmers and buyers at farmers markets are often very strong and obligations to repeat certain patterns of transactions apply, nonetheless.

This can lead to the second restriction/difficulty 2) Reduced provider switching options due to formal or informal loyalty arrangements between the purchasers and the farmers, growers and other sellers. In mainland Europe and North America, CSA shares are paid for in advance at the start of the
season, whereas in Ireland and Britain, the shares are paid weekly, but you are expected to stay for the entire season. Considering present day lifestyles, the obligation to stay with the same farmer or producer group and the need to cultivate and maintain good relations with that producer is a restriction which could take quite a bit of getting used to. Reasons for leaving a CSA, for instance, include not knowing how to cook unfamiliar vegetables, not enough choice, too many vegetables, not being free at the times food are to be collected (Huntley 2018). A combination of these factors gives us a third possible restriction/difficulty. 3) Obligation to go beyond an atomistic exchange logic. Obligation to construct and maintain relational ties with farmers and growers may be awkward for some, inconvenient for others and sometimes impossible when purchasers circumstances change.

Choices made that satisfy solidary motivations might compromise the purchasers manoeuvrability to satisfy the wants and needs of all within the household. This gives us a fourth possible restriction/difficulty but one that is conditional on multiple factors 4) The purchaser within the household may have his or her discretionary and real-time decision making powers reduced (relating to spending) and have the tasks of balancing the needs of all household members complicated by the introduction of moral-economy type considerations. Clearly there is a number of ideological factors involved (including legacy of unreconstructed ideals) even if it has been agreed that solidarity purchasing forms an important part of the mix.

**Practical Examples of How Problems Are Resolved and Resistances are Overcome**

It is suggested that these restrictions are a very real disincentive to many potential new customers and a reason for others to try something else (corporate organic, available in supermarkets, or commercial online organic deliveries). The Scott farm has certainly had its problems with those who consume the food, there are often complaints about very minor issues. This has been a source of annoyance to those on the farm who are struggling to make the farm work and keep a good output despite the short growing season.
The farm is overseen by a committee which sometimes has to intervene in any dispute. The Gallagher farm says that members (customers in CSAs) who crib constantly are taken aside and it is suggested to them that the arrangement is not working out although there is usually a list of people interested in becoming members of the CSA. The customer would obviously be welcome to buy vegetables grown on the farm at the farmers market, but availability of quantities at the market might vary as the CSA gets priority.

The Keane farm has a constant job of persuading the members that the project is a real ‘political thing’ a revolution to change the way food is grown and consumed and farmer Keane has communicated to me that he is fearful that the CSAs will go the same way as organic. He was surprised that in Germany there are new rules with regard to classification of farms as CSAs. He discovered that a farm has to have only 25% CSA product to class itself as a CSA in that country. His father was one of the first organic farmers in Ireland and he was not inclined to renew his certification recently. As his customers trusted him for so long, certification was not worth the expense. His father appeared to be disillusioned with the direction taken by the organic movement, so he relies on those durable ties to keep his business ticking over. Farmer Keane is trying to motivate people to see it politically and use this as a source of enthusiasm. Obviously, there is the problem of a certain turnover of members and that is not easy to remedy if you are living in an area with relatively low population density as is the case with the Keane farm.

Informant Clarke, who purchases her food through one of the farms in this study always had a problem persuading her household members to eat healthily. As she was the cook and buyer of food in that house, she had to sell the idea to everyone else in her household but also in her mother’s household which is around the corner. Despite being nicknamed food police she eventually won everybody over, but this took years. Some of the instances above are examples where the exertion of power derived from implicit but mutual obligations, by farmers, CSA members, food co-operative leaders or household eco-zeolites is part of what keeps these solidarity arrangements ticking over.
Other times solidarity purchasing arrangements just emerge because people are provided with the choice to get away from the conventional supply chains and they take it. Here farmer Malone explains how her box collection scheme took off.

**Farmer Malone**…..yes and it has just grown over the years really I realised very early on that I’d have to fit into the restaurants if I wanted the regular income (Yeah) and that is where my main income comes from and the box scheme is slowly developing. I’m getting more, I’m becoming a better grower as well I am having more selection for people which is more exciting and more people are becoming interested in it as well so people are spending more money than they were two years ago

I think this year now it’s that people are more conscious of trying to buy local produce, people seem to be really aware of it now in the last 12 to 18 months (Yeah) and basically I have done no advertising for the box scheme it’s totally pure… it’s just word of mouth so somebody might hear about me from their friend and then they start talking to me as well so.

**TF**… alright so the proximity of relations is among the customers really? They are doing it for you, they are getting that going.

**Farmer Malone** ……Yeah they are totally doing it for me

**Conclusion**

It can be seen that relational ties can emerge between consumers, rather than between the producer and the consumer. Nevertheless, an atmosphere of non-directive learning, and a level of autonomy exists. It seems evident that mutually agreed responsibility sharing obligates people to veer away from impulsive consumption patterns and if the relational ties can develop over time, it gives the buyer in a household time to win over the other parties who may be less inclined to change their habits. The duration of the ties helps producers and other business owners or key decision makers (like chefs) to overcome teething problems. Over time, a better fit between primary producers and other actors who are interested in sustainable objectives occurs.
It seems that institutionalised forms of alterity are too eager to quicken the pace of adaptation to sustainable options and this can become something resembling a marketing exercise. Market orientated surveys undertaken by Bord Bia for instance are quick to point out that only a limited number of better off customers are likely to buy organic (Bord Bia 2014). This kind of classical economics approach to transitioning to sustainable forms of agriculture and food provisioning ignores the slower moving transformative process described above.

Sub-institutional and non-hierarchical social structures

Many of the farms in this study are part of an immediate network which connects them to the eaters, others become subsumed, or in the case of farms converted to organic and biological, farmers have always been subsumed in many overlapping networks. In this section the sub institutional and non-hierarchical social structures are briefly considered.

The CSA Structure

In CSA farms, the core group will set up a farm and either find a farmer to run the operation or become farmers themselves. One CSA near Dublin recruited both man and farm in order to fulfil their needs and that seems to have worked for them. Usually there is some kind of committee that take decisions on everyone’s behalf. The day to day running of the farm may be a matter for the farmer to organise or manage while the core group may share other work among themselves, such as recruitment of new members and the integration of volunteers into the work programme. Whereas in the US and Europe the members (eaters) pay for their share up front at the start of the season, in the UK and Ireland this is usually done on a weekly basis where a box is valued at say 20 Euros and this provides the vegetables for the week. Members in Ireland are expected to stay for the duration of the season and some CSAs actively encourage their members to work off some of the cost of their share.
Some kind of involvement or helping out on the farm by the members is the norm. In CSAs customers are expected to put up with bad harvests and get the benefit of good harvests so that means members share the risk of things going awry. I think most people know that there is a limit to tolerance in this respect, so the core members are always trying to make things work so as to avoid hardship or lack of product for the members. The CSA I had most contact with struggles to get to the magic number of one hundred shares (100 boxes a week) which is commonly perceived as the level where it might be really viable. The democratic nature of the CSA system is one of the things that make it attractive. There are about six CSAs in the Republic of Ireland. One in Kinsale County Cork has been out action now for many years, even though I was told they were looking for a farmer years ago. However, it appears it never got up and running again. Some CSAs are tiny, like the one near Cork city, that is based on the collective ownership of a 0.25-acre orchard where apples are harvested and pressed to produce juice. The CSA model is a good example of the non-hierarchical social structures associated with AFNs.

**Interest Group Formation**

Interest groups which are non-hierarchical are often formed because an umbrella is needed to oversee certain developments or help people to feel they are part of something larger than themselves, larger than the boundaries of their farm. For example, there are interest groups for the CSA farms and for Perma-culture in Ireland. More developed interest groups which supply services such as third-party certification for producers will not be considered as non-hierarchical in this study and I will discuss later why this is the case.

**Tallamh Beo** is a recently established organization which hopes to bring together Irish farmers, growers and land workers to regenerate the local markets for naturally grown, fresher food. While the organisation shares characteristics with its Northern European counterparts, emphasising a movement towards increased self-organisation and autonomy within food systems, at its philosophical core it identifies strongly with transnational
networks of “agrarian reform-based food sovereignty”. This evocation of international allies allows for an externalisation of grievances to international forums, which has proven to be an effective strategy for the global campaign for agrarian reform (Borras Jr 2008).

Some of the founding members have worked around the world for food sovereignty organizations and have taken part in anti-capitalist events while others were present at the embryonic stages of agro-ecology in the United States and worked for many years with Irish seed savers. It’s worth noting that many of the founding members are not from traditional Irish farm families and have integrated an urban perspective and post materialistic value system into their views on farming and food provisioning. Long-time members and leaders of comparable organizations abroad such the Land Workers Alliance in the UK and Via Campesina Europe in Italy have been involved with Tallamh Beo at embryonic stages.

The impression one gets talking to the founding members is that solidary and expressive incentives on the producer side of the food sovereignty movement are dominant. There is a deliberate political message built into the ethos of the organization, and this, according to one member, is in defiance of a supposedly apolitical consumer culture. In keeping with an antipathy to neo-liberal and market led policies the members recognise that the food provisioning system in Ireland relies on political choices which funnel financial resources and human, social and political capital towards productivist goals which have decimated local markets for fresh produce.

The group is quietly optimistic that it can build on positive group efficacy, through a kind of group level actualization process, although they are acutely aware of a potential hostility from a hyper-vigilant, defensive and well-resourced mainstream. One of the practical reasons for getting the organization going is to bring people together, as this can be a lonely occupation and even more so if you are going against the grain as it were. So mutual support and an atmosphere of camaraderie and friendship are rated as important factors in the recruitment and retainment of members. It is important
that members know ‘there are people beyond the horizon who share their grievances and support their causes’ (Tarrow 2005, p76).

Also significant is the psychological and emotional well-being of all concerned, something that is often overlooked in dealing with marginalised communities or with those who find themselves on the fringes of the mainstream economy by adopting particular moral limits to behaviour. Collective action is often governed by choosing when to mobilize and confront mainstream norms and this is “a question that seems to be addressed in a rather open-ended and tentative manner” (Borras Jr 2008 p 268). The organization sees the necessity for being open to many levels of engagement and this means going beyond a pro-active stance where an intensification of efforts is necessary to counter prevalent negativity in the daily discourse and to confront the hegemonic productivist and consumerist culture.

The founders do not see the organization as a marketing tool to coral consumers around their cause. Although consumer/citizens are encouraged to become a part of the organization, decisions will be taken that prioritise the interests of the farmers and land workers (as expressed by one of the founding members at the Feeding Ourselves Conference 2019). The marketing aspect of alternative farming, such as the organic label or the CSA trust-based system, are distinct elements which evolved through previous efforts to engage with local markets and achieve direct contact with eaters. The founders made it very clear that it is not their intention to construct a broader alternative brand to enhance their image. That said, viewing the layered set of images going from sovereignty related narratives through the CSA relationship building and community rhetoric and on to the security of the organic label with its rich history, could prove to be a resource and one that may be, at some time in the future, used to lure customers and members (see Burt on Social Topology 1980). Particularly where a farmer belongs to or has been co-creator of all three organisations. However, they profess to educate and politicise not to sell.

As some farmers might be reluctant to disengage from practices common to industrial farming the founders see the need to engage with fellow farmers in order to choose a path suitable to the newcomers needs while progressing
towards increased autonomy and self-reliance in terms of farm inputs (green manures), regeneration of local markets and value capture. Tallamh Beo will offer this kind of forum, where farmers consult and educate each other as to the best strategy to rebuild local markets and minimize the use of expensive agri-business inputs. In addition, the founder members envisage a situation where alliances with other like-minded groups will not only give members a feeling of being part of a global movement but will offer the organization a degree of protection and facilitate access to EU Institutions and policy makers through alternative channels.

Significantly the organization sets broader goals in terms of playing a role in creating viable social-ecological systems for the future. This inclusion of longer time frames as well as pursuing practical and more immediate objectives sets the organisation apart. Tallamh Beo, as well as their international counterparts, describe alternative scenarios where future generations inherit an improved rather than a degraded ecological balance relating to food systems and where vibrant rural communities once again function as food and fibre providers without being subjected to pressures exerted from big business strategists and governance structures that favour both export-led growth in agriculture and operations with ever increasing scale and an ever increasing subservience to ‘the market’.

Connections to International Counterparts

Urgenci is a democratic organisation which supports CSAs internationally. In countries as diverse as the United States, Japan, France, China or Mali people have organised communities around a return to wholesome food, where farmers and consumers come together to share the risks and bounties of ecological farming\(^\text{10}\). The Mission of the Urgenci Network is to further, on the international level, local solidarity-based partnerships between farmers and consumers. It organises seminars and research projects to promote the CSA model in Europe. Ireland has its own CSA network, and this is affiliated with Urgenci. CSAs have been useful to small farmers as a means to survive the supply of cheap imported fresh food, this is why “the Soil Association has

\(^{10}\) https://urgenci.net/the-csa-research-group/
been engaging in a project it calls *Cultivating Communities*, to facilitate the development of more CSAs in England and created a CSA Action Manual, a fifty-seven-page guide to setting up a CSA” (Henderson 2010). The primary activities of Urgenci has been to facilitate exchanges of information and visits among partnership participants in different countries, for instance, some members of developing CSAs in Ireland have visited CSA farms in other countries. Interestingly, the CSA story begins in Japan with the TEIKEI movement, which was very much influenced by Masanobu Fukuoka, mentioned in the Introduction. This data supports the idea that adopting a common recognitional stance connects local food networks with international counterparts.

**Sub Institutional Structures**

In sociology the word institution has a rather elastic meaning. So to say something is sub-institutional may be difficult to delineate unless we are merely talking about sub-state institutions. Perhaps it is better to talk of group identities which are not yet subjected to institutionalisation. Many would identify the organic certification bodies as non-governmental, but few alternative farmers would deny that these bodies have been institutionalised and co-opted into mainstream economic and political processes. Many farms break away from the organic certification bodies in order to differentiate themselves from corporate organic and to avoid the costs of certification. The CSA movement is often seen as a response to the co-optation of organic into the mainstream distribution system, depicting it as the new frontier of alterity. Ostrom (2012) has used the term *institutional monocropping* to describe the imposition of static institutional models on smaller farmers in the Global South. Instead she proposes a kind of *institutional diversity* developed by encouraging an autonomous search for solutions. This idea, which is mirrored by van der Ploeg et al. (2000) as they talk about *autonomous restructuring* and *new institutional arrangements*, and presupposes a certain density of actors. I mentioned earlier that Ireland has a very low population density, and this means that those involved in collective action, particularly in rural areas, are going to be starved of participants. A factor that may sometimes lead to collapse of the network, but it can also set the limits to the collective
enterprise. As a result many forms of institution building are not applicable. In this sense institutionalisation can be avoided. I have outlined how some of the farmers are disinclined to become involved in networking outside of their immediate circle. I think this not only identifies them as adopting a policy of network closer but identifies them as *sub-institutional* from a structural point of view.

**Conclusion**

These examples of sub-institutional and non-hierarchical social structures are evidence of the recognitional stance as it extends itself into social formations. Low population amongst the target group may give the intended structure the opportunity to stay small and establish workable alternatives to the type of part conventionalised businesses achieved by those who are able to avail of a larger pool of willing participants. This does not exclude those operating in proximity of more densely populated areas from limiting their ambitions. As an alternative strategy they could help others to set up other small-scale operations, it just seems less likely that this would be the case. Some of the internet based scaled up operations in Ireland began by buying out a successful locally-based sustainable farm and proceeding by making investments to expand that base.

*Respect for the web of life and taking the time to understand it*

There are many instances identified in this research to support the notion that alternative farmers in Ireland are worlds apart from their conventional counterparts. Many farmers have amicable relations with their conventional neighbours and seek to learn from them about how the old folks farmed the land in that area. It’s worth remembering that there is a social memory of
peasant-like farming still alive in Ireland and consulting on that subject could be one route to communication across the organic-conventional divide. On the contrary, it can be a social memory strewn with undertones of bitterness about the hardship and discrimination felt by small farmers in the past. Poverty and lack of access to resources like education and adequate social welfare but also being subdued by an authoritarian culture leaves its scars, especially on those that stayed at home (many emigrated). One alternative farmer I spoke to referred to the historical context of Irish farming, blaming the Catholic Church for discouraging farmers from resisting the colonial and post-colonial regimes which turned farming into what it is today. Others praised the work of Muintir Na Tire which stood up for small farmers, but in that case, it was Catholic priests leading the charge, the Catholic Church was the saviour. The reality is that farming is subject to whatever major changes are affecting the rest of society and there are many layers set down over time.

One process may still be playing itself out when another is already underway. For example the organic and bio-dynamic movements still exist and develop, they still compete with each other. I even met two Irish farmers this summer who swapped over from organic to biodynamic and I visited a farm which started its life as biodynamic and is now looking for certification via organic standards. This at a time when many people see organic as a spent force, as something that has been co-opted by corporate interests on one hand but also by entrepreneurial farmers who are doing it for the money and are compliant to third party certification standards.

One alternative farmer, who meets regularly with an inspector working for the certification bodies, told me that in the inspectors opinion Ireland is about 2% Organic but 85% of that 2% consist of farmers who want to get the premium and he personally did not consider it to be truly organic. Another alternative farmer I met in the midlands complained about the derogations (permissions to use specified amounts of forbidden chemicals or non-organic manures on a temporary basis) being handed out by the organic certification bodies in Ireland, particularly in relation to seeds. He felt they were being handed out too easily, that they were unjustified.
While all this is going on some committed Organic and Biodynamic farmers are still finding out new ways of doing things even if it only applies to the soil and climatic conditions in their area or to one particular weed problem in one particular field. Superimposed on that, there is the biological farming pitch which claims that conventional farmers using some aspects of organic methodology like cover crops and companion planting can reduce chemical inputs and still use chemical fertilizers if they wish. They would say ‘the more the merrier’. Increasing the number of farmers using these natural methods is a good thing even if they also use agri-chemical inputs like the infamous Round-up weed-killer.

All these layers are sedimented over time into the socio-cultural soup. A sociocultural mix which underpins attitudes to farming in Ireland. It determines much of how farmers interact with the natural world. What level of damage is permissible? Is one question which separates people. Van der Ploeg (2018) once used the phrase co-production with nature, and this is mirrored by the words mimic nature used by the biological farming people today.

How farmers see the interconnecting parts of natural processes is down to their interpretation of what is working for them and what is not working for them. In conventional farming if something in nature is not contributing to their production process directly, they ignore it, if it is having a negative effect, they annihilate it. Alternative farmers have figured out that ignoring leads to the farmer themselves becoming ignorant of natural processes and that the annihilation kills far more than the target weed, pest or fungi. I will try to show the reader the difference between the various approaches to alternative farming in Ireland today. Some are closely aligned with conventional thinking others are more aligned with those pioneering figures outlined in the introduction. Each respects the web of life above and below ground and each devote a certain amount of their time to understanding it, something which is considered a waste of time in industrial farming.
**The Biological Farming Approach**

*Witnessing the design of soil recovery programs using multi-species cover crops, companion cropping, and attempting to inject useful microbial lifeforms into the soil.*

I have been present on farms where the soil expert said he looked at the soil under the microscope and there was nothing there, very little bacterial or fungal life forms. They then set to work to remedy the situation by spreading teas, soil inoculants and home-made folio sprays. This was followed by changing from the monocropping method to growing multiple species at the same time, corn and beans for example. One crop supplies the nutrients that the other needs and the farmer can then harvest the crop and use it, without separating it, as a high-quality feed for animals. Otherwise the crop could be harvested and separated and sold into the human food chain. Biological farmers, those who have just begun to convert from conventional, are new to the practice of observation. It’s not that conventional farmers don’t use observation as a tool, but they usually follow advice from extension services, commercial suppliers and department of agriculture inspectors, so they really have little choice in these matters.

Some of the Biological methods are difficult to apply in Ireland owing to mild and wet winters. These conditions are not ideal for killing off the cover crop (the crop used to feed and protect the soil in between commercial crops) so there is the temptation to ‘terminate’ using products like Round-up. The farms that I was able to access who were using biological farming methods were indeed an interesting cross over between an organic and a conventional farm.

Farmer McLoughlin in particular was really enthusiastic about the biology of the soil and he even bought his own microscope so he could conduct his own observations. General monitoring of the health of the crop at all stages of development was in evidence. He told stories about his experiences. How he once decimated the worm population of one particular field when he made the mistake of applying slurry. That field was now operating with zero chemical inputs. He seemed genuinely concerned with the loss of the worms as he is now totally focussed on building the soil biology. He was convinced that the
increase in soil biology he hoped for in the next five years would greatly improve the bio-nutrient quality of the plants and that would transfer to the human food chain. He said, ‘Compare to what we used to produce in this country the food we are producing now is crap’. He was hopeful there would be some form of verification for this kind of production in the future. It was, in his opinion, going to be superior to an organic product and he demonstrated this by referring to his eleven species cover-crop compare to the two species cover crop of a well-known organic tillage farmer.

The farmer was getting the help of a member of the Danu Farming Project which is trying to promote this kind of farming in Ireland by evaluating quantitatively inputs versus benefits when specific farms convert to these methods over a period of five years. Of course cost benefits to the farmer are one of the main areas being focused upon, otherwise it may not have been awarded EU funding. This point in itself is interesting. It seems the calculative mode of thinking is already operational even though very serious teething problems are still being worked out as regards being able to identify how these methods will apply to Irish farms.

The farmer had invested in various kinds of equipment to prepare teas which are then sprayed into the soil or on the crop as it grows. He described how he got used to using his sense of smell to detect if the home-made teas or inoculants were ready or if they had gone too far. This was used in conjunction with the microscope. It was interesting to see this successful conventional farmer talking about using his senses to ascertain if the microorganisms within the concoction were of the right kind. The soil health expert had a good knowledge of soil biology and had warned that if the mixture in the hopper shaped vat (where the teabag was) was agitated for too long (by pumping air from below) the result could produce undesirable bacteria or fungal life forms.

The farmer also talked about using grazing animals to eat the cover crop in the field as an option and was pleased to tell us that he was able to receive a better rate from the beef farmer that put the animals there. He also informed the people on the farm that day that he was saving his own seeds in order to
gradually create seeds that were better adapted to the particular conditions on his farm. So if it is taken into consideration that this farmer who only started trying out some of these techniques a few years ago, there are signs of progress. He was now seeing the interaction of multiple species of plants, how they affect each other, but also below the ground he was now thinking about the microbial life forms, worms and insects, the water content and aeration of the soil in order to make conditions right for this underground ‘civilisation’ as one farmer called it. In terms of weed control he was now able to observe, on his own farm, that if you get the soil biology going, if it is more harmonious below ground, there is less reasons for weeds to be there as they thrive on deficiencies or surpluses within the soil (or extremes such as compaction or water logging).

So in the case of farmer McLoughlin he was focused on a) saving money through reducing the amount of agri-business inputs per acre b) gaining in terms of possible premium rates for grazing, fodder or for food for human consumption as people see the bio nutrient improvement on all levels c) the alternative kinds of equipment needed to sow seeds differently, also to create teas and homemade sprays d) the interaction of all non-human lifeforms above and below ground which is part of a more integrated view of things. Obviously, the latter is the most relevant in this chapter but if farmers see these methods as not only economically viable into the future but also a more interesting way to farm, that could persuade a lot of people to give it serious consideration.

**The Organic Approach**

One of the tasks in organic farming is to take the advice from the books and the experts elsewhere and convert it into useful techniques taking Irish soils and climatic conditions into account. For example one farmer, while discussing when and how closely to plant your seeds if you are planting them outside, noted that this is quite different from the south east of England. He emphasised that moisture, tilled and soil temperature are the three key things for planting out, but one has to adjust for regional variations and even for the soil type in a particular farm. The same organic farmer told a story of a farmer
in the midlands who had been into snail production for years and when he got out of this production for one reason or another the soil was in a bad way, it was compacted and this encouraged the growth of docks (a type of weed). To get rid of the docks he had to germinate every dock and then he had to dry out the roots of the dock to get a potash kick and a biological kick for the soil and get a nitrogen fix out of the leaves of the dock and that had to be done without getting further compression within the soil through compaction from machinery. Then the midlands farmer had to plant a buck wheat cover crop and plant it at the right time to get ahead of the docks (to smother them) so they would not come back and start the whole cycle again. He said that this is an example how you can use a cover crop to your advantage. This farmer explains how the horticultural experience with cover crops can have its own pitfalls:

You can use the green manure to clean up a particular weed you can use the green manure to get rid of a certain disease that you might have you can use the green manure to soak up nitrogen. There are many many uses of green manures you can use them to fix nitrogen. They have many uses but the thing about them is they are tricky to get established horticulturally. Because the person that puts them into a corn drill, they love contact with the soil, vigorous contact with the soil and drives on, gets that contact, and particularly the person that is doing minimum tillage and what we (horticulturalists) do, we tend to be doing small little plots and we sow them in and then we might go at it with a how or with a rake or with a fork and we are only fassen (messing) and what we do is we don’t bind them with the soil so they don’t germinate. The second thing is we don’t sow them deep enough and they dry out on the surface and you get very poor germination and the other thing we do is right we are not doing them deep enough lets go at them with the rotavator and we go at it with the rotavator and we put them down too deep and we get poor germination so they can be very hard to establish form a small scale horticultural point of view when you don’t have the machinery and you don’t have the know-how and for that reason people give up on them. But I can honestly say they are a serious part of the picture they are a serious part of building soil.
Here it can be seen that organic farmers are mindful of the smaller scale of the growing system. The farmer using the biological approach discussed previously has a very large farm with very good land (although not as fertile as it should be after years of monocropping). I would doubt if he would be keen on discussing anything happening on the scale of .25 acres, but an organic farmer would. Organic farming (lets omit entrepreneurial and corporate organic for now), has a tradition of very small farms, some resembling overs-sized gardens, and mainly horticultural output. The organic farmer above was raised on a conventional farm, so he is very adept at going from the perspective and scale of agriculture to horticulture and back which is very useful if you want an overview of how the various methods and approaches form a kind of mosaic. Again there is the idea that plants provide a huge amount of what other plants need. The cover crops (also called green manures) can add or subtract various elements to the soil depending on what the farmer hopes to achieve. He says that in horticulture for instance green manures are a much more short-term affair and there is no need to get into multispecies manures as some of those species take too long to get established. So you have to know what you are doing and why you are doing it and that goes back to the tillage farmer using the eleven species cover crop and saying he might be doing way better than a well-known organic tillage farmer. If he is only doing this sort of thing for three years no matter who is advising him, or how many videos he watches or books he reads, he needs to spend a lot more time assessing the way the multiplicity of life forms interact in order to hazard a guess at who is doing better in terms of soil health. This coming from someone who is still using the infamous Round-up to terminate cover crops. The organic farmer says that the way one terminates a cover crop, for example if you chop it up small or big, can vary the outcome significantly. If you chop a cover crop too big it might rob the nitrogen from the soil as it is breaking down to fundamentally change the biology in the soil the soil could be bacterially dominated it could be fungally dominated, the soil could be inert, the soil could have calcium locked up, it could have any of these issues.
We see that the organic farmer is far more patient and willing to engage on an intimate level with the natural processes. He is far more discriminating in his language as to the variations in tactics and outcomes. For the biological farmer it is a discovery that these methods might work and save him money, to the organic farmer, this has been and will continue to be, an ongoing discovery process and a fascinating one on so many levels.

**Mixed methods from experimental grower-educators**

In County Tipperary the grower behind the RED garden project trialled many methods of growing vegetables and found many factors intersected to create the right conditions. Sometimes things went wrong, disastrously wrong from a crop yield point of view, but nevertheless yielded some knowledge. On one of these occasions it happened that the potato crop failed because of slugs, but he noticed there was a huge increase in the number of earth worms.

I realised what was probably happening here, the potato plants were storing huge amounts of carbon in the form of starchy carbohydrates in the underground potatoes slugs were consuming some of the potatoes and the worms were feeding off the waste of the slugs either directly or by consuming the bacterial and fungi that fed off of the slug waste. This is a simple but effective food chain funneling huge amounts of food to the soil biology with the potatoes acting as primary producers and the slugs acting as primary consumers. Of course, I would much rather harvest a crop of slug free potatoes, but the loss of a crop is not a total loss. It never really is in a garden. The potatoes that won’t be feeding me will be feeding the soil and this increased soil biology and fertility will only benefit the next crops that I plant in this part of the plot…… But the slugs that ate the potatoes would only go on to make more slugs which is not a good thing in a vegetable garden unless you had something that ate the slugs, like ducks. Now that could be an interesting integrated approach that would be worth exploring at some point in the future.

This is just another example of the web of life being explored and thought about by someone trying to find better ways of growing food, taking Irish soil and climatic conditions into account. The many videos on this grower-educators You Tube channel is a good source of knowledge for Irish people who are interested in growing their own food or growing food for several families.
**The Holistically Managed Grazing Approach**

The Lynch farm is dedicated to low input farming via holistic grazing and low stress stock handling. If the soil is allowed to breathe and root systems go deeper via the use of multi species grasses, then the manure from the gazing animals is all it needs. Weeds are suppressed by trampling and through strangulation by long, healthy grass plants but also by providing better filtration of soils by avoiding compaction and allowing natural processes to bring the right balance of air and moisture to the soil. The lower stress on the animals through professional low stress handling and by being kept outside as part of a natural herd for most of the year reduces vet bills and leads to happier animals.

Farmer Lynch talks a lot about *eye-balling*. This refers to getting a picture of what is going on below and above the ground by monitoring through visual data, processed in an ad hoc manner. He is getting the feel of what is going on by literally looking at it. He is looking at the grass, which species of grass is starting to prosper? Have the animals trampled it sufficiently to provide ‘soil armour’ or a protective layer against drying out or loss of nutrients trough contact with the air? How is the grass growing through the trampled grass, creating new fodder and at what rate is it growing? The cow manure, has it beetles and other insects in it, and how many, compared to previous years? Has the cattle trampling and grass growth suppressed the weeds in this field? What about the field on the flood plain, has the same thing happened there? Is the ground compacted near the water trough, how long have the cattle been near that trough this morning? Next season look out for increased weed growth there where it may be compacted, that will tell the tale. How is the grass growing where there was bale grazing last year (hay or haylage bales rolled out on the field) is the grass better or worse off? How has the growth of weeds been affected by the bale grazing? Did I leave the cattle in there too
long yesterday, is it over grazed (normally moved every 18 or 24 hours)? How has the grass recovered in the conventionally grazed field where the contractor cut it way too short? Every question above, everything asked by farmer Lynch is answered by looking with his own eyes at the ground.

He used to manage cattle conventionally for years and he always looked at the cattle, now he looks at the ground because he knows that if he gets that right everything else is going to look after itself. Cattle are grazers and if you give them really good grass, long grass with many varieties going through it which has not been revved up with chemicals or had slurry applied, the animals will thrive. When other farmers asked questions like ‘how long do you leave them in the paddock’ (small section of field)? Or how long do you rest the grassland before the animals are let in? His answer was always the same, ‘I just eye-ball it’. In a word this is observation, observing nature and the interaction of the various species below and above the ground.

Farmer Lynch is opposed to leaving animals indoors during the winter or any time for that matter. That is why he has the Galloways, a hardy breed with longer hair and stout, low to the ground build. These qualities mean that they are usually associated with hillsides where the soil is bad and the weather harsh, but farmer Lynch sees it differently. He knows, from observation that this breed is ideally suited to minimum interference from humans and this suits the holistic method. One farmer asked farmer Lynch if they were hard to handle:

I have Galloways ‘Belties’. I hear this one a lot and the Galloways are normally coming off of hills it seems every once and six months and they are pretty wild but if you have cattle that are reared in other words that are reared on low land seeing farmers and tractors every day of the week type of thing are like any other Hereford or Angus or anything. A lot of the time with stock it kind of depends on how they are reared like anything ……… with any breed that you have your good and bad days with. With animals, there is certainly that, they don’t tolerate fools the Galloways are very like bison from the point of view that their instinct they haven’t been messed with by man. They haven’t been diluted the reason why they haven’t is they have long bodies…..

Apart from moving the fences very often to keep the herd moving onto new grass every 24 hours and checking water troughs, the cattle manage themselves. He has particular methods for everything which is designed to
efficiently perform tasks while doing the least amount of damage to the grazing land. For example, he will carry a flexible hose around the farm to set up temporary drinking stations and move them quickly to avoid animals compacting the soil around the ‘drinkers’. Every care is taken to minimise any weight going on the soil anywhere on the farm. If animals are kept indoors it is for a specific reason and short-term, for instance, if the yearlings are being bullied by the older animals at the bale grazing site, he might bring them in and feed them hay for a short time. Time indoors starts to cost the farmer money. He says the minute you put animals indoors costs go up, you are off to what they euphemistically call the co-op (Agri-business retailer). The animals are also happier outside.

Farmer Lynch also got turned off leaving the animals indoors after he lost a Galloway calf because the animals are so tuned to their instincts, they are able to conceal the fact that they are about to calf. After that he decided they could calf outside and the animals are well able to cope with snow and ice and give birth in all conditions.

But they basically from the point of view of calving they don’t let you know it’s impossible to spot even like you know muscle tissue dropping down and things like bags bagging up and things like that they have a small bag anyway so you don’t see it you know and they are all full of hair you don’t see it that time of the year either but we had one calf in the shed and I totally missed it. I didn’t think she was any way near and em it was nine hours when I come back and the calf had a broken leg from landing in the drain and never got colostrum and there was a fight on, from there on, and I did all I could but I lost that calf a lovely heifer calf, but yeah they are very very in tune with their instinct for that reason and it’s a quality but its challenged in some respects

Farmer Lynch is not unconcerned about the welfare of smaller creatures on the farm. Some like the dung beetles are seen as something that helps, others are just part of a natural environment. He was very upset with the contractor after being asked to leave some of the grass behind him (not to cut so short) just cut it to the bone and there were hundreds of dead field mice left on the surface. The farmer said it had been a lovely meadow before that contractor ruined it. He is now thinking about buying his own equipment because contractors cannot be trusted. Other farmers on the farm that day agreed. Down in the low-lying part of the farm called the Basin there was one section where there
was a lot of rushes (a tough grass-like plant usually seen on boggy ground) and he had taken to topping them (cutting). However, on one even wetter section there was too many dead frogs after topping, so he decided from that time onwards he was going to let nature take its course there.

Farmer Lynch brings a huge commitment to the farm using these holistic methods and an enormous amount of information is gathered through this observational strategy he calls ‘eye-balling’. He doesn’t even do soil tests, they cost money and they don’t tell you much sometimes (Zimmer, Bio-Farm Conference 2018). The information gathered is interpreted through a holistic view of the web of life. The idea being that if you allow that to flourish, the natural processes that kick in will reward the farmer by providing low input, inexpensive options of rearing cattle.

The Biodynamic Approach

The Ferris farm sees the farm as organism in itself and one that is affected by planetary motion and the waxing and waning of the moon. Farmer Ferris converted to bio-dynamic five years earlier and said it was quite a learning curve. He showed us his spring oats and detailed the preparation that took place before that crop was sown. There was a cover crop which included rye vetch and mangles (turnip) and later there was compost applied which on this farm is always applied to a growing crop which is safer from a biological point of view. Later he applied the bio-dynamic preps which in this case was a horn-silica (cow horn silica and cow horn manure bought from bio-dynamic experts in Germany).

He says that in bio-dynamic farming the winter is a very important time for preparation for the coming growing season, that if you get the sprays (natural concoctions made up by the farmer and sprayed using light weight equipment) on, you are charging up your soils almost like a battery. In the winter there is not a lot of growth happening above ground, but you can get a lot happening below ground. When he was sowing the main crop in April, he applied a targeted soil drench with the planting of the seed. This gives the seeds a boost
which is not distributed to competing wild seeds. Included in the seed boost was some seaweed extract and a tiny bit of cobalt and copper but also the liquid had been inoculated to enhance bacterial and fungal life around the seed (water mixed with bits of soil around the farm where things are growing really well, for example under hedgerows, nettles and weeds).

The ground was ploughed and in springtime harrowed. Farmer Ferris explained that that particular field needs to be given some air mechanically, even though he is very careful about how deep he goes with the plough and he does it slowly. It is obvious that he does all the work himself as the contractors could not be trusted in this sort of set up. He has found the condition of the soil to be coming on year on year since he has moved to bio-dynamic.

**Farmer Ferris** I’m just turning that five inches over I’m leaving all the soil biology under that now when I’m sitting on the tractor I’m not doing ten kilometres an hours, I’m doing five or four and I will ease it over as opposed to forcing it over and then the same with the fine harrow just sort of take it easy with the soil so that all these sort of things are improving the picture

**Other Farmer:** The soil drench is that based on soil analysis?

**Farmer Ferris** It’s based on soil analysis and it’s based on advice I got from Hugh Lovett, so I worked it up with him.

**Other Farmer** So is it a prepared product you are buying or are you making it up?

**Farmer Ferris** I am making it up myself from various bits I’m buying

**NOTS Personnel:** But low cost.

**Farmer Ferris** Very low cost because it’s so targeted, I need very little of it. I mentioned cobalt there I was only using three grams of cobalt per hectare. It’s very small amounts its only hitting the seed where you need it. So then around June we gave the crop a bit of a feed and this was based on soil analysis it got some Epson salts for magnesium some cellular for boron it got some more kelp and it got seaweed extract it got a bit of zinc and a bit of manganese, more copper and cobalt and some penergenics which is a particular product with helps the plant to access nutrients, it’s to help the biology in the soil and I put in some bio-dynamic preps as well.

**Other Farmer:** Was that all in the one spray?
Farmer Ferris: All in the one spray mixed up yeah. It was targeted at the soil to feed the crop and the biology to get it going. It was a foliar.

Other farmer: Do you do foliar analysis?

Farmer Ferris: No I don’t do foliar analysis. It was based on a soil analysis done about two years ago.

The above dialogue shows that the farmer is very careful to co-ordinate the boosts he is supplying to the soil biology and the developing crops and that everything is targeted. The targeting helps reduce costs. Also significant is that the soil test is used but it does not have to be done very often. The bringing together of microbial life forms contained in the inoculant and the compost, the other preps and micro-nutrients plus the benefits obtained from the multispecies cover crop, is something that reflects the view that the farm operates well only if many highly specific components are tuned. This level of refinement would only work for a particular farm if the farmer and any suitably skilled persons (in biodynamics) gain an intimate knowledge of how every living creature is interacting with all the other components.

Conclusion

It has been demonstrated in this section how different types of alternative farmers in Ireland have recognised the complexity of the web of life on the farm. Each have their methods to understand it better and each have specific time frames. Soil health appears to be one factor which is given priority across the spectrum although there are qualitative differences as regards knowledge and how this knowledge is absorbed over time. Organic and bio-dynamic farmers appear to think things through using a longer time frame while the farmer educators using mixed methods and biological farmers think in terms of one season or one crop although they do occasionally make references to their own future plans and to long-term threats to the food provisioning system. The latter are motivated partly by exigencies emanating from a precarious political and economic order while the former is aligned with
ecological practices which have evolved over the last hundred years or so, although still improving and adapting to place bound contingencies.

**Evaluating recognition theory as a resource for a sociology of alternative agriculture**

The interpretation of the data from a recognition theory perspective as detailed above shows that there is considerable potential in this strategy. Many interesting areas for further scholarly work have been identified. The subsection *Acknowledgement of the socio-cultural and historical context of the knowledge* has identified discursive actions which could be construed as misrecognition and also identified incidents where farmers and institutional actors exercised their right to defend the organic movement as a significant contributor to alternative methods and as a contributor to present day agroecology. This area together with the furtherance of knowledge relating to *the more knowledgeable other* both as an actor in a unique social context and as a motif available for exploitation are good examples of how the approach can uncover specific targets for further study. The establishment of place based opportunities sub-section shows how the approach reveals interesting subtopics like the notion that *opportunity* is not confined to or created for the benefit of the opportunistic individual or the acquisitive social group in the case of stronger AFNs but is seen as something available to a community which makes mandatory a respect for the non-human world as part of the development of opportunities. I think it is important for the researcher to identify these distinctions and open the door to new possibilities for targeted research. The blend of recognition theory and Vygotskian approaches discussed in the literature review is in evidence in this chapter and used to good effect. The other component in the theoretical mix is distributed cognition and one of the leading authors in that field, Edwin Hutchins, often
refers to the contribution of Vygotskian and Russian perspectives to the area of cognitive ecology (Hutchins 2010). The next chapter examines how this might be of use in the study of alternative farming.
Chapter 5 Viewing the Recognitional Stance Through a Distributed Cognitional Lens

Introduction

As discussed in the literature review, the Vygotskian approach to social research sees all learning and knowledge transfer environments as being subjected to a historical and socio-cultural context. It talks about very specific details of the learning environment and sees the task of learning as not only a sequence of social or cognitive events leading to the acquisition of certain competencies or understandings, but as a lifelong developmental affair for both the individual and the broader community within an unfolding historical context. The thought processes associated with this situated learning is not interpreted in the same way as typically western ideas of knowledge transfer would assume. Vygotskian scholars would assert that bodies of knowledge and learning strategies should not be universally applied. There are always cultural and social differences which skew the learning process and the ambitions of the educators. In the case at hand it has been shown that knowledge concerning a co-production with nature in the field of food production has been repackaged to suit different interests groups and in order to target different publics. Even the word ‘organic’ can bring reassurance to one group but may provoke a defensive posture from another group. The phrase ‘biological farming’ coined by Garry Zimmer is probably inappropriate if it is taken consideration that in many European countries the word ‘organic’, its main rival, translates as ‘biologique’. Its seems researchers could do with a theoretical device capable of looking closer at the thought process of the knowledge generators as and when those thought processes occur in these distinctive learning environments. In this section the idea of distributed cognition is proposed as a useful theoretical device to engage with the cognitive dimension of alternative farmer’s developmental and social processes, which not only enable the accumulation of knowledge over time, but allow for on-going discoveries close to the natural world to be part of a shared event.
It is hoped that this approach will also shed light on how the recognitive stance establishes itself in the day to day lives of the farmers and AFN actors. I will provide a tentative theoretical synthesis between some aspects of recognition theory and that of extended, shared or distributed cognition. Hopefully this will unearth additional vantage points or explanatory capacity which will convince the reader that the suggested methodological proposal is something distinctive.

The approach goes beyond being embeddedness by another name and gives insights into similar socio-ecological micro-communities as referred to in van der Ploeg’s (2018) new peasantry. Seeing nature in personal terms, as a host of dispersed knowledge, is one of the metaphors we humans use to explain the complexity of life in the natural world, albeit a natural world very much altered by human interventions. The interface between the natural and human world can be viewed as the space where exchanges happen, where humans learn from making very close observations of natural processes. As well as the idea of the host and exchange location as sites of distributed cognition, this chapter looks at deferrals of cognitive tasks to external actors as a potential area of interest.

**Nature as a host and creator of dispersed (multi-species) knowledge**

Those of us who are new to researching the intriguing area of alternative agriculture are quickly submerged in a world of dispersed communities of people who are in turn situated in separate production environments. These production environments are by necessity bound by the laws of nature. Whether they like it or not the alternative farmer is dependent on progressing
her knowledge of a somewhat inaccessible community of non-human life forms and things which are cocooned in their own complexity, in their own closed self-referential worlds. Agriculture is always an intervention, a disruption of these closed systems. Alternative methods insist on co-production with nature as a basic principle, but in order to do this one must understand the cocoons and the interdependencies within and among the clusters. The farmers are cognisant of the need to understand what way these organisms might have behaved previous to human involvement or what they would do if we just withdrew our interventions altogether. I am suggesting here that in order to understand the processes involved these actors respect nature as an unself-conscious host of dispersed knowledge.

In the previous chapter examples were given of farmers who went to see other CSA farms in England where the host farmer was involved in growing biodiversity rather than growing vegetables, every one of his crops looked amazingly healthy. There was no need to weed or hunt down pests because the farmer had worked it out, natural enemies and natural competition had curbed any excess of single species invaders. Farmer-educators expend quite an amount of their time trying to get the point across. One such farmer talked about the top half inch of the soil which he disturbs very lightly with the hoe. He used the word ‘tickles’ to describe what he was doing, he said that worked wonders as it turned young weeds which were beginning to germinate into a biological kick for the soil. He had learned by trial and error and observation how this worked. He planted rows of calendula on the side of his vegetable field, many plants were not there to be consumed in the human food chain but to counteract the action of pests or diseases noticed on previous years. Another farmer-educator liked to talk about planning, when to germinate seeds or when to plant out, always referring to the plants as if they had a mind of their own. When they would bolt or go to seed, it’s because they know this is the last chance to pass on their blueprint. The bio-dynamic farmer talked about tricking the weeds in to thinking their job was done by drying the weeds and boiling them up as part of a remedy, later sprayed onto the field. When the weeds took up the liquid through their roots this was the signal that ‘their job was done here’ and they died off.
One of the ways that we as humans can explain these processes to other humans is to personify those elements of nature, as if they performed cognitive acts. In the case of some domestic animals this may be the case but for the majority of cases they are part of self-referential systems where one process triggers another. For us we can only understand this as a kind of knowledge, ‘nature knows best’ is a common phrase or we personalise natural processes by referring to it as ‘mother nature’ knowing this or that, or having such and such strategy. We unconsciously use this as a heuristic, in some ways this may also be problematic. Firstly because it is not true and can present misleading ideas of how things actually happen and secondly it can be dismissed by believers in competing conventional systems as airy fairy. Its perhaps easier to ridicule something if it is represented in very much simplistic terms.

More recently the ‘biological farming approach’ is having another shot at explaining it, pitching it as ‘mimicking nature’ to save money. The recent approach to understanding the true complexity involved in healthy soils is making headway in conventional and conventionalised-alternative circles. If farmers accept that this complexity which is and always has been functioning within the natural world is a form of knowledge, if they want to think of it as a form of knowledge external to the human knowing, this would probably bring them in line with the founders of natural, organic, and bio-dynamic farming in the early years of the last century but it would also bring them in line with peasant farmers all around the world who have never used agri-business inputs in the first place.

**Distributed Cognition at the Human to Nonhuman Interface**

If it is plausible that nature acts as a host and creator of dispersed knowledge, is it not also plausible that humans who interact with natural worlds in both a structured and flexible manner are involved in some distinct form of
distributed cognition. The farm is certainly a world on to itself and particularly when its human designers have distanced the functional operations of the farm from the agri-business model. Alternative farmers in the industrial countries had to reimagine their purpose as defined by natural limits. The very idea of limitations was raised by Hans Martin Lorenzen at the *Feeding Ourselves Conference 2018*. As mentioned earlier, he was at the heart of renegotiating organic certification across the EU. Curtailing corruption and sharp practices were among the objectives of the exercise. So the distinctives of *organic* or *bio-dynamic* products starts with what happens on the farm and that in turn begins with an agreed upon template among farmers. The alternative farmer can be creative within limits which have evolved over time through consensus. This negotiation of what should or should not be included in the template is the work of not only those at the table but those who have worked on this as individuals or part of a group out in the fields and in the glasshouses or polytunnels. So firstly we can see that there is a distributed task of *figuring out* over time and in many separate spaces what is a good practice and what is not a good practice. This can be described as distributed cognition but one which has been built across time lapses.

One of the above time lapses has to be the cycle of the seasons. If one farmer tells another one of a process, it is most likely too late for that farmer to try it out on his farm until the next growing season. Many competing factors might put that farmer off the trial of this new idea by the time the new season arrives. In any case, nurturing plants for instance is a preoccupation that is not always frantically looking for new ways or even for incremental improvements to present methods. It is suggested that farmers, being heterogenous actors\(^\text{11}\), would experiment and adopt new methods at vastly different rates. For these reasons it is proposed that the cognitive process is also part of a slow-moving developmental process, but this does not exclude it from being a *distributed* cognitive process. Hutchins study of distributed tasks inside an aircraft cockpit or on the bridge of a navy ship, demonstrates how the tasks performed by many instruments and artificial thinking machines (like on board computers) are brought together by human interaction and the superimposition of the

\(^{11}\) http://www.pannelldiscussions.net/2019/09/327-heterogeneity-of-farmers/
human world on the technological one. The staff on board Hutchins aircraft are performing under pressure where a small mistake could result in significant loss of life, also relevant is the fact that the tasks happen over extremely short time periods and in one tiny location, like a cockpit or the bridge of a ship (Hutchins 1995). Although the bridge of the ship also interacts with key persons throughout the ship, particularly if there is a problem such as when Hutchins witnessed the occurrence of loss of power resulting in a steering issue. In his cognitive ethnography Hutchins is concerned with what is happening with specific persons on a minute scale but the compressed nature of the space available and the time allotted to fulfil the task may not make these tasks any less or more distributed than those of the farmers who experiment with natural methods for the production of food and fibre. The farmers then share the results through conversations with other farmers or some other form of communication.

As mentioned earlier Vygotskian-inspired researchers are aware that ‘cultural-historically developed tools mediate the way an individual relates to the world and that the competence to handle such tools is acquired in social settings through guidance from other persons’. Furthermore, the actors in the various settings ‘use, produce and modify these culturally produced artefacts’ over time (Daniels 2008, p76). Whether the tool is a shovel, a plough or an air speed indicator in a cockpit is not necessarily relevant when what you are focussed on is how cognition happens as a shared or distributed event.

As an example, a social interaction among farmers and other actors is examined. Farmer Maher was talking about his field which he rents from a nearby landowner. The field, if one were to ask the extension services in Ireland, was considered to be marginal land fit for a forestry plantation of fast-growing conifers. When he was offered the field it was covered in weeds and ferns and he thought that was just what he wanted because there was at least some life in it. If one person is showing a field to the other, each may have different perspectives because of different knowledges relating to farm practices. Farmer Maher ’s knowledge is considered fairly unique as his experience at the interface in this case, that is, the human to nonhuman interface occurring in organic horticulture spans forty years and one can see
that his approach is particularly attuned to capturing knowledge from a variety of sources.

What appears to interest him most though, are those practitioners who are close to the soil, people who are always watching what is going on at that interface. He tells the story of the above ground situation; the plants and their condition are important to observe but also the weeds, pests and diseases that are trying to establish themselves in that particular above-ground community. The existence of these non-desirables gives us an indication of what is going on under the ground. For example, the weeds down on the bottom left hand corner of the field (the field slopes down at quite a gradient) were created because he had spent some time down there with a tractor and that may have caused compaction and hence the docks (a common weed in Ireland). He explained that he is not as concerned about weeds as much as he was years ago because now he is focused on soil biology now and if that is going well, if the field and its fertility remains optimal, ‘humming’ as he calls it, there will be very little problem with weeds. Here he is talking about the soil in this field and how sensitive it is to become unbalanced biologically.

Farmer Maher ……It’s a struggle because this field, I sent this away for soil analysis to Southern Scientific the pH is very low its now about 6.1 its coming up very slowly you see this field could become hungry as quick as you would blink from an organic point of view. So basically if you come along and you trash this soil in the winter harvesting the spuds harvesting another crop and then you came along and you ploughed this ground and then come along with a harrow

Other Farmer (1) Do you plough this field?

Farmer Maher …I do I have a plough over there. But I have a kind of funny way to do ploughing……. depending on the soil condition it might be judicious to use a plough rather than do it three times with a tractor rotavator so then I would use a plough and you would find me ploughing in August and not ploughing in February. Now it could take me forever to get into a seed bed, but I don’t care because I want to protect my soil, the biology and the fertility and I don’t want to damage the structure so the very minute I come in with an implement and … I see the soil is cold or the soil is wet. I get down on my hands and knees and I have a look with my magnifying glass, and I see I have glassed the soil welcome weeds and goodbye biology. That soil is not fit for a mechanical instrument or a mechanical tool to hammer it…………. I go down in increments I go four six inches I go down in increments….. it’s a long slow process
Other farmer (1) Does the period between matter?

Farmer Maher Yes it does and it’s the old people you know….. basically you come along here with your springtime harrow in March April you rummage (with) your springtime harrow. The old people said if you run with your harrow, the next time you back in with a mechanical… with a steel implement on that soil is when you see that eighty per cent of the soil…. that you see it white. It has turned to a white colour and if you can kick it with your boot (and nothing happens) that soil is not fit for a harrow

Other farmer (1) Alright

Farmer Maher Until it has 80 or 90% of whiteness its very prudent. It’s very prudent thinking. I am always fascinated that like if we go through fields or we go through Gardens and there is a particular weed and there is a particular weed has a dominance in the crop. Now the seed of that weed has been dormant in that soil for forty, fifty a hundred years, be it docks be it charlock be it red shank or whatever, it’s been dormant for forty years and it’s the action of the steel on the soil, on the biology that makes the weed germinate. That is what happens it’s the action, it’s the action of the steel.

Other farmer (2) It might be the absence of the biology?

Farmer Maher It might be the absence of the biology as well

Other farmer (2) The metal might have killed the biology and that makes the weed come up?

Farmer Maher Yes, the weed is only doing its job. (he is now pointing to the row of calendula flowers that were there to attract pollinators) We have the calendula over there. There was a girl here from UCD and she was doing a study on different farms. The biodiversity on the farms. She had a little table and a chair, and she was down there for half a day testing a square metre she had a thing like a picture frame, and she had a screen for stopping them. And they are pollinators and they are pollinating all sorts of things that are unknown to us and she had a look at that ….. and she said your biodiversity is high and she attributed it to the pollinators.

Here we see several actors. On an institutional level there is the soil analytics by Southern Scientific and the student from UCD comparing biodiversity levels in farms around the country. It’s worth noting that both of these institutional actors are looking at very small samples of the field, they are on a micro or even a microscopic level. Then there are the old people who have contributed with some ‘very prudent thinking’ at some point in the past which demonstrates cognition distributed over time. Next there is the observation of
other people’s fields and gardens by farmer Maher, whether in an informal advisory capacity or otherwise, revealing to us that there are many physical/visual points of contact between the nonhuman world and the human observer. He is constantly talking about other locations while at the same time focusing on his own field. It’s rather like an informal science of observation and hypothesis construction. Lastly there are the other farmers who are mainly listening and asking questions but occasionally they input their own suggestions. The idea of the steel of the plough triggering the germination of the seeds which have been dormant for fifty years is poetic and carries a powerful symbolism.

Vygotskian research is receptive to the idea that these symbolisms form part of the tools, as is the appreciation of the ‘old people’ and their correct observations, these seem to be quite deliberate tie ins to the pace of delivery of the knowledge transfer but also a message for the acquisitive learners that this is a process that requires slowing the frantic pace of perception and learning, typical for our time. Also implicit in the farmers speech is his willingness to go against typical patterns like the idea that the ploughing should happen in the spring. Like Fukuoka (1978) who told the young men in his orchard not to imitate him, I think Farmer Maher is of the opinion that you cannot succeed by directly copying another farmer or gardener but you have to make your own way in the soil and climatic conditions that present themselves to you. Like he said, it might take him forever to get down with the plough in increments, but his first priority is to protect the structure of the soil, seeing it as a living organism. The use of the plough and leaving the soil turn white goes against the no till ground rules of never leaving the soil bare but farmer Maher, or the bio-dynamic farmer from Chapter 4, are not afraid to use the plough if they see a good reason for doing so but they do it themselves and very slowly.

The bio-dynamic farmer mentioned in previous chapters is also worth mentioning in relation to pinpointing how remedies get concocted. He said that he and Hugh Lovel designed the homemade spray for the large field of spring oats. Certain problems were arising because of past mistakes but also because the land has its own disadvantages in terms of soil type. He had farmed for many years as an organic farmer and when the fertility died off
eventually, he decided to turn to the bio-dynamic approach. With this field he first got a soil sample analysed by a laboratory. Then the experience of Hugh Lovel and his own were combined to design amendments. The agreed amendments were not available in Ireland, so he had to get some components from that part of Germany which is noted for being strongly bio-dynamic. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, this involved cow horn manure and other elements of the horn. Interestingly from the perspective of the human to nonhuman interface, he also took inoculants (biological samples from around the farm, from ditches and rough ground) from his own farm and mixed them into the fluid to be sprayed on the crop. Here we see the actors again, the laboratory, the farmer consulting with the biodynamic expert and the makers of the cow horn manure in Germany.

On the day of the farm walk some of the other farmers were intrigued by the effectiveness of the remedy particularly related to the idea that both a physical and an energetic element were deemed responsible for the dispersal of its effects. At the beginning of the walk the farmer warned that some of the audience were going to find these remedies associated with bio-dynamic farming as being ‘a little bit out there’ meaning that they are beyond what the rationale of the scientific approach would find credible. It reminded me of homeopathy from the point of view of using a very small amount of physical material as a medicine and also because it relied on an intuitive, trial and error approach to finding the right remedy.

*Homeopathy, pharmaceuticals and who to trust.*

Homeopathy at wellie level\(^{12}\), providing homeopathy treatments for farm animals, is also something that has been making inroads in the Irish alternative farming scene recently and I was informed of this by one of the customers of the Burke farm who is a part-time homeopath. She attended a NOTS sponsored talk on homeopathy for farm animals in Cork during 2018. She recounted examples where farmers were told by the vets they were using that their animals were going to die and so the farmers decided to try homeopathy out of desperation. The animals survived. Other examples related to the

\(^{12}\) [https://hawl.co.uk/](https://hawl.co.uk/)
general health of the herd once the dependency on pharmaceuticals prescribed by vets was reduced. She told me that now there are many farmers who want their vet to either have a homeopathic qualification or they want a homeopath to be part of the vet’s practice in order to cut costs and to establish a healthier herd. Standardised medication and preventative medication used by vets and farmers is responsible for many changes in the nature of bacterial and other microorganisms and this, as well as antibiotics used in animal feed (now banned in the EU), has had a big part to play in the emergence of superbugs such as antibiotic resistant bacteria (Martin 2015, Nunan and Young 2007).

Anecdotal evidence and discourse analysis points to a general disbelief among landowners as regards the kind of progress reported by those who chose the homeopathic route. The disbelief appears to be even stronger within the bureaucratic machinery of the institutions supporting mainstream agriculture. An alternative sheep farmer from Kilkenny told me that she knew a farmer who was trying out holistic grazing and his sheep were doing really well. The farmer who was availing of a government scheme at the time was threatened with financial penalties because the official did not believe that his vet bills were so low, suspecting that the farmer was buying pharmaceuticals over the internet and administering them himself. During a conversation at the end of one of the biological farm walks 2019, some of the farmers were discussing unfair treatment of experimental farmers who were also in receipt of some form of payment from ‘the Department’. These farmers were recommending that people should be assessed based on the type of operation they have rather than standardised notions of what should be happening as best practice in the conventional sense. These are good examples of the interface between the human and the nonhuman worlds and the thought processes developed over a period of time by some actors which appear to facilitate a distinct type of knowledge development. Knowledges that are applicable on smaller scales and in highly particularised settings.

There is the assumption by institutional actors that one way of thinking namely ‘productivism’, has the answers to all problems and if it isn’t working the farmer concerned needs to alter his strategy based on expert advice or do something else, perhaps a different line of work. One area where institutional
actors on the conventional side have concerns is the medication of animals for health and disease control purposes sometimes referred to as biosecurity. Obviously, they look towards the pharmaceutical industry for solutions. When having conversations with persons associated with AFNs there is often a deep distrust of the pharmaceutical industry whether the remedies sought are for human or animal purposes. According to folk theories around healthy diets, it is thought that those who eat healthy foods are often focused on health rather than sickness. Alternative farmers will tell you, the micro-organisms within your gut are connected to the micro-organisms in the soil (Dan Kitteridge Biological Farm Conference). It seems that farmers and their employees and volunteers who work closer to that interface with nature found it necessary to rethink some fundamentals. It seems they had to drop some fundamental assumptions that we in the industrial world grow up with.

For the farmers it’s not actually a case of who they can or cannot trust, it’s a case of building knowledge at that interface. The interface between the natural world and the human world is a good place to learn, slowly. This can be achieved while being part of smaller close-knit groups. They understand that the natural world has its own complexity and to understand it a person has to be patient and thoughtful. A person needs to suspend the belief that one kind of thinking performed thousands of miles away, then applied by compliant actors is sufficient to solve all problems. One formula with lots of financial muscle and technology behind it, may be the incorrect solution or may overstate the breadth of applicability of a single correct solution. AFN actors in general are resistant to formulaic solutions and mistrust big business.

**Being thoughtful at the interface**

In urban Ireland farmers are not generally thought of as thoughtful people, and that may be doing them an injustice, but below is an example of a Welsh organic seed advisor referring to the idea that organic tillage farming is a thinking man’s game shows he feels it is a message worth getting across. Although he is representing a commercial interest, here he has been involved in the organic movement for many years and he knows that one of the behavioural changes a farmer has to make if converting from conventional tillage to organic tillage, is to be more engaged and to be a lot more
thoughtful. They need to reflect about what they may have done wrong in the previous years and look forward as they try to make amends and hopefully increase fertility. Also interesting here is that the advisor makes several ‘maximisation’ references although within the organic system.

Organic seeds advisor So how do you get back into grass if you start in the autumn you get all your chickweeds and all the autumn receding Wales is like here if it starts raining in the autumn you can go near it once you…. so you leave it. It will still be green actually but there is a long story on that one with the prep premium but ah you leave that till the spring and then you use what you call an arable silage. Which is, could be barley or peas or oats and peas so its 50 kilos an acre in the spring, under-sow your new lay, take it off in ten weeks and there is an absolutely beautiful take of grass perfect you have taken all the weeds away because you cut it in ten weeks so there you are a perfect layer you can establish, work on it manage it so you are not going to spoil that layer so it is really hitting the ball next year pushing the yields out. If you can do decent rotations like that, manipulating soil like that you will be growing crops equal to the conventional guy. You will, your crops pretty well equal to the conventional guy especially with clover layers. And that is the target for you guys. So I would say be enthusiastic about organic farming, don’t let people say you can’t do this or you can’t do that. Think of what you are doing, it is a thinking man’s job it’s not you just come along

NOTS employee. Quick fix.

Organic seeds advisor Put a bit of fertilizer here and everything else…. you got to think. You got to think forward you got to think back. You will probably be thinking two years hence on what you have been doing…. the year before you start ploughing up for em cereals you will be looking what is my lime status? what is my phosphate potash status? Before. Not when you want to sow the crop, so you try and get it organised that way, and you are always looking forward with a proper rotation going and that is what Farmer Gillanders…. 

Farmer McGuiness is trying to do

Organic seeds advisor is doing, and he is really getting some phenomenal results from his cropping and you can’t deny that

Farmer McGuiness my biggest problem is crops lying down sometimes that’s my biggest problem

Organic seeds advisor So there you are you produced the fertility so the potential for you is high crops big crops so the enthusiasm is there you know you can do it ha ha
Farmer McGuiness went on to say that he is not going to put barley into his rotation anymore because the oats and wheat suit his ground. The fertility is actually too high for some crops and that is why they were starting to lie down (bend over) on him. The NOTS employee then asked was the fertility due to there being chicken manure from the poultry factories nearby applied to the soil in years gone by. Farmer McGuiness said that this was not the case on his farm, but on the rented adjoining land it was true to some extent. He was able to stay growing cereals for a year longer in some fields than would be normal for organic rotations because he had figured out that the soil in those fields could take it. He also spoke about certain parts of the fields where there was more of a problem with weeds although generally it was good land. Farmer McGuiness also explained how he grew peas interspersed with the oats or wheat, adjusting the relative seeding rate between each species as the years went by to get it fine-tuned. The advisor was very interested in emphasising this idea of fine tuning because this, in his opinion, is what brought the yield up to competitive levels. Interestingly, the advisor said that the bio-dynamic people over in Britain ‘are doing some crazy things’ as far as he was concerned so he obviously sees some competition arising there. The peas and wheat crop that the audience was standing in was destined to be a high protein fodder for the McGuiness cattle. The thinking, fine tuning and intimate knowledge of what was happening with each field and the many phases of crop rotation and prepping of the soil (using other crops) is a good example of how alternative farmers get closer into that space, the human to nonhuman interface, and develop knowledge applicable to their individual farm, and each subsection of the farm because soil type distribution, drainage and topography are not uniform.

Alternative farmers need to be aware of the history and very recent history of each part of the farm. They need to remember their own mistakes and adjust their thinking as well as defend against critics and overcome doubts. The literature provides some examples of farmers who reverted to conventional farming, but those who converted to organic for purely economic reasons are more likely to revert than those who have deeper environmental concerns (Läpple 2010). So in general, thinking strategies are important at the interface.
of human and natural systems, at the interface with farmers and non-farmers but also between alternative farmers and mainstream actors whether they be farmers, institutional actors or the general public.

Deferring cognitive tasks to new institutional forms

Not all tasks on alternative farms concern the interface of the natural and human worlds and tasks beyond the farm carried out by the farmer or other actors in the associated networks referred to, are hugely diverse and multifaceted. This may be one reason why new institutional forms come into being. They come in all shapes and sizes including 1) state sponsored actors like NOTS, 2) not for profit organisations like 3LM (allied to the Savory Foundation), 3) home grown advocacy groups like Tallamh Beo (allied to European Co-ordination Via Campesina), Food Sovereignty Ireland, CSA Ireland (allied to Urgenci) 4) Formal local structures such as sustainable living spaces and long standing direct sales venues which have chosen to make legally enforceable agreements the norm 5) informal or short term affairs like pop up markets and annual entertainment or educational events 6) finally there is the not so new third party certification bodies such as Organic Trust, but they have more recently been challenged by efforts to get market or consumer recognition for partially sustainable conventional-holistically managed forms of agriculture such as Ecological Outcome Verification now happening in Australia\textsuperscript{13}. Some alternative farmers are very independent and steer clear of these new institutional forms, apart from the direct sales venues they depend on. Others choose to off load some of the tasks they might have to do themselves to these new institutional forms and this, among other things, is a

\textsuperscript{13}https://www.savory.global/land-to-market/eov/
potential route to increased entrepreneurial thinking, bureaucratisation and co-optation into a more mainstream identity. Some alternative actors suggest that offloading tasks to these new institutional forms is assisting the greenwash of barely reformed state actors and commercial interests not sufficiently committed to sustainable methods. It is likely that a proportion of these offloaded or shared tasks are cognitive tasks, some occurring on a micro level, and this is one possible area that could provide examples of distributed cognition. It would be beyond the scope of the study to focus on anything more than a few examples which came to light by accident, but they nevertheless reinforce the idea that researching this aspect of the alternative farms and their supporting networks, might yield some interesting avenues for further research, particularly relating to the recognitive stance of those actors.

One such task is to explain where in the spectrum of alternative farms and associated practices a particular farm belongs, or a particular farmer belongs, a particular practice belongs, or a particular product belongs. I have witnessed confusion among consumers as to which is worth bothering about. For example, local and small scale farms which do not adhere to any policy as regards inputs, such as chemical fertilizers or herbicides, are not even considered in this study but there are those who count them as alternative if they sell within twenty or thirty miles of the farm or at a farmers market. Then there is the organic, corporate organic, imported organic, biodynamic, holistically managed, post organic, chemical free and grown using agroecological methods. The task of simply identifying which category you are in might be ok if you are certified organic, but that is often not the case. It is not always down to just telling people what it is you are doing. Allen et al cite Jackson:

the knowledge whereby one lives is not necessarily identical with the knowledge whereby one explains life’. Allen et al (2003, p62)

In the case of a CSA for example, there is a lot of explaining to do to win a customer over. This might be done by another customer (or member as they are called) or through a well organised website and then finalised by a meeting
with the core members. The task of thinking through how you are going to explain it, how radical you need to be, or how radical you can get away with being, is one of the restrictions or affordances you may have to work with. One of the farms which explicitly avoids any involvement with the above new institutional arrangements is the Burke farm. Farmer Burke (m) had said that they ‘just want to get on with it’ and that they have ‘got our own brand’. So the farm itself and the ethos of its occupants is a brand and that’s an interesting idea.

Other farms choose to develop a brand, in the context of the farm and the ethos of those that work and live there, that is more widely known and is something that can be leveraged to generate revenue and create legitimacy in the eyes of multiple publics. The Keane farm and the Scott farm are two examples of this. More recently NOTS have gotten involved in the promotion of events happening on these farms. The marketing ability of NOTS enabling it to reach more people, collect the funds and subsidise the event for NOTS members, makes it an attractive option for the farms. I am suggesting that this legitimises the farms in the eyes of more conservative publics like mainstream farmers and those who think ‘hippie’ farms are a bit too weird for them to visit, opening up the possibility of creating the educational and entertainment/experience revenue stream.

More recent offerings at these farms have been expensive enough affairs which might be out of reach for those on a low wage and certainly out of the reach of those in receipt of social welfare. Also, having attended one of these events myself, I had noticed a tilt towards being far more accepting of conventional farmers, including the statement ‘we are all farmers’. This statement seemed out of sync with other ‘thought processes’ expressed which postulated the collapse of the carbon economy in a matter of years and thus the flow of imported foods. I noticed the employee from NOTS wincing in the corner when the latter was mentioned. The obvious lack of coherence between the messages is inherent in anything where partners do not sit down and work out their differences or agree to disagree on some matters. It seems from an observers point of view that they just agree to do certain things for each other
leaving it to the consumer to work out the lines of separation, or the inherently incompatible identities.

One of the prominent tasks on the producer side of AFNs, it can be assumed, is to explain to potential customers what kind of ‘alternative’ the farm and its workers and volunteers represent. This, if it is done with a certain level of competency, can generate revenue, possible new relationships and network connections. Perhaps it can also generate legitimacy with publics who may have had reservations about these types of operations. Normally the task would be distributed among various actors close to the farm or the network of customers or members (in the case of a CSA). What needs to be communicated needs to be thought through, whether that be in brain storming sessions or on an ad hoc daily basis, and feedback would probably be used to correct errors or things that don’t seem to work so well. It can be assumed that this is one of many cognitive tasks, referred to as the cognitive load, and that some farms just get to a level of complexity, in terms of socially orientated tasks, that it seems like a good idea to hand over part of the job to outside actors. Even if the new institutional form carries with it certain ambiguities, and these ambiguities will then be leaking into the narrative of the farm and its own network, this seems to be an acceptable exchange.

One explanation for this is that the farms and their networks have begun to build something in that rural space and need a helping hand to (re)construct it. Here Brunori and Rossi talk about possibilities for synergy among network actors:

> The more complex the network, the more synergies can be activated. In order to create the context in which synergies can be activated, rural actors should be able to create hegemonic cultural codes (Brunori and Rossi 2000 p 421)

I characterised this as complexity building within recognisable cultural codes. What are the recognisable codes in Ireland? Conservatism and a tendency to institutionalise something faster than it has time to mature, is one pattern that comes to mind. Making the network larger is a quantitative achievement, making the network more complex if a significant part of the message has to
be simplified in order to create ‘network’ complexity is something that needs to be given careful consideration. What Brunori and Rossi 2000 describe as ‘collective action’ could also be described as ‘entrepreneurship and cooperation’. They are talking about tourism, which is now seen as unsustainable, accounting for possibly 8% or greenhouse gas emissions (Lenzen et al. 2018). Parsimony is to describe something using the least possible words and ideas while at the same time getting the message across. If one simplifies something to the point that something important is lost in the conveyance than you are talking about something else. I have witnessed in the course of my research a phenomenon which could be described as ‘talking about something else’. Significantly there appears to be a correlation between many of these ‘talking about something else’ speech events and the presence of state actors, commercial actors or conventional farmers. It seemed the moral barometer was significantly recalibrated downwards. Tourism becomes collective action, organic farming becomes too polarising or just a label, Biodynamic people are doing completely crazy stuff, holistically managed becomes land to market, an agri-business chemicals ban becomes using less of these inputs to save you fellas a few pound, fighting the good fight against productivist farming becomes we are all farmers. In short, the shared cognitive process of ‘how am I going to pitch my farm and its ethos?’, when managed in-house, appears more coherent and tailored to just that mix of circumstances. When in the presence of those more conservative actors, it seems likely, according to my observations, that the thinking is transposed into a shared process skewed in favour of prescribed, not very well thought out, compromises.

Tallamh Beo, a recently founded farmers organisation allied to Via Campesina, was open to all comers who were interested in the regeneration of farmland and local markets, but I found it very unclear where the boundaries actually were. A conventional farmer could join as far as I could see. One of the founders said there were setting it up and they were going to see how it goes. This is another institutional form that takes some of the burden off the individual farmer. One of the founders stressed the need to belong to something bigger than just the farm. Some of this isolation and drudgery he
was referring to is obviously an emotional factor, but also cognitive burdens seem to be significant. At the public meeting the Land Workers Alliance UK were present, and they explained how they expanded the network overtime. The most effective method, according to the speakers, was to hold events where young people would be more likely to attend, after the talks and demonstrations they would ‘party’. In addition a sizable proportion of their members were forestry workers who are working in chemically treated forests, presumably harvesting, planting and spraying. The alliance seeks to be a union as well as an advocacy group for sustainable farming and food sovereignty. Arriving at the stage of 1000 paying members seemed to be an important milestone for them, but it really is not that impressive in a population of close to 80 million people where alternative agriculture is pretty well established. Part of Tallamh Beo’s strategy is to assist farmers to feel good about themselves and get help in explaining what is important about their approach to farming and local markets. Significantly, they have no plan to integrate consumers into the equation, consumers can become members, but decisions are taken in the interest of farmers. They have no plan that I know of to reprimand farmers who continue to pollute as ‘all are welcome’. One farmer who I met at the meeting of Tallamh Beo used the words ‘a voice’ to describe why the new group appealed to her.

**Normalisation of relations with external actors as a necessary development for diffusion of sustainable practices.**

In contrast to the possible counterproductive consequences of deferring cognitive tasks to new institutional forms as proposed above many authors are of the opinion that reaching out to mainstream networks and institutions may be necessary for the diffusion of alternative practices to conventional farmers, consumers and other publics. As an example Ingram (2008) implies that independent, commercial, or state funded advisors who are willing to come to the farm and meet the farmer on his own terms should not be viewed with suspicion or too much scepticism. Studies often reveal that farmers and alternative consumers are often more varied in their behaviour than
anticipated. But this pattern does not only apply to farmers and consumers. When examined more closely the same could be said for advisors and educators in the current climate. Ingram (2008) speaking in the context of best management practices in England points to the

… heterogeneity of the agronomy community…..since they have different backgrounds, and possess a range of qualifications, skills and values. (Ingram 2008 P 7).

She acknowledges that advisors were, up until recently, cast as clinical disseminators of technical information and “policy messages as part of the tradition of top-down agricultural extension” (p5), but due to the privatisation of the extension services in England and the development of a more demand-led market for services being driven by the more particularised needs of farmers, these stereotypical or rigid conceptions of the relationships between farmers and advisors are beginning to yield to a more differentiated idea of farmer-advisor interactions. The farmer is now able to co-produce the relationship, setting the terms according to his needs.

Krzywoszynska (2015) alludes to a subtle but vital relationship between intuitive coping with uncertainty and non-rational patterns of knowledge generation on the part of the farmer as expert practitioner on one hand and scientific rules-based systems of of knowledge on the other. In certain contexts practitioner generated expertise can be transposed into a somewhat formal context with a reasonable expectation of good outcomes. Here she talks about the creation of action orientated knowledge.

..it is the local adaptation, tinkering, and acknowledgement of uncertainty which enables abstract principles and rules presented by scientific and managerial practices to be reproduced as part of care-full farming. While this connection merits further attention, this and other studies indicate that such flexibility and adaptation need to be recognised, valorised, and supported, for it is these breathing spaces which enable a translation of rules and principles into care – as action-oriented knowledge (Krzywoszynska 2015, P306)

Ingram (2008) points to a strategic shift on the part of agronomists to engage with the farmer on a more equal empathetic basis, but it can be observed that
they also align themselves with practice orientated decisions and expected outcomes envisaged by the farmer.

“..agronomists support practical farming decisions and, as such, their knowledge, interests, values and expectations are more likely to coincide with those of farmers” (Ingram 2008 p6)

In another example of changing landscapes in terms of transitions to more sustainable forms of agriculture and man-made nature Maye (2018) discusses how external supports such as grants might help innovators. This applies to those involved in sustainable agriculture but extends to producers of improved socio-ecological public and private environments, enabling both to prosper and develop stronger ties within their own networks. Initiatives supported by external assistance could also facilitate boundaries to be usefully permeated, creating opportunities for contact between producers and various publics. Maye’s study involved case studies of the permaculture movement in England. Among his concerns was the paradox that positive and desirable internal mechanisms which held the organisations together such as common values and distinctive practices were the apparent obstacles which made translation of knowledge from niche to mainstream communities of practice less likely. However the more structured approach of the Permaculture Association could be a good example of how to build demonstration and learning environments by designing homogenous standards for communication within a network. This in turn could enable the network to export its knowledge and ethos to more diverse social groups and to do so more reliably. Ingram and Maye give us useful examples of how intentionally designed knowledge transfer arrangements relating to agriculture and rural sustainability need not be rigid top down affairs.

These examples suggest that there may be a need to further interrogate the idea that distributed cognition particularly as it applies to distinctly different patterns, not just strongly alternative farms and their associated networks. The conventional networks and their supporting institutions or hybrid networks which arguably straddle the divide may resemble a mosaic rather than a homogeneous block of conformity. Although one has to consider the low network density of alternative agriculture and AFNs in Ireland and not be too
quick to assume that what applies to a highly populated neighbouring country applies to Ireland. Also one has to consider the cultural differences and the historical layering of institution building and institutional entrepreneurship which may have profound effect on formal structuring of knowledge transfer and diffusion of practices both internally and across diverse or even oppositional networks.

**Conclusion**

One of the most impressive things about Irish alternative farms, speaking as an ethnographic researcher, was witnessing actors in primary food production that adhered to principles, principles that were worked out at the interface between the natural world and the human world down through the years. Having spent all my life in Ireland, I had always thought of Irish farmers as angry people in pursuit of subsidies. Having spent the first half of my life in an urban environment and the second half in a rural environment I had to make some adjustments, including keeping silent about what my thoughts were as regards conventional farming. Seeing the alternative farms up close and talking to the farmers who did agree to talk at length was a real tonic. How they had worked out how they would talk about it, was also interesting. Some of the farmers were very articulate and tied the narrative nicely to the broader problems of ecological damage happening today. I agree with the farmer who said that Ireland is too small for many of these networks. People already know each other. The same faces turn up at different groups. For me the higher quality thinking and the more worked-out reasoning justifying this kind of approach to farming and food provisioning was most evident among those farmers who avoided those new institutional forms and AFN get togethers. It
seems that deferring a proportion of the thinking jobs to these structures may lead to standardised and sanitised takes on what alternative farming should be. Admittedly this is based on data collected over a short period of time.
Chapter 6 Discussion and Recommendations

Introduction

In this chapter it is hoped the reader can get an insight into the many opportunities that recognition theory can reveal to the prospective researcher of alternative agriculture. Recently, having reason to engage with practitioners of alternative medicine in Ireland, I have noticed that there may be other possible applications of this theoretical vantage point. The inclusion of distributed cognition in order to extend the method and perhaps consolidate it as a methodological option has proved a useful addition and warrants further investigation in its own right. As it is beyond the scope of the thesis to re-examine the entire work in the light of what has been revealed by a new approach, this chapter chooses several specific areas which warrant further discussion and other areas which are recommended as possible research opportunities.

Contrasting the conventional and alternative approaches in the Republic of Ireland

So what is different about alternative farmers in Ireland and how can we differentiate between them and their conventional neighbours? In part two of chapter three I have laid out how this question is addressed. There are many differences, but some stand out as being particularly important. Improved ecological capacity of farmland including the unique contribution of tree planting (non-commercial varieties) initiatives which transform the soil and landscape, is one aspect, and this can be assumed to be achievable through practices and philosophies which emphasise a co-production with nature. Autonomy, self-organisation and the utilisation of a ‘common good’ frame of
reference are some of the fundamental hallmarks attributed to alternative farmers in mainland Europe, the UK and North America and these could readily apply to the average alternative farmer in the Republic of Ireland.

Another point of differentiation is profit sufficiency as opposed to profit maximisation. The former being more common among alternative farmers. Pursuance of profit sufficiency allows for investment of time and resources in activities of an entirely different socio-ecological bent. Among these are social farming projects and low revenue-generating tasks, like seed saving on behalf of Irish Seed Savers.

In contrast, according to the alternative farmers, AFN actors and academics I have spoken to, few of the above characteristics are readily observable among conventional farmers, although it would be surprising if a small proportion of conventional farmers were not found to deploy elements of the above practices. There is nothing to exclude a conventional farmer from dabbling in natural methods or from being an occasional conscientious objector to the chemical and mechanical displacement of bio-diverse life forms on farmland and surrounding landscapes. It has for the last thirty years been a point of contention whether or not conventional farmers contribute to the drive towards sustainable production methods. Obviously, it is in the interest of conventional actors to say they are ‘looking after’ the land and doing it well. A more recent addition to the lexicon has been ‘climate smart’ where robots, drones and artificial sensors will supposedly help create a more sustainable food system. The Irish commissioner for agriculture for the EU (at the time of writing) has been recorded as saying he wanted a clean, green and smart agriculture coming out of the EU. As we know, capital intensive systems are adept at providing the various publics they address with promising futures, there is always a brave new world just around the corner. But it appears that capital intensive, entrepreneurial and corporate agriculture, has got it so badly wrong over recent decades. In terms of protecting the ecological capacity of the farmland itself and in terms of threatening the stability of vital ecosystem services on a global scale one would do well to rigorously question any solutions being promoted by this cohort of actors.
The narrative in Ireland is shamelessly tilted towards productivist agriculture according to my observation of the discourses emerging during the period 2018 to 2019. Conventional claims, that they are ‘doing their bit’ for the environment is seen in the alternative world and in certain sections of the urban population as deliberate lies. The view is, according to those who take the time to monitor these untruths, that the professional foul may not buy them much time in present circumstances, but any time is better than none. I contend that conventional agriculture in this regard could, quite easily, be tracked by some uncomplicated quantitative research. By retrieving and subjecting to analysis annual aggregate sales figures pertaining to chemical fertilizers, herbicides and pesticides in the Republic of Ireland for example, it could be demonstrated if high energy, polluting inputs are in decline, or if there is an escalation of their usage. This would reveal if the country is getting ‘greener’ as it is claimed. If it is as green as it claims why does it sit near the bottom of the EU league table in terms of organic farming and near the top of the EU league table in terms of GHG emission reductions, mostly attributable to agricultural emissions in the case of Ireland?

In the wake of the 2018 drought, I was listening to a local radio farming program in the South West of the country and the conventional farmers were discussing the possibility of maxing out their grass growth for the last months of the growing season through the application of chemical fertiliser. It sounded very much like an increase in applications to remedy a crisis caused in part by over grazing and low soil fertility as well as the freak weather events. In 2018, in an effort to defend against accusations of over stocking, the representatives of Irish beef farmers were on the airwaves claiming to be one of the most efficient producers of beef in the world. Why should they reduce output to hand the job over to less efficient farms in Brazil? This was the argument I heard over and over. In 2019 the same conventional farmers have been protesting outside of the factories because they were claiming that they could not continue to be economically viable at the prices they were being offered for their animals by the processors (Phelan 2019)14. This despite being heavily

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14 See van der Ploeg 2020 for the Dutch equivalent of this populist revolt calling for the restoration of unworkable subsidized agriculture.
subsidised. One of the headline claims of productivist agriculture is that it leads to a viable livelihood for farmers by making them efficient and that the network directs the farmers to follow realistic and up to date trends within a highly globalised market. The market determines what happens, there are no favours for stragglers, would be their logic. But when the beef farmers who are in the global big league in terms of efficiency can’t make a living, four fifths of beef farms in the Republic of Ireland are said to be unviable, this suggests the market is anything but a trustworthy indicator and treats its most valiant adopters with increasing ruthlessness. One Midlands alternative farmer I volunteered with summed up the fate of these conventional farmers who cling to their traditions in a short sentence “They are trapped”.

In contrast, it seems that alternative farmers are making a living, sometimes a very modest living, but often an enjoyable one. Alternative farmers can be financially successful also, without following mainstream logics. They often perform their tasks with zero subsidies from the state. Van der Ploeg (2018) has pointed out that the entrepreneurial type farms in the EU are failing, causing farmers to exit farming as a way of life, whereas poorer peasant-type farms are able to adapt due to distantiation from market led patterns of investment and a refusal to follow the advice that depicts the only way to survival as being via specialisation, intensification and scaling up. New entrants to farming, often started by people with urban backgrounds, have been able to construct viable small farms across Europe and avail of diverse knowledges and skills from the new urban-rural connectedness (van der Ploeg 2018, Brunori, and Rossi 2000, Seuneke et al. 2013). Land Workers Alliance UK and Tallamh Beo have indicated similar opportunities for small scale operations in the UK and Ireland and this ties in with current literature in rural sociology and human geography emphasising those forms of agriculture that are proximate to urban populations (Baldi et al. 2019)
Consider an alternative to embeddedness and conventionalisation theory

As stated in the literature review, there are a number of key theoretical constructs used in the study of AFNs and alternative agriculture. The concept of embeddedness deployed in the AFN literature is, according to Goodman and Goodman (2009), a combination of Granovetters’ network theory and heterodox economics. One of Granovetters’ concepts revolves around the idea of the usefulness of weak ties (Granovetter 1973). According to this idea the information or knowledge received through these ties is often unique and puts the receiver at an advantage. Ronald Burt (1992), also an economic sociologist, extends the non-redundant ties notion to theorise the space between the networks which holds this redundancy, calling it a structural hole. These structural holes are the key to brokerage activities which exploit the opportunities created when certain types of actors make a connection. A teacher in a community college meeting an alternative farmer who has an interest in teaching organic growing and biodiversity to local communities is an example, and something which was documented as part of the qualitative data collected in the course of this research. On that occasion the contact led to a very constructive partnership, eventually evolving into a synthesis of popular and formal methods of educating school goers and adults within the community on all things ecological. The farmer generates income from teaching, by mining this structural hole, but this displaces or redirects some of his energies away from food provisioning. Although both activities can be said to be embedded in the community, in this thesis the nature of the ties or the value of the structural hole is not the issue so much as the redeployment of resources from one activity to the other and whether the actions require re-evaluation. Does the redeployment represent a switch from the recognitional stance to the calculative mode of operation to any significant degree? Has the farmer in question crossed the threshold deserving to be re-classified as entrepreneurial? In current language we call this form of reversal
entrepreneurship if it has an internal source or co-optation, if it has an external source. The concept of conventionalisation, which was developed to explain the co-optation of organic farming in California (Goodman and Goodman 2009), in some way covers both sources.

Hinrichs (2000) makes an excursion into economic sociology in order to support the use of the embeddedness concept with respect to venues such as farmers’ markets and CSA arrangements in the United States. She suggests that “social embeddedness, if employed in a cautious, critical fashion, is useful for analysing direct agricultural markets” (p 296). Hinrichs relies on Block’s analytical framework involving marketness and instrumentalism to augment the embeddedness argument, yielding explanations related to tensions and contradictions found in these collective action orientated transaction spaces. Kirwin (2004) also refers to the discipline of economic sociology while demonstrating that embeddedness theory, if applied to alternative strategies in the UK food system, needs to include many types of embeddedness but he also emphasises the need to consider how it might be co-opted into the mainstream. His table entitled “The utilisation of ‘embeddedness’ within the agro-food system” (p 398) displays categories for alterity, valorisation and appropriation. Notably, in both Kirwin’s and Hinrichs’s approach, there is a need to travel beyond the notion of embeddedness to describe how embeddedness might be applied as a theoretical construct to the area of farmers markets and CSAs. Externalising the ‘message’ of the more holistic production process in order to turn this into a commercial advantage is one form of marketness which seems to be unavoidable but even this alerts co-optive forces to a potential revenue stream.

In other words, although an AS may emerge as a response to the disembedded ‘conventional’ agro-food system, once it becomes economically significant enough it is incorporated into the latter’s structures, thereby losing its alterity.

Kirwin (2004, P399)

However Lukacs (1968) and Simmel (1990) in philosophy of money have anticipated and theorised for precisely these scenarios where dissolution of
previously relational structures or the diminished capacity of extant relational structures are subsumed in any money-based economy. Lukacs argues that where commodity exchange is the organising principle of society the *human relational aspect of things* will be in a state of disarray. Redundancy of many aspects of communal ties or their reduced potency in terms their functional mechanisms are fundamental to Lukacs and Simmel’s argument. Simmel’s work on autonomies and extended layers of detachment achieved by an ever increasing complexity of social forms and the emergence of new groups inspired Ronald Burt (1980) to speculate on the positioning of actors in several networks (simultaneously) where they can choose to disengage from moral or practice-orientated obligations or at least deescalate their commitment. This multi-positionality of actors and their selective engagement-disengagement postures may provide better explanations to describe the behaviour of AFN actors. Actors may be simultaneously consumer-citizens, hardcore consumers and members of middle to high income groups. On the producer side actors may at once identify with belonging to diverse groups such as alternative farmers, artisan food salespersons, micro institution builders, educators or activists.

Deploying recognition theory to areas of study where producers are pivotal actors is unusual as it is more commonly applied to areas where identity politics features strongly (Honneth and Fraser 2003). In this study the concept of distributed cognition discussed in chapter 5 was introduced to see if it could deepen understandings of the recognitive stance as applied to these actors. It was found to be useful for exposing areas of interest, such as the interface between the human and nonhuman worlds, and the shared cognitions taking place there. As mentioned in the review, Honneth (2008) has allowed for certain aspects of human actions to be dependent on the cognitive or calculative mode of thinking. This means that he has conceded that the recognitional response, although having primacy in theory, will become redundant in practice as some tasks are more easily achieved if a highly

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15 Bétriseya et al 2018, applying recognition theory, recommend an instrumental use of recognition by those promoting Bolivian PES (Acuerdos Recíprocos por el Agua, ARA).
rationalised mode of thinking is given free reign. He does not say how far one can go with the substitution of the cognitivist model for the recognitional one, he does not give us a boundary. How much forgetfulness, to use one of Honneth’s key terms, can a social system endure before collapsing into Lukacs’ all-consuming reification.

As far as Simmel is concerned, a society can bear an enormous amount of plurality within its social forms and each layer of inventiveness can generate different autonomies. Each phase becomes more embroiled in detachment (Simmel 1971). For Simmel the money system allows for a strange fluidity of claims, whereby a possessor of money can lay claim to the achievement of another (Simmel 1990). What is of interest about these scenarios is a certain mobility and the ability of actors to transform, either as individuals or as a group. For instance, organic farmers, who learned their craft on a small scale farm, can set up, or help set up, larger more commercial operations that may damage the very ethos they had worked so hard to develop. As discussed in the previous chapter, collective farms may defer certain cognitive or communicative tasks to third parties, some of which are known to have connections to co-optive actors. The explanations, for this phenomenon, available in terms of embeddedness theory and conventionalisation theory fail to explain adequately the reasons behind some of these actions. It is suggested that a synthesis of aspects of recognition theory and the theoretical construct of extended cognition, what we term distributed cognition, is worth thinking about. As a pathway to further scholarly work in the area of alternative agriculture, but also in the area of applying recognition theory to empirical aspects of human ecology, I propose to connect cognitional dominated spheres of action to what I will term typical distributed cognition and connect recognitional dominated spheres of action to what I will refer to as atypical distributed cognition.
Presenting domains of recognition and cognition as an alternative to embeddedness or conventionalisation theory

The recognitional domain represents behaviours, practices and social structures where recognition has primacy over strategic and calculative thinking, although strategic and calculative thinking may be applied in a contained manner. The cognitional domain is characterised by strategic and calculative thinking with a view to maximisation of all assets and positioning of actors to favour future acquisitions. Behaviours, practices and social structures in this domain follow an abstract form of reasoning often referred to as instrumental reasoning. Patterns of recognition in the cognitional domain are normally prescribed and are always subordinated to strategic interests of the group or its allies. Taking agriculture in the Republic of Ireland as an example, the actors belonging to strong alternative food networks operate in the recognitional domain whereas everyone else (conventional farmers, mainstream consumers, institutional actors and commercial or corporate interests) operate in the cognitive domain.

Assuming that cognitive systems extend beyond the human skull (Hutchins 1996), the inclusion of two distinct forms of distributed cognition is an attempt to shed light on what are presumed, in this thesis, to be very different processes. It is suggested in this discussion, that distributed cognition-typical
associated with the cognitional domain is either a subservient following of
instructions, or part of an approved and autonomous scramble to secure
surplus (available) assets. It could also describe shared cognitive tasks
centering on the exploitation of expected emerging opportunities.\textsuperscript{16}

On the other hand, it is suggested that \textit{distributed cognition atypical} is
highly particularised to the task at hand and yields to the primacy of
recognitional properties. Again taking agriculture in the Republic of Ireland as
an example, the actors belonging to strong alternative food networks could
easily be cast as performing a type of \textit{distributed cognition atypical}. The
alternative farmers who are close to the human-nonhuman interface discussed
in Chapter five perform cognitive tasks in highly particularised environments.
The circumstances in which that knowledge is shared and adapted to a very
deranged and dispersed alternative farmer community (over time) is
contingent on the coming together of complex, not easy to replicate
components. The circumstances of the discovery, interpretation and sharing of
this knowledge also yields to the primacy of recognitional considerations as a
matter of ethos, as well as a matter of necessity given that, (I have assumed) it
is impossible to develop knowledges and practices with this level of
specificity close to nature without having first adopted a recognitional stance.

Distributed cognition-typical could refer to any extended cognitive activity in
conventional agriculture that is performed in line with the hegemonic
agricultural regime. As it is heavily subsidised, actors within this regime have
to do what the system wants them to do and the way the system wants them to
do it. Farmers might co-operate very closely with their accountant, their bank
manager, feed or fertilizer suppliers, the local vet or the extension service
advisor. During these communications they may develop or alter ways of
thinking relating to practices on the farm. The formation of entrenched anti-
nature biases which appear to be fairly pervasive and similar in content
presumably didn’t just come out of nowhere. They were constructed over a
long period of time. As many farmers have told me, the promise of

\textsuperscript{16} I would like to stress that Hutchins (\textit{Cognitive Ecology 2010}) is at pains to point out that
cognition in conjunction with action is a cultural phenomenon and for him the human brain
coevolved with human culture and collective demands for complex multi modal solutions.
Solitary contemplation is relatively rare and far from objective.
maintaining good yields with reduced labour and drudgery, was one of the first selling points of chemical fertilizers, herbicides and pesticides. Other claims were worked out over the years by strategists acting on behalf of the huge chemical and pharmaceutical companies. Depleted soils, due to monocropping, needed more artificial inputs and less resilient animals needed more medicine.

The mainstream consumers and their contact points with the productivist food provisioning system is another area of interest. Dependency on very large corporate and commercial actors can lead to a cognitively laborious product-selection exercise for the consumer (Dewitte et al. 2005). The market segmentation approach of suppliers and supermarkets is provocative and separates consumers into categories, some with low incomes eager to find the cheapest food, others with higher incomes looking for premium quality which may include corporate organic, artisanal and exotic imports. Here one can see a lot of research possibilities to determine how the thought processes behind the decisions co-evolved between multiple actors and to ask questions about their (cognitive) maintenance as a fairly stable purchasing pattern over time.

In this study, the focus is on alternative food provisioning and the actors involved, some of which are pragmatic and disinclined to become connected in any way shape or form with state or commercial actors. Others are eager to engage with anyone that will further their cause. The latter are variously described as hybrids, as belonging to weak AFNs, as new peasant farmers pursuing multifunctional survival strategies or as ecological entrepreneurs. The above heuristic map demonstrates how these variations can be conceptualised, for example hybrid actors can be seen as fluctuating between the cognitional and recognitional domains but are probably destined to settle in the cognitional domain over time and this can generate permission structures for other alternative farmers to follow. Strongly alternative farmers who are sub-institutional and non-hierarchical are stable within the recognitional domain and provide an example to those new entrant farmers who are more ideologically motivated.
Narratives and The Common Good Approach

Conceptualising the opposing narratives with deserving clarity

Tregear (2011), Goodman et al. (2014), Sonnino and Marsden (2006), Holloway et al (2017) and Maye and Kirwan (2010) point to contested issues relating to the conceptualisation of AFNs. Even van der Ploeg (2018), writing from a rural development point of view, contends that there are no clear lines of demarcation to differentiate peasant from entrepreneurial farmers that are reliable in a real world context, although he goes on to show how the shades of difference manifest themselves on the ground. The AFN writers often depict a field of blurry lines of distinction and suggest there are unacknowledged real-world overlaps between the alternative and conventional worlds. Tregear (2011) alludes to abstractions responsible for fuzzy thinking and provides many examples of conflations between elements within the so called alternative world which really could and should be analysed separately. There is the suggestion that AFN researchers were biased, conducting qualitative research that tells the story of the virtuous circle which is not empirically correct. By utilising recognition theoretic approaches it is hoped that some of these ambiguities and misunderstandings identified by these writers will be better articulated and some will be identified as healthy oppositions.

Tregear (2011), suggests that using theoretical approaches like network analysis could enable a more agnostic approach, a sort of disengagement from moral assumptions entirely. As a reply to this assertion, it can be argued in defence of seasoned AFN writers, that the word alternative is used to delineate a distinct set of practices and is less concerned with making static assertions about the existence of an ideal type or proselytising about the existence of a morally pure set of actors. In this respect, researchers who focus on the agreed-upon area of study are hardly ‘partisan’ because they stay on subject.
The actors they engage with may be guided by moral considerations, the researchers should not be accused of going native just because they entertain the idea that the conventionally produced food is less healthy or more damaging to ecosystems and that the claims made by alternative farmers are made in good faith. I agree that researchers should take particular interest in the characteristics of the people who operate these alternative structures of production and distribution and researchers should examine the stated intentions of the actors relative to their actual performance. However, I disagree with Tregear’s reasoning as to why we should be doing it. It is good social science to interrogate the veracity of the testimony given, but that does not give the researcher or writer the licence to demolish the integrity of testimony given without firm evidence gathered across these diverse pockets of resistance. At the time of writing the above article, Tregear was working at the University of Edinburgh Business School so unsurprisingly she was calling for more ‘rigour’ to be applied to this field of research, but is the proposed ramping up of instrumental reasoning going to happen at the expense of more engaged qualitative research?

One example referred to by Tregear involved a researcher counting the number of seconds a vendor at the farmers market spent conversing with the customer, I hardly think that is appropriate to the task of assessing quality within farmer-consumer relationships. I assume the well-known geographer of food systems was not standing at the farmers market with a stopwatch when researching relations of regard in the South West of Ireland in the early years of this century.

The reorganisation of the conventional farmers working life into prescribed, mostly indoor activities (van der Ploeg 2018), at the behest of industry advisors, appears to be detrimental not just to living creatures on the farm, from the microbial to the crops through to the cattle sheep and pigs, but also to the wellbeing of the farmer (whom we also acknowledge as a living creature). Tregear appears to be recommending that the good deeds of conventional farmers and retailers should be explored more fully if a just comparison between them and their alternative counterparts is to be achieved. I suggest that what needs to be understood is that AFN researchers come from many
disciplinary and cultural backgrounds and some write only one, maybe two, articles on the subject. They may be focusing on other areas of interest from that point onwards. Sadly, at least in my opinion, this results in the literature being strewn with inconsequential and sometimes careless additions. Other writers, often associated with conservative leaning schools, subsequently use these not very well researched documents as sources to mount an attack on the whole edifice of AFN literature. It’s true that grandiosity and exaggerated moral standards, espoused by those outside of the network, obscure a proper representation of the real actors (see Chapter 4), but the claim that the moral component of behaviour has been exaggerated by professional researchers might be a misreading of what those researchers were actually referring to.

What Goodman and Goodman (2009) refer to as new moral imaginaries of food for example, is not as easy to grasp as one might expect, one certainly should not confuse imaginaries with fantasies, or confuse journalism with scholarly work.

In this field, the best researchers, those who are most frequently published, most frequently referenced, and whose work is generally well received, are adept at pointing out the limits of their own methods of investigation and often make remarks about the behaviours of actors who are less alternative or more entrepreneurial than the average alternative farmer, peasant farmer, or CSA member. They cannot be responsible for outliers who buck the trend, like an unfriendly alternative farmer at a farmers market stand who has lost interest in talking to customers. For instance, in my own case, although a newcomer to this field, I have noted throughout this thesis that not all alternative farmers are committed to the social dimension of AFNs.

Critics may well point to those AFN actors who are either disingenuous or who have already migrated towards the conventional way of doing things. The later are known as weak AFN actors (Watts et al. 2005), the former, like those selling imported corporate organic vegetables at the farmers market, point to flawed governance structures at the AFN level. Those who have failed to live up to the standards which have evolved because of concerns about an untrustworthy and ecologically destructive food system we rely on, are perhaps telling us just how difficult it is to develop a trustworthy and benign
food system, nestled within, or whilst being a subset of, a market led economy. Putting it another way, those who fail to live up to the standards of *strong AFNs* are telling us that recognitional starting points can easily transpose into cognitional (rationalised) end points.

If one were to read Tregar’s (2011) review without knowing too much about the field of AFNs and alternative agriculture, one might be forgiven for thinking that too much research has been undertaken with a view to singing the praises of alterity while the conventional farmer and the supermarket chains and retailers were left to make their own case. To say that conventional farmers and retailing systems are unfairly treated by researchers is likely to be incorrect in all jurisdictions.

In the case of the Republic of Ireland nothing could be further from the truth in this authors opinion. In Ireland AFN actors are poorly represented in scholarly work and are often portrayed as being necessarily subordinate, not just because of scale, to the needs of the conventional market-led economy. In public discourse in the Republic of Ireland the more successful conventionalised formats of alterity are showcased as the norm. The media led fetishization (during the recession years of 2008 onwards) of farmers markets and artisan food stalls, failed to educate the public as to the real reasons why these alternative actors existed in the first place. In short, the media presented a politically sanitised version of these venues.

As Goodman et al. (2014) have stated the retreat of a more oppositional organic movement into civic agriculture (CSAs) and localism (Farmers markets and direct marketing formats) has certainly extinguished the threat to both corporate and commercial producers and appears to have enabled the conventional distributors of product to get in on the game. We should consider if writers should feel it is appropriate to disengage from the task of identifying distinctive forms of strongly alternative farmers and their supporting networks. Although conventionalised forms of alterity are gaining legitimacy in the marketplace, it should be emphasised that examples of strongly alternative networks are still evolving and maintaining themselves.
Perceptions of the Common Good Versus Private Incentives

The conventional (the economic approach) versus alternative (common good approach) is now an acceptable split relating to landholder and farmers values according to sociological and psychological literature (Maybery et al 2005). Alternative farmers seek to embrace the common good approach, and consumers who identify with food sovereignty movements and AFNs prefer to maximise their transactions with primary producers who follow a similar prioritising of ecological concerns (Goodman and Goodman 2009, Jarosz 2008). Although larger scale concerns about common goods such as fertile soil, biodiversity and good water quality may be seen as inseparable from vital ecosystem services, this natural complexity needs to be understood, valued and protected on a society-wide scale.

I have found that participants in collective action, or those with common good orientated goals, tend to be aware of the odds, whether things are stacked for or against them. They generally know whether their contribution is going to make a significant difference or not and this affects how they contribute. The literature on collective action anticipates these kind of outcomes (Chong 1991, Olson 1965). So on this level we can assume that all strongly alternative farmers in Ireland know that their contribution is having close to zero effect on the grand scale of things. They are disappointed with the response of the Irish consumer, successive Irish governments and a pro big business EU. On the level of the individual farm they are more likely to be happy with the impact they are having, and they are aware that this has a substantial common good component. However as regards the creation of an alternative food provisioning system the alternative farmer knows that breaking away from the conventional system is an almost impossible task in a society which is politically conservative, pro-entrepreneurial and pro big business. If these farmers have an effect on their own customer’s habits, which in some way assists the customer’s development towards being alternative consumers or consumer-citizens this could be considered to be among the non-financial
rewards which give satisfaction to the producer. If these objectives are salient it can be assumed the farmers have to forego certain profit-making opportunities. In order to enable this transformation on the consumption side, and then help to consolidate it, profit sufficiency registers as a perfectly acceptable goal. According to the evidence, it appears that some, but not all, alternative farmers have the temperament to engage in what is sometimes a laborious and repetitive set of tasks over time. They carry out these repetitions in order to provide the same customers with produce year after year. Achieving duration, it seems, is important as the perceived longevity of the relational tie and the consistency of satisfaction attained from the product is one of the key factors in collective action orientated participation according to Chong (1991).

We know from the literature on CSAs for instance that they are often temporary affairs lasting only a few years, it might be that the land was only available for a number of years, or key members of the core group needed to move on to other forms of work or collective action. The example of the discontinued CSA in Kinsale County Cork is a case in point. Also research results indicate that many customers who engage with AFNs in Europe and North America do so for the relatively cheap access to organic or naturally grown food and for access to food which is perceived to be healthier (Fonte 2013). This would indicate that customers are treating the food primarily as a private good, although their continued participation shows a rejection of consumer impulsivity and a collective awareness relating to mutual obligations. From observations made during this research, I think it is safe to assume that farmers are aware of the limitations of their common good orientated achievements, they know better than anyone that the results are variable and often impossible to measure.

Van der Ploeg and Frouws refer to managing zones of insecurity when talking about collective efforts to restructure dairy farms and links them to new (organic) technological spaces (van der Ploeg and Frouws 1999). For some farmers these variable results and uncertain returns represent an acceptable
return for their efforts, it might be assumed in this case that they managed their zones of insecurity adequately, resulting in an increased self-efficacy and most likely increased group level efficacy (van der Ploeg and Frouws 1999). Both on the large-scale impacts concerning ecosystem services and on a more localised social and ecological scale, their common good incentivised goals in this scenario have been met, as part of the systemic outcome (LeClair 1969 p 199) they aspire to. Gibson-Graham’s (1996) ecologies of productivity is cited by Maye and Kirwan (2010, p7) to describe non-monetary practices and exchange events which can happen within (rather than outside of) a competitive capitalist economy. On the economic level these pragmatic farmers may have managed an adequate income with a modest profit from time to time.

As a counterpoint to this scenario, having made observations and witnessed discourses and conversations in the field, I can confirm that there are a proportion of alternative farmers in the Republic of Ireland who do not feel adequately rewarded. These farmers may be all too aware that consumers, institutional actors and other farmers are treating the whole edifice of alternative food provisioning as something that is either a) providing private goods or b) is merely providing the backdrop to market segmentation and elitism in the food sector. It’s easy to understand their cynicism when one considers that the entire establishment, including grant giving bodies and educators, are heavily biased towards export agriculture and (food processing orientated) product development. Many alternative farmers are on the verge of becoming more entrepreneurial, and more business-like if they have not already done so. In any case it is extremely common to find (through conversation analysis) the pre-entrepreneurial thought processes quietly ticking over in the background. The cognitional underlay which I refer to may be involved in identifying the jump point\textsuperscript{17}. It is evident that these cross-overs to entrepreneurship, or conversions to more conventional modus operandi, do not happen overnight but may be the result of layers of experiences, some rewarding and some not so rewarding. In saying that there is always the

\textsuperscript{17}Van der Ploeg (2018) uses this term to describe the peasant farmers jump point (or leap of faith) to submerge himself in the entrepreneurial regime which was seen by the state sponsored advisors as the only way to go at the time
element of personality based characteristics and psychological factors to be taken into account on a case by case basis.

Crossing over to strategic thinking: a counterpoint to the use of concepts like diversification in alternative farming and related networks.

Diversification in farming is suggestive of a tolerance of many combinations, such as farming plus agri-tourism or farming plus agricultural contracting. It also allows for quirky alternative niche markets such as snail farming or combinations of alternative and conventional marketing strategies. As stated earlier, it is envisaged that the recognitional domain allows for a very limited level of strategic and calculative thinking and even this has to be mindful of recognitional norms. Honneth (1995) brings us back to the Hegelian roots of recognition theory in *The Struggle for Recognition* explaining that the ‘precontractual relations of mutual recognition’ underlie a broad range of human intercourse including those happening in socially competitive situations. The ‘moral potential evidenced in individuals willingness to reciprocally restrict their own spheres of liberty is anchored in this very recognitional stance towards one another’ (Honneth 1995, p42). Conflicts are not always about the law of the jungle. The seizure of one’s property is not so much a threat to a person’s future survival chances as the Hobbesian state of nature hypothesis would have us believe but reactions are based on the ‘feeling of being ignored by ones social counterpart’ (Honneth 1995, p42). I remind the reader that although Honneth sees recognition as having primacy over cognition in virtually all contexts, in as much as it precedes it, he also allowed for certain aspects of human functioning in the times we live in to warrant cognitive deliberation and a highly rationalised approach (Honneth 2008).
To reiterate, alternative farmers are subjected to norms of a recognitional nature and this would seem to imply a limiting of one’s personal liberty by consent. In the case of alternative agriculture there are many permutations of how to farm whilst maintaining compatibility with ecological goals, so it is a little difficult to pinpoint, with any reasonable precision, if and when a breech has occurred. Perhaps it is even more difficult to achieve a consensus on the correctness or viability of labelling a particular set of actions as a breech.

How can the model of recognitional and cognitional domains explain these departures from more strongly alternative positions? Or to answer the latter part of the second research question, how might disengagement from a recognitive stance (or the renewal of misrecognition) occur?

I will give two examples of how the recognition theory might contribute. One is where the farmer sees the farm as a “thing” which needs to perform and the other looks at co-authorship. Both cases briefly show that the redundancy of a recognitional point of view involves cognitive process and discrete re-alignments with convention. Envisaging disengagement from the recognitive stance as a cognitive exercise is an area which would require a lot of new data and it would be unwise to speculate at this time how that research process would evolve.

Hutchins cognitive ethnography in *Cognition in the Wild* gives us some idea of the level of detailed work that this might require. At this point we can at least say that to think in a strategic and calculative way about something which had, or was identified as having, an ideological or moral starting point is a distinct type of departure and its particularised nature needs to be addressed. Sociologists should certainly see it as more than a curiosity. Alternative farmers, if one is to believe their narratives, see the conventional food supply chains and distribution systems as corrupt, destructive and unhealthy for workers and for those that are eating the food. To engage with its distribution system and in some way sanitise the image of that distribution system by putting authentic product on its shelves has to be a de-escalation of your resistance to it.
The Farm Becomes a Thing, Labour Becomes Commodified

The commodification of labour is not readily associated with the self-employed. The assumption will be made that strategizing and the objectification of the farm and perhaps to a degree, the objectification of relationships within and beyond the farm, has established itself as a rival domain to the recognitional domain\textsuperscript{18}. As has been depicted in the heurist map in this chapter these objectifications or instrumentally reasoned choices can be seen as actions within the cognitional domain. ‘This thing has to prove itself’ said one farmer who had veered in the direction of mainstream distribution. She was talking about the farm. The recalibration of the moral barometer in the downward direction, making the farm less a part of a moral economy of food (Jackson et al 2009) and more like a small business requires a shift in thinking.

I realised very early on that I’d have to fit into the restaurants if I wanted the regular income and that is where my main income comes from…

The farm is now a ‘thing’ that has to make money. It is at once objectified (breaking it down), and then personified as a fictitious (corporate) person who has to justify itself as a productive component, its stands on its record of productivity. Of course Marx and Lukacs have written a lot about dissolution of communal forms of exchange in favour of capitalist markets. Products become things that fit somewhere, into slots with other things, as the commodity exchange format becomes the organising structure of society.

…the immediate production and reproduction of life (in which for the individual the commodity structure of all 'things' and their obedience to 'natural laws' is found to exist already in a finished form, as something immutably given) could only take place in the form of rational and isolated acts of exchange between isolated commodity owners. As emphasised above, the worker, too, must present himself as the 'owner' of his labour-power, as if it were a commodity. (Lukacs 1968 p92)

\textsuperscript{18} Van der Ploeg and Frouws (1999) use the term \textit{reification} in their discussion of rivalry between collective action orientated and corporate actors and they refer to the assumed infallibility of market logic which proved to be an inferior strategy in this case.
Heads of salad belong in hotels where there are always busloads of people to consume them, head to head. Polytunnels of salads with only one person to be paid at the end of every week is something that can net €40,000 a year. It is hard work, but that very fact generates the right narrative, it is a selling point. There is no better badge to wear in conservative rural Ireland and no better badge to wear if one wants to commodify oneself. The same farmer is noted for hard work, I don’t think I have ever heard her name mentioned without the concept of hard work being linked to it. For Lukacs the worker becomes ‘thing like’ as his labour is formed into a homogenised saleable product ready to slot in to where it is deemed to function best. To be better than your co-worker, faster or doing something with flair, is disruptive to the calculative mode of operation. Everything has to be the same. Of course where difference is called for, like the provision of distinctive very fresh salads presently being sought by hotels and supermarkets the commodity exchange logic will eventually manage to find the farmer who will wrench the knowledge generated by alternative farmers from its roots and reconstruct it as formulaic, hitting the mark every time. The farmer who is able to convert some of the skills and knowhow of alternative growing techniques into something closely resembling the mono crop productivist regime will become an integral part of that economic system.

For some writers even partial resistance to the what actors experience as “monolithic power relations” in conventional food systems is worth engaging with from a research point of view (Holloway et al 2007 p15). The production, distribution and consumption dynamic should be looked at through multiple analytical fields in order to assess their impact and potentialities and this can be done whether or not the actors have explicitly stated their oppositional credentials or have avowed some kind of attachment to an intentional community or collective action orientated group (Holloway et al 2007). In this research, all farmers who were strongly alternative either at the time of our encounter or at some time previous, were still very much in the business of nailing their colours to the mast as regards green credentials and loyalty to ecological goals, but also made their intentions known as regards the unsuitability of the current (mainstream) food provisioning system. Increased
entrepreneurial zeal acquired by some did not dampen their enthusiasm as opposers but their practices had in fact changed and that point. According to this thesis, these instances of allegiance switching need to be acknowledged as a retrograde step from a recognitional point of view.

**Authorship in Co-Action and convenient omissions**

The Alternative farmer may use distribution systems of large corporate or commercial concerns or otherwise, creating new linkages, she may break into an unexploited market that larger actors have unwittingly created, through her own sales and distribution efforts. An alternative farmer could for instance break into the tourist industry by supplying product to a hotel (let’s assume it is part of a chain of hotels), and this would certainly be a significant departure from the AFN norms described by Lucey Jarosz (2008). Jarosz describes venues such as farmers markets, CSA farms and the like as being typically associated with the alternative farmer. In willing this action, that is the change of tack required to sell to corporate actors, one would expect the farmer assumes authorship of his actions.

Interestingly, Wegner and Sparrow (2004) claim that people assume less authorship and consequently less responsibility for an action where the other actor is perceived to initiate the action and more authorship, and more responsibility, if they perceive themselves as having taken the lead. In the case of the alternative farmer switching to hotels and supermarkets as a market for his produce, he may very well see this as a decision to integrate into a system where he would have an increased level of anonymity. I’m thinking here of the actor pursuing freedom from obligations of a noneconomic kind. Of course he would be the junior partner and a price taker, and he would likely follow decisions made by persons unknown to him.

It means he could forget about the obligatory pressures of relational ties and forget about bearing the burden of reciprocity demands, instead concentrating on the requirements laid down by unknown actors. He may very well see himself as being less responsible in terms of the joint venture as the other partner is dominant. Alternative farmers from my observation are not quick to divulge information of a commercially sensitive nature and are more likely to
conceal exactly how larger transactions occur. They are more likely to openly claim authorship for those actions that are most alternative and done with collective responsibility, with the common good in mind and correspondingly diminish their authorship of entrepreneurial, business-like ventures.

**Systematic compartmentalisation of the forms of recognition as a future research objective**

When I quoted this phrase ‘systematic compartmentalisation of the forms of recognition’ (Honneth 1996 p69) in Chapter 4, I was referring to Honneth’s view that Hegel thought it necessary to break down the recognitional pattern in order to reveal the ethical foundations that existed at the genesis of modernity’s institution building phase, institutions which are common in present-day societies. It’s worth considering how such a compartmentalisation could be accomplished in relation to alternative agriculture and AFN networks in Ireland. If the stated objective of the study was to benefit from viewing these areas of socio-cultural and economic life through the recognitional lens one could envisage how categories like the ‘acknowledgement of the socio-cultural and historical context of the knowledge’ might make a good starting point. If it is found, for example, that in a particular social group there is a markedly different approach to the acknowledgement of the socio-cultural and historical context of certain types of knowledge, different from the norm in the sense that it underrepresents this aspect of knowledge acquisition, this points to either carelessness or deliberate withholding of recognition. When considering the ‘material and discursive means’ deployed to achieve a spatial dynamic of care (Goodman and Goodman 2009), the recognitional lens revealed factors such as the ‘expectation of solidarity and reciprocity’. It further revealed that the normalisation of demands for reciprocity and the creation of durable relational ties (within AFNs) as being possible only among those who adopted and maintained a recognitional stance towards each other.
If the expectation of solidarity and reciprocity were to be one compartment, one form of recognition which was considered to be essential for the formation of ‘new institutional arrangements’ (van der Ploeg 2010, farming styles p4), then this could be exhaustively dealt with, verified as a meaningful category, via qualitative methods or disposed of. For instance, demands for reciprocity by consumers and the stress that these demands sometimes exert on alternative farmers would be one avenue that researchers could focus on. Farms which responded very well to that stress may be the ones that can afford to reinvest in a way of thinking described earlier as the recognitional domain. In this way it may make a lot more sense to researchers if some competent farmers remain strongly alternative and other apparently competent and able farmers tend towards a more entrepreneurial or conventionalised approach over time. Factors like an inability to respond to the demands for reciprocity in an appropriate and efficient manner, may trigger divestment from the thought structures, ethical foundations and day to day practices commonly associated with strong AFNs.

It is suggested that building a compartmentalised, and very detailed, picture of the recognitional systems of engagement and exchange in these environments, including a cognitive-ethnographic dimension, may be a very worthwhile research strategy. One which could have the potential to enable a non-partisan, realistic grasp of what is often seen as a very fragmented social response to the conventional food provisioning systems.

**A Recommendation for Further Research on The Conventional Side**

It is suggested that there are several areas of research which have become more accessible because of the work carried out in this thesis. Although the study focused its energies on the alternative side of the spectrum a lot was learned about the conventional efforts to rebrand some of the practices of agroecology as a conventional affair. The biological farmers who I
encountered in Ireland were often very enthused about the whole area of cost cutting via the introduction of natural replacements for chemical inputs such as cover cropping and companion cropping. It was noted that many were excited by the freedom to experiment with the methods while at the same time being able to use their entrepreneurial abilities to create opportunities from the new product. Products derived from holistically grazed livestock in the UK have been successfully marketed as a niche product according to one Kilkenny farmer. Other farmers were getting better prices for their grazing from top class beef farmers because they were using biological methods for fodder production. These actors were not identified as ecological entrepreneurs at the earlier stages of this study and to do so now would be premature without further research.

Ecological entrepreneurship within conventional agriculture is one area which could prove difficult to investigate from a sociological point of view. I say this because it seems the term ecological entrepreneurship has not been sufficiently developed theoretically. The boundaries of applicability of the term have not been defined and this I suggest is partly because entrepreneurship itself cuts through many layers of identity, many categories in food provisioning and is perhaps too malleable or too mercurial a phenomenon to pin down (see Nashchekina et al. 2019 on similar problems with social entrepreneurship). Writers who publish papers in rural sociology journals or speakers on all matters rural who use the term rarely spend much time explaining what exactly the term is meant to convey or capture. Without having any strict allegiances within the various shades of sustainability or greenness, which is the case with most of the people I identify as ecological entrepreneurs, the entrepreneur will reincarnate herself as many times as she sees necessary in order to arrive at the most viable intersection between established norms and disruptive alternatives. It appears this is something which authors have found difficult to theorise. Using theoretical constructs developed in this thesis, it can be assumed the ecological entrepreneur uses and discards various modes of operation, sometimes creating hybrids. She can move from the recognitional domain where she established practices or
constructed a level of green credentials to the cognitional domain to exploit these learnings in a conventional, extractive manner.

The farmer as ecological entrepreneur operating within conventional agriculture’s socio-cultural environment, demonstrates the many ways that producers can bind the cognitional modus operandi with the recognitional modus operandi. We could assume that each new way of binding these modes, in any one field of practice, can be depicted as a new socio-cultural construction and will either survive or thrive depending on multiple factors. A clear line of enquiry is possible using this approach if one were to gather data on the biological farmers and holistically managed grazing specialist in Ireland who are, in socio-cultural terms, aligned with conventional agriculture and may still practice purely conventional agriculture on other farms or at different locations on the same farm. From observations made in the field, I can confirm that the use of the term ecological entrepreneur could fit very well with what some of these farmers are doing. This would be conditional of course on identification a specific interpretation, which would be the first task, of what ecological entrepreneurship actually means.

**Possible Limitations of The Research Process**

Qualitative research involves the collection, analysis, and interpretation of data that are not easily reduced to numbers (Anderson 2010). Where the research is carried out by a single individual albeit under the supervision of experienced academics the orientation of the researcher towards the subject matter is prone to overly subjective filtering and various biases. To assess this aspect of the researcher’s orientation one invariably enters into the complex area of ontological and epistemological starting points and this can trigger a spiral of eternal regress. In the case of this thesis, which examines a somewhat neglected area of rural sociology in Ireland, the researcher takes a stance on ‘alternativeness’ as a pathway to fundamentally altering the socio-ecological systems associated with food production and distribution in Ireland. It’s possible by adopting this stance some aspects of conventional agriculture and its actors have not been adequately assessed and the inputs of these actors towards the construction of new, more sustainable ways of doing things has
been dismissed too easily. The same could be said for the choice of informants
and sites used for data gathering. If for example the researcher had a
background in conventional farming, ease of access to conventional farms and
knowing where to look for the type of conventional Irish farmer which would
possibly demonstrate a heterogeneity of approaches towards sustainability
issues among these type of actors may have resulted in slightly different
outcomes not only in terms of data collection but with respect to interpretation
and analysis of the available data. The fact that this researcher spent the first
half of his life in an urban environment and later only had contact with
alternative, usually first generation farmers and networks of peri-urban and
transient rural actors certainly raises questions as to possible biases. Anderson
(2010) raises the point about biases and idiosyncrasies as regard qualitative
research, but also raises the important aspect of individual skills. “Research
quality is heavily dependent on the individual skills of the researcher and more
easily influenced by the researcher’s personal biases and idiosyncrasies”
(Anderson 2010, p2). One way of remedying this tendency towards bias is the
adoption of a reflexive approach.

Reflexive researchers keep track of, and endeavour to separate, their twin role
as participant and engaged data retriever on one hand and as interpreter and
analyst on the other. Social science is reflexive in the sense that the knowledge
it generates is "injected" back into the reality it describes (Bourdieu and
Wacquant 1992, p38 cite Giddens 1987). To open up the debate to critical
appraisal we can see there are competing logics. For instance, there is a long
standing school of thought which warns against seeing researcher reflexivity
as a formulaic method of introspection or an internally directed interrogation
for which the individual researcher is solely responsible for. Bourdieu and
Wacquant (1992) to mention just one alternative, state that “reflexivity calls
less for intellectual introspection than for the permanent sociological analysis
and control of sociological practice”. This implies taking a stance whereby the
researcher risks becoming less objective in the short term in order to become
more effective at uncovering concrete and self-propelling research agendas
(Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). This however presupposes that the research is
ongoing and that the researcher has extensive autonomy and decision making
power to explore future objectives in further rounds of research. These subsequent rounds of research may be governed by new research strategies in order to take advantage of emerging, flexible methodologies. In line with this approach some researchers like to apply reflexivity as part of developmental process. For instance Attia and Edge (2017) see “the ‘developmental approach’ as one which foregrounds the continuing growth of the whole-person-who-researches as integral to the research process” (p34). During the course of this research an effort was made to periodically assess that both a reflexive and a developmental strategy governed the approach to the data gathering but also to its interpretation and analysis.

Researcher positionality (particularly relating boundaries and allegiances) arguably played a strong part in the formation of strategies in this thesis from the outset. Although Jarosz’s definition was used to define AFNs but also as a criteria which helped decide which actors were considered to be ideal-typical, real world encounters forced the researcher to make necessary choices as to which farmers were worth investigating and which could be disregarded. For example, those farmers whose behaviour appeared closer to the AFN definition which Jarosz crafted were treated more carefully and discourses emanating from their life world was perhaps given priority. It could be argued that their responses were privileged, and increasingly so as the work progressed. The reader will be aware from the outset which part of the farming world is being supported by the author and some readers may assume that the researcher might have injected personal bias as evidenced by repeated references to the negative features of conventional farmers and their supporting networks and organisations. The question remains, did researcher positionality invalidate the outcome of the research or affect the reliability of the process?

Again returning to the research questions, using them as a guide, I think the objectives of the research were achieved and this was done with reasonable attention being payed to the positionality of the researcher and to matters relating to objectivity and reflexivity. In answering the research questions certain aspects may not have been dealt with to the satisfaction of some readers, partly because the objective was theoretical in nature. Some aspects
of the work were likely limited by depending too strongly on “alternative” sources of data retrieval and the researcher’s preferences in terms of ideological, cultural and political affinities may have hampered interpretative and analytical objectivity to some extent. I will leave it to the reader to be the final arbitrator and to decide how well the author performed.

**Final Conclusions**

To reach beyond the microcosm of alternative farming, that is to hope for an expansion of that sector of agricultural production, this thesis suggests that the objective should be pursued as a qualitative change rather than a scaling up of certain physical practices. The lesson learned from the conventionalisation of organic agriculture in the US, which is very well documented, is that reductionism (often emphasising inputs rather than process) leads to shallow understandings, and this helps to re-establish the mindset of productivism, often called neo-productivism. Rural sociology as a discipline has had a conservative and restrictive history, therefore one has to be sceptical about its product, and this applies to rural sociology in the US, Australia, New Zealand as well as Ireland where the state has had quite an influence on its development. Geographers and anthropologists have made progress where rural sociology was forbidden (or discouraged) to tread, and rural sociologists may have learned something valuable from these other disciplines. In the field of alternative food networks and alternative farming, rural sociology as a discipline has at times performed admirably and other times has fallen short. By applying constructs from mainstream sociology and social theory one can uncover new approaches and create opportunities for disconnection from some of the more conservative and restrictive elements of statist rural sociology. The application of recognition theory undertaken in this dissertation is a good example of how this can work. Although the work is exploratory, it shows considerable potential for making progress in the area of conceptualising
alternative farming, particularly relating to allegiance switching within the various forms of AFNs (not least from strong to weak) and co-optation of producers and their productive assets via entrepreneurial zeal. The approach developed here also shows potential to neutralise or disentangle duplicitous discourse relating to sustainable or alternative food provisioning whether that be state sponsored, corporate sponsored, whether it be the output of academic institutions or the product of the alternative or mainstream media.

In addition, the research goes some way to confirming that the appropriate development of alternative farming and its diffusion (scaling out) is dependent on respecting its origins and never forgetting why those pioneers saw the need to invent a counter movement to productivist, polluting and resource destroying agriculture. One cannot simply abandon learning at the interface. As Pretty (1995, p1249) remarked “Sustainable agriculture is, therefore, not simply an imposed model or package. It must become a process for learning and perpetual novelty”. But this is novelty within the microcosm and not an extractive process where techniques are wrenched from their origin. And finally, it is dependent on social, economic and political actors giving due recognition to those who practice these agroecological methods today.

Working close to the interface of the natural and the human worlds and doing it respectfully is certainly an important occupation and those who profess to study and conceptualise this life-world, for instance rural sociologists, should use all the means at their disposal to be effective and engaged.


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national strategies and best practices to ensure the co-existence of genetically modified crops with conventional and organic farming”


Proceedings of the 52nd SIDEA Conference, DOI: 10.13128/REA-18667


GRAIN (2014) 28 May Hungry for land: small farmers feed the world with less than a quarter of all farmland https://www.grain.org/article/entries/4929-hungry-for-land-small-farmers-feed-the-world-with-less-than-a-quarter-of-all-farmland


Huntley, S. (2018) *CSA: We Have a Problem* https://www.harvie.farm/blog/csa-we-have-a-problem/


The bibliography contains a list of academic sources, primarily from the fields of sociology, economics, and rural development. Here are some key entries:


The bibliography also includes references to specific topics such as food markets, agricultural economics, and the sociology of food production and consumption. These sources are cited to support research on topics like the impact of food scares on EU food policy, the role of consumers in rural development, and the nutritional quality and safety of organic food.


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Geoforum, 41(1), pp.131-143.


Smagorinsky, P. (2018) "Deconflating the ZPD and instructional scaffolding: Retranslating and reconceiving the zone of proximal development as the zone of next development", *Learning, Culture and Social Interaction*, 16, 70 – 75 https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lcsi.2017.10.009"


Tovey, H. (1992) “Rural Sociology in Ireland: a Review”, *Irish Journal of Sociology*. 2, 96-


Urgenci The International Network for Community Supported Agriculture https://urgenci.net/the-csa-research-group/


Appendix

The Dataset

Primary concerns in designing the dataset for this thesis was to ensure the data is suited to serve as an evidence base for a satisfying answer to the research question (see Zahle 2020). Table 2.2 below lays out the diverse sources which were eventually included.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2.1 Qualitative Dataset</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Data Type</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recorded Interviews or Text based Q and A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observation notes taken while participating or volunteering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social artefacts relating to alternative farms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notes and recordings while participation in public events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conversations engaged in and conversations witnessed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Witnessing the development of institutions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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