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Houtbeckers, Eeva

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Land in transition: the role of land for Finnish households striving for self-sufficiency

Eeva Houtbeckers

Aalto University (eeva.houtbeckers@aalto.fi)

Abstract: This short essay is based on ongoing ethnographic fieldwork that focuses on post-growth work in the global North. Some of the people I have met during my fieldwork are in the process of altering their life according to their understanding of more affirmative ways of living. Here the focus is on households that strive for self-sufficiency in terms of food. However, in order to cultivate land, one needs to access it. This essay focuses on describing self-sufficiency households' everyday needs for private land ownership and its implications for the households. It seems to be hard to completely rid oneself of owning land because of the institutional arrangements beyond one's immediate influence. For discussions concerning transitions toward more sustainable societies, projects exploring other ways of organising land ownership are important.

Keywords: self-sufficiency, land, diverse economies, ethnography, degrowth, land trust

Intro

Earthy colours, brown and grey. The buildings are modest, but they are tidy and they do the job with regards to providing shelter. There is one (maybe lived-in) car in front of one of the buildings. 'Cock-a-doodle-doo!' floats over the garden. Following the sound reveals a hen enclosure. There may be other domestic animals around, like sheep. Tools hang from nails and hooks; some lean against the wall. A project lies unfinished on a flat surface, evidenced by a miscellaneous assortment of materials. If it is the start of the growing season, seedlings crowd the greenhouse. Decorative plants or other objects seem an anomaly since everything is marked by functionality.

Inside the house, earthy colours continue. The hallway hosts working clothes and shoes as well as foodstuffs that need cooler air. After another door, one's body is hit with the warmth of a fireplace in

the heart of the house. Food is being cooked on the fire and materials are being dried around it in a sweet heat that makes one smile. Another centre for activity: the dining table. While shelves and work surfaces may be crowded, the table is reserved for eating and coming together. There may be a sofa, but it is in the corner or in another room. There is not much space but enough for this family. Water comes from the well and food is grown in the garden. Around the table, we eat and drink things that are sourced from the same property. Today, like most days, no slaughtered domestic animals but rather vegetables and eggs.

In the garden, the one(s) responsible for it explains how things are grown here. Silent places and immobile materials come to life when the cycle of the year is painted in front of us. The work of love done in the garden paces the time-use of the household. Sometimes they have volunteers to help, but the work is done mainly by the small

family. Outside the growing season, other types of labour are performed: securing firewood, fixing the property, preserving food, sewing, studying, planning and resting. And as always, cooking, washing, cleaning and mending.

This vignette could be from 1950s Finland. However, it portrays typical observations from my visits to Finnish households striving for self-sufficiency. These visits conducted during 2016–2018 are part of my ongoing ethnographic study, in which I use ‘post-growth work’ as a concept to theorise about work, labour, jobs and employment for/in post-growth societies (see for example Barca 2017). Overall, striving for self-sufficiency in the global North in terms of food, electricity or warmth represents a shift in the contemporary thinking of how to gain a livelihood in a society organised around waged labour (Benessaiah 2018). During my fieldwork in the Finnish Degrowth Movement¹ I have met many who, following the conceptualisation of Gibson-Graham, Cameron, and Healy (2013), question capitalist understandings of work, enterprise, transactions, property and finance. This is because they seek more affirmative ways of living on our limited planet with many burning socio-ecological issues, such as climate change, the sixth mass extinction of species and unequal accumulation of wealth. During my fieldwork I have witnessed debates about the usefulness of waged work, listed or limited liability companies, market-based transactions involving money, as well as the role of central, exchange-listed and investment banks. Instead, people are interested in social security reforms, basic

income, voluntary work, cooperatives, non-profit enterprises, alternative currencies, household sharing, open access property, community-based financial institutions and many other topics. Some of the people I have met are in the process of altering their life according to their understanding of more affirmative ways of living. They have given up or are in the process of giving up waged work, support for listed or limited liability companies, use of money and market-based banks. Such reorganisation of everyday practices seems to be possible in households striving for self-sufficiency. Families who want to grow their own food and produce their own heating or electricity keep smallholdings. In other words, they have a varying degree of independence from food, heat and/or electricity infrastructure.

While the people I have met during my fieldwork have a good imagination for affirmative ways of living as well as the energy to experiment, the practice of growing food sets material boundaries. The most important of these is the need to access land and commit to its improvement. Despite interest in less capitalist understandings of work, enterprise, transactions, property and finance, it seems to be difficult to avoid the need to own land. Although acquiring a property is a one-off deal, it requires monetary assets or might result in part-time or full-time waged work in order to pay back loans. Such a navigation in the diverse economy creates some observable dissonance among the households I have visited. This short essay focuses on describing self-sufficiency households’ everyday needs for private

¹ ‘Kohtuusliike’ in Finnish, www.kohtuusliike.fi

land ownership and its implications for the households. Such a ‘weak theory’ perspective (Wright 2015) takes seriously the practitioners’ situation and offers open-ended answers to complex socio-ecological challenges. I argue that from such a position I can conduct meaningful research to be used for debates concerning sustainability transitions.

This essay is organised as follows. First, I present related concepts to self-sufficiency. Second, I discuss the current Finnish institutional environment of land ownership, policy and use. Third, I provide information concerning my fieldwork and the empirical material used in this essay. Fourth, I present practical aspects related to land ownership and the need to own land from the self-sufficiency households’ perspective. Fifth, I discuss land trusts as an alternative to private land ownership in relation to self-sufficiency. Finally, I present conclusions and suggest steps for further analysis.

Self-sufficiency, voluntary simplicity and back-to-the-land

I am conducting a sensory ethnography in order to familiarise myself with ‘post-growth work’, a theoretically derived concept that would explain the everyday practices of working for/in degrowth societies (see for example Barca 2017). The notion of agency is important in order to understand work and labour that aims at living within the planetary boundaries (Houtbeckers & Taipale 2017). This is because people are embedded in persistent

sets of practices and changing them takes time and energy. In order to make sense of how people engage in everyday practices of working for/in degrowth societies, I use the weak theory perspective (Wright 2015) that challenges ‘comprehensiveness, exclusivity and grand claims’ and instead ‘supports partial understandings and multiplicity, and allows for both contradictions and inconsistency’ (Wright 2015, p. 398). In this vein, during my ongoing ethnographic fieldwork I have come across a set of practices that, at this stage, I refer to as *households striving toward self-sufficiency*. Self-sufficiency is a concept used by some of the participants to describe their ways of being, which includes food, heat or electricity sovereignty. In academic discussions, self-sufficiency is used in reference to food security, social security, development of nations and criticism of the economic growth imperative. In the latter case, self-sufficiency becomes a position in which ‘[s]ufficiency is not in line with a culture of domination over nature, nor with politically motivated promises of wellbeing and wealth, nor with profit expectations’ (Mölders, Szumelda, & von Winterfeld, 2014, p. 23). Moreover, Mölders *et al.* point to the moral aspect of self-sufficiency, which relates to the axiom that ‘[n]o one should ever have to always want more’ (von Winterfeld in Mölders *et al.* 2014, 24).

Other concepts are also used, especially in the global North. Self-sufficiency is linked to voluntary simplicity, in which minimal material needs are understood to lead to higher well-being (Alexander 2015). According to Alexander (2015), the social movement has roots in 1960s and 1970s North American and European counter-

cultures, which criticised consumption and are associated with back-to-the-landers. Back-to-the-landers refers to people with no agrarian background who move to rural areas from cities in order to live more simply and be self-sufficient (Calvário & Otero 2015). In the case of Finnish households striving toward self-sufficiency, there are varying levels of previous agrarian experience. In a study of the Greek back-to-the-land movement, Benessaiah (2018) argues that ‘the back-to-land trend is first and foremost a livelihood transformation’. Therefore, the back-to-the-land trend is not a light change of lifestyle, but a fundamental change in ways of being in this world. It makes visible the various everyday connections of human existence, including human and more-than-human relationships. In transitions toward more sustainable societies, such as imagined in the degrowth movement, the question of land has been discussed, but in a limited manner and attached to the role of agriculture in dehgrowth thinking (Gomiero 2018). The profound questions include how to feed humans in a sustainable way when considering the impacts of diet choices, farming, processing, packaging and food transportation (Infante Amate & González de Molina 2013). According to Gomeiro (2018, 1836), ‘a path toward degrowth aims at food self-sufficiency at the level of local communities, shortening the production chains, reducing waste, relying on renewable energies and the ban of agrochemicals’. Yet, he emphasises that there should be more analysis on the large-scale transition towards such systems. Instead of such ‘strong theory’, this short essay takes the ‘weak theory’ perspective in order explore

the role of land for households striving for self-sufficiency. When attuning to the standpoint of the practitioners and providing partial understandings as a researcher, I hope to offer surprising and meaningful perspectives for research concerning transitions towards more sustainable societies.

Land use in Finland

Compared to other regions, Finland has distinct socio-ecological issues that impact life beyond Finland. For example, the ecological impact of an average Finnish citizen is among the highest in Western countries. In addition to wasteful living, the distance from European logistical hubs, cold winters and long distances within the country increase emissions and material use. Additionally, while Finland as one of the Nordic countries has extensive social security and other rights-based services for all citizens, there are socially marginalised people and hereditary social problems. Moreover, according to Joutsenvirta, Hirvilammi, Ulvila, and Wilén (2016), ecological aspects are rarely considered in relation to social politics. Finally, there has been an increase in voices that call for the closing of national borders to immigrants. Such a position fits poorly with the need for international solidarity in the face of socio-ecological challenges and expected increase in migration.

With 18 inhabitants per square kilometre (Statistics Finland 2018), there exists plenty of land in Finland compared to Central Europe. However, the population is centred in the south of the country. Seventy-eight

per cent of the land is forest and ten per cent water. In general, the Ministry of the Environment manages land use policy in Finland. The Land Use and Building Act determines the general planning of land use (Ministry of the Environment 2018). Regional and local administration carries out the daily work related to land use and management. Nowadays, land use is based on private and state ownership (Tieteen termipankki 2018). This is based on a land reform dating back to the 18th century, when common land owned by villages was privatised (Talvitie 2013). Compared to many other countries, Finland has unique rights for everyone to access land. These so-called ‘everyman’s rights’ include the right to gather berries and mushrooms and walk on anyone’s land without permission, apart from the yard surrounding private houses. Yet land use can be limited since the landowner’s permission is needed to cut growing plants, hunt or cultivate the land. There are very few examples of unauthorised cultivation on a private owner’s land, while guerrilla gardening has been more common in urban public spaces. Squatting can be more common if a house is unattended in a remote area. However, in small villages everyone tends to know everyone so previously uninhabited houses with new, unknown guests tend to draw attention. In addition, securing a livelihood by nomadic hunting and gathering is not common as a lifestyle, and it can be met (partially) only among the indigenous Sami in the north of Finland. Relevant for this essay is the notion that in order to cultivate land, one needs to access it. The portion of Finnish land used for growing plants, grains and animal fodder or used as fallow

is 2 272 200 hectares (Natural Resources Institute Finland 2018a), which comprises 7% of land use. The number of farms is decreasing in Finland (Natural Resources Institute Finland 2018b). This is in line with previous research that highlights the pressure towards larger production units to ensure greater efficiency (Tonts & Horsley 2019). However, while government policies and support for farmers have an impact on land use, farmers’ perceptions affect land use as well (Raatikainen & Barron 2017).

Description of the research

In my ongoing study, I have been part of the Finnish Degrowth Movement (FDM), which gathers people from various geographical locations and demographics. I came across self-sufficiency when taking part in FDM as a researcher-activist, and since 2016 I have followed households and projects that strive for self-sufficiency among other related aims. In this short essay, I focus on empirical material generated about self-sufficiency when visiting meetings and self-sufficiency households. Two of the households are located in Southern Finland and two in Eastern Finland. In practice, I have volunteered to work for the households, which has allowed me to learn about their everyday practices and visited or will visit them periodically.

Although every studied household has a unique combination of self-sufficiency practices, it is quite common that they cultivate their own food, use firewood for heating and produce part or all of the energy with their own solar panels.

Mostly this is possible outside urban and residential areas, which have fewer regulations concerning how to live. Thus, self-sufficiency relates to being 'off the grid' and detaching partly from the centralised infrastructure. In order to acquire versatile knowledge on practices, I engage with sensory ethnography (Pink 2017), in which senses and recorded impressions are understood as sources of knowledge that is not only intellectual but embodied. Sensory ethnographies may be reported in different forms, such as written text or videos. In practice, I generate various materials during my fieldwork, such as written reflections and notes on observations, audio recordings, and digital images and videos. While all ethnography can be said to include such a variety of empirical materials and media, following discussions on sensory ethnography has encouraged me to experiment when doing research. This essay uses materials from some of my encounters: fieldnotes recording participant observations, photos and videos, interviews and secondary materials, such as newspaper articles, contents from email lists and social media posts.

Land and self-sufficiency households

Since the households taking part in my study grow their own food, access to land is crucial. While legislation and social norms dictate some of the pressure for private landownership, next I focus on the material and mundane needs of self-sufficiency households.

Accessing the land

While spending time with people I have encountered in different gatherings, I have heard different versions of the same story over and over again. Even though people have unique life situations, a certain pattern can be visible. Many people who I met in various meetings told me they came to realise that something does not *feel* right in their (Western) way of living, amplified by unquestioned institutional arrangements such as housing infrastructure, schooling and paid labour.

Self-sufficiency for many means intellectual freedom of thought. This could be possible with some form of paid labour or full-time employment, but many experience increasing dissatisfaction, questioning the role of their (professional) work in the face of challenges, living in urban settings, and/or living according to human-made cycles, i.e. not living according to the seasons. Some found their place by doing voluntary work at smallholdings; getting a nature-related profession; moving to a property or a community in the countryside or semi-rural areas; and/or cultivating their own food. This direction caused some distress since, if they had no access to land, they needed to decide where to settle and how to meet their needs, which at that point may have seemed quite basic compared to the social and cultural norms in Finland. Setting up a family with children has especially tended to increase the need to settle down and get a place of one's own. Overall, there is a need to lead a life that would be ecologically and socially more sound compared to the perceived

destruction caused by the minority of the world's wealthiest population.

In order to lead a life striving toward self-sufficiency, there seems to be a need for a place and time to do the work. In other words, one needs access to land. The households I visited have all spent money to buy the land they now inhabit. One of the households chose the location after spending some time on the land as tenants. Two other households chose the location because it was closer to relatives. Moreover, these two households mentioned the need to access some services, such as schools, hobbies, library and the post office. One of the households has no car so they needed a way to travel, with reasonable time and effort, to needed services and (part-time) waged work. In one household a decent proximity to friends was also a question. For another household, their regional identity prevented them looking from elsewhere. Two of the households were interested in buying more land around their property in order to determine what happens to the nearby forest, since the treatment of forest is unpredictable. One of the households had bad experiences with unnotified clear-cutting. However, both households had experienced troubles in acquiring more land because of reluctant private sellers.

Cultivating the land

“It is completely different to grow food to depend on throughout the year before the next harvest compared to growing food as a hobby to last until it's gone and then buy the rest after

that.” (A member of a household striving toward self-sufficiency in Southern Finland)

This statement taken from fieldnotes has many implications for choices that are made in households striving toward self-sufficiency. Anyone who has tried to grow food knows how a good harvest is determined by many factors, such as seeds, weather, irrigation, pests and nutrients. Especially for the latter, the quality of the soil makes all the difference. One can improve the soil, for instance, by using nutritious earth from compost, but optimally this is not done in one growing season. Working the soil means learning by testing. Thus, working the soil and yielding a harvest means committing to the land over time.

There is a need to accumulate knowledge and skills concerning soil, weather and other determinants affecting growing one's own food. Unless one has certain skills, it is difficult to strive toward self-sufficiency. Skills needed for self-sufficiency are embodied. For instance, improving the soil is a matter of the soil's touch and feel and tasting what is harvested. Skills are honed through testing and getting embodied feedback on results and failures. Thus, one needs time to acquire feedback and more skills. Time to learn new skills competes with other needs for time, such as paid labour. If one has financial stability, there is a possibility to trial and learn or even hire someone, but the latter seems to go against what is expected. In the case of meagre income, expenses need to be cut. This is reflected in the way property is maintained. In addition, one's personal

appearance might not be a priority if the majority of the time is spent on working the land and soiling clothes.

Implications of self-sufficiency

The members of the households I visited reported that the experienced expectations regarding capitalistic understandings of work, enterprise, transactions, property and finance create some dissonance in their everyday lives. In other words, there are implications of running a self-sufficient household. Even when the members of the household are not politically active, they have stories of instances when their lifestyle has made other people uncomfortable or hostile. Their choices about, for instance, waged work and diet may collide with expectations derived from institutions or social norms. Thus, in addition to physical labour – in the garden, fixing the property – they are involved with emotional labour – how to lead a life according to their own wishes. This is visible in everyday situations when they negotiate with others.

Finally, they might engage with projects that aim to change existing institutions. However, at the time of the visits, none of the households were active in projects directly related to land ownership. One of the households was familiar with an emerging project rethinking land ownership in Finland. The project focuses on establishing a land trust that would accept farmland as donations and find long-term non-paying tenants to cultivate and live off the land. The slogan promises that one can ‘dedicate oneself to the land without owning it.’ The organisers aim to register

the trust during 2019, but many questions remain open.

Conclusions

Although how households strive for self-sufficiency may look simple, even modest without many of the contemporary comforts, it would not be possible without an initial monetary investment to acquire land. For the households I have visited, buying land seemed to be the only viable choice for striving toward self-sufficiency because of their mundane needs. Some of these needs mapped above could be met as a tenant, while others cannot because the land owner makes the decisions and not the tenant.

Overall, it seems to be hard to completely rid oneself of owning land because of the institutional arrangements beyond one’s immediate influence. Moreover, land ownership is attached to capitalist understandings of property, which again emphasises the accumulation of wealth. Therefore, projects exploring other ways of organising land ownership are important. First, during my fieldwork I have encountered families that state they cannot afford to get their own place. Experiments with commoning land ownership are important in order to widen the possibility for who could strive for self-sufficiency in Finland. Yet they also need to consider households’ mundane needs, such as the ones mapped above – i.e. access to land that matches soil preferences, is close to services and important social relations, as well as allows knowledge accumulation in a household.

Second, commoning land ownership, for example in the form of land trusts, can have a more holistic understanding of land when they emphasise the need to take care of the land and soil (Houde 2018). Such regenerative care work with land or soil is also at the core of self-sufficient living since soil is what yields food. Finally, it should be mentioned that there are also critical voices of self-sufficiency as a lifestyle. In Finland, some fear that self-sufficiency means going back to the 1950s in terms of household wealth and overall social order. Those who lived then highlight that many things were different in agrarian societies compared to contemporary lifestyles. This is echoed by Quilley (2013, 277) who argues that '[i]t cannot be assumed that liberal-democratic and cosmopolitan institutions, attitudes, and values can be transposed'. Therefore, I join the call for 'a view toward the future of labor: The right to do one's own work instead of a mandate for growth' (von Weizsäcker & von Weizsäcker 1979 according to Mölders *et al.* 2014, 24). Such freedom, also from the need for waged work in order to acquire land, could serve the transition toward more sustainable futures.

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