

From "Weak" to "Strong" Multifunctionality? – A Research Framework for Assessing Farm-level Multifunctional Pathways in the UK and Germany

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Abstract

The aim of this contribution to the discussion of Anglo-German agricultural and rural themes is to analyze conceptually issues surrounding multifunctional agricultural pathways in the UK and Germany, and to propose a framework for closer investigation of multifunctional agriculture in the two countries. First, we will discuss recent debates on the conceptualization of what "multifunctional agriculture" means, especially with a view towards using a "normative" view of multifunctionality. We will then discuss similarities and differences in multifunctional pathways between the UK and Germany. The chapter concludes with a discussion of key steps necessary for the development of a comparative study on multifunctional quality in the UK and Germany, arguing that any assessment of multifunctional agriculture needs adoption of "multifunctional" research methodologies.

1 Conceptualizing multifunctional agriculture

The debate surrounding multifunctionality continues to dominate academic and policy debates in the rural field (see MANDER et al. eds. 2007; WILSON 2008a and 2008b; 2009, for recent interventions). In recent years, this has assumed ever greater importance as global agriculture is facing renewed productivist pressures based on rising demand for agricultural commodities in emerging markets (especially China and India) and associated rises in commodity prices (e.g. doubling of wheat price in 2007), and because the planting of crops for biofuel is increasingly challenging global food production spaces (LANG and HEASMAN 2004; BREUER and HOLM-MÜLLER 2006). This is also beginning to have repercussions for farm trajectories in the UK and Germany, where farms that had begun a process of disconnection from the productivist regime are re-intensifying production (WILSON 2007; DÜNCKMANN 2007). This suggests a kaleidoscope of farm transitional pathways in both countries. While some farmers have continued with a productivist (or even super-productivist; cf. HALFACREE 1997) strategy, others have opted for pathways closer to the non-productivist end of the decision-making spectrum including the commoditization of the countryside and a re-evaluation of the meaning of "farming" itself (MARSDEN 2003; LOIBL 2007). It is this wide spectrum of decision-making opportunities open to farmers that is referred to as the "multifunctional" spectrum of decision-making (HOLLANDER 2004; HOLMES 2006; WILSON 2007 and 2008a).

The last twenty years or so have seen the use of the notion of "multifunctional agriculture" in a wide variety of contexts, including economic approaches that focus on "externality problems" (e.g. VATN 2002; VAN HUYLENBROEK and DURAND eds. 2003), policy-based approaches that see the policy environment as a key driver for multifunctionality (e.g. POTTER and BURNEY 2002; HOLLANDER 2004; POTTER and TILZEY 2007), and "holistic" approaches that also incorporate the strengthening of social, economic and environmental capital and changing societal perceptions of farming as key components of multifunctionality (e.g. MARSDEN 2003; CLARK 2005). Yet, although multifunctionality has been much debated, it is remarkably poorly researched in terms of decisions, behaviour and intentions of farmers and those stakeholders who influence farming decisions at the grassroots level (WILSON 2007 and 2008a). This is particularly surprising as it is at the farm level that the most *direct* expression of multifunctional action and thought can be found (CLARK 2005). In addition, there are only few studies that have used a comparative approach within Europe to analyse possible differences in multifunctionality pathways in different countries of the EU (e.g. VAN HUYLENBROEK and DURAND eds. 2003; EU-funded MULTAGRI project). BULLER (2005: ii), therefore, suggested that "what is missing is a more holistic evaluative framework for assessing the broader multifunctional contribution of agriculture". This critique is reflected in recent calls for a more *normative* evaluation of multifunctionality that may be applicable in various EU contexts (e.g. VAN HUYLENBROEK and DURAND eds. 2003). The recently suggested normative view of multifunctionality as a complex transition within a multifunctionality *spectrum* bounded by *productivist* and *non-productivist* action and thought provides a particularly useful conceptual

framework that can be used in any European context to analyse empirically different multifunctional trajectories of rural districts (HOLLANDER 2004; HOLMES 2006; WILSON 2001 and 2007). This view of multifunctionality enables a normative conceptualization of *weak*, *moderate* and *strong multifunctionality* pathways for individual farm-level transitions concerning the intensity of multifunctional farming strategies.

2 A normative view of multifunctionality?

The normative view argues that strong multifunctionality is the "best" type of multifunctionality with the best social, economic, moral and environmental *quality* (see also HOLMES 2006). The key drivers of *strong multifunctionality* are seen here as positively characterized by: high environmental sustainability (Wilson 2007); low farming intensity and productivity (EVANS et al. 2002; PRETTY 2002); "deep" diversification (KNICKEL et al. 2004); short food chains and high(er) food quality (MARSDEN 2003; GOODMAN 2004); weak integration into the global capitalist market (GOODMAN and WATTS 1997; HOLLANDER 2004; MCCARTHY 2005; WILSON 2001 and 2007); revaluation of existing farm household knowledge (BURTON and WILSON 2006); new perceptions of farming that go well beyond productivist food and fibre production (CLARK 2005); local and regional embeddedness (strong governance structures) (PRETTY 2002; CLARK 2005; WILSON 2007). Weak multifunctionality, meanwhile, can be conceptualized as the spectral opposite of above characteristics (e.g. low environmental sustainability, high farming intensity [productivism], shallow or no diversification, long food chains and poor food quality, agricultural processes driven largely by profit-driven capitalist processes, etc.).

Inevitably, normative assumptions about "good" and "bad" or "strong" and "weak" agricultural pathways are linked to subjective assumptions about the "quality" of a system and are, therefore, open to criticism. Indeed, any discussion on "quality" needs to acknowledge the subjective nature of the term. As PIRSIG (1974) argued, the notion of quality is relational and, therefore, always subjective – in other words, different individuals and stakeholder groups will view "quality" in different ways. Finding a common definition of the quality of an object or process (i.e. "weak" or "strong" multifunctionality) is, therefore, almost impossible. From an ontological perspective, "quality" simply means a system of properties that make a thing or a process what it is and which make it different from other things or processes. Here, we will be concerned with qualities associated with what could be seen as "good" or "bad" rural pathways – in other words, we will adopt an explicitly normative view about what could be seen as an "ideal" rural system (see also PARNWELL 2007).

A few points need to be considered when conceptualizing "strong" and "weak" multifunctionality. First, any normative assessment of multifunctional "quality" is imbued with pitfalls linked to cultural preferences about "good" or "bad" rural development pathways. Although our UK-German comparison below will attempt to adopt an objective stance with

regard to the identification of the "ingredients" for strong multifunctional quality, inevitably some of the indicators discussed here will not necessarily be applicable in all rural community settings. In addition, what may be strong multifunctionality for an individual may not be good for the household and possibly even less so for the rural community.

Second, a particularly problematic issue – conceptually as well as morally – is the need to acknowledge that strongly multifunctional systems, despite all their positive attributes regarding community resilience based on strong economic, social and environmental capital, may not be able to feed a growing world population (see WILSON's 2008a notion of "zero-sum-game" in global multifunctionality transitions). The key, therefore, is not to reify certain multifunctional "quality systems" over others. Despite this caveat, certain systems – such as super-productivist rural systems evident in both the UK and Germany – are often associated with weak multifunctional quality in which social and environmental capital has been particularly eroded.

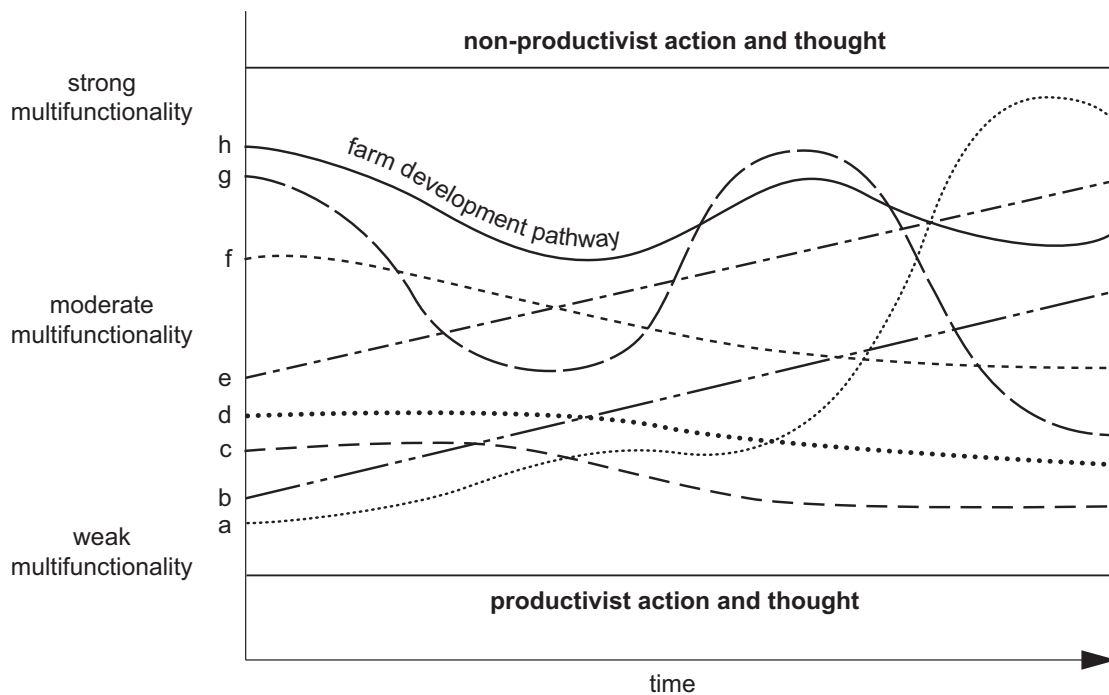
Third, normative judgments about "good" or "bad" multifunctionality can form important baselines for policy action, as discussed below. Yet, the situation is complicated by the fact that multifunctionality means different things to different people – in other words, a complex geography of policy needs with regard to harnessing multifunctional quality is emerging. For many, multifunctionality is largely a response to poverty, where only multiple strategies enable rural households and communities to survive (PARNWELL 2007). Multifunctionality in this context can, therefore, be interpreted as a form of "resistance" and coping strategy (MC CARTHY 2005), where increasing *economic capital* is the ultimate goal in the first instance. For many rural communities in the global North, often characterized by the erosion of *social* and *environmental* capital, meanwhile, policies have to increasingly focus on social and environmental aspects of community survival.

Fourth, any framework attempting to identify the characteristics of multifunctional quality based on a normative framework needs to acknowledge the importance of a researcher's positionality and cultural embeddedness when making value judgments about rural change. A more reflexive approach will have implications for our construction of knowledge, in particular related to agricultural sciences, rural studies and cognate sub-disciplines such as human geography (WILSON 2008b) – issues that are amply evident throughout this publication. Approaching multifunctionality from a mono-dimensional and mono-causal perspective is likely to generate simplistic evaluations of, and solutions for, the challenge of raising multifunctional quality. Echoing DEMERITT's (2009) recent call, only through a *multi-disciplinary* approach will we be able to fully understand multifunctional pathways and drive forward constructive agendas for the future (see discussion of methodology below). As strong multifunctional quality may mean a relative withdrawal of productivist agriculture, it is evident that "classical" – often technocentric – agricultural science approaches towards understanding rural change may be less relevant in

future. As a result, other disciplinary approaches rooted, for example, in rural studies, sociology, psychology, environmental sciences or human geography may take on a more important role. In particular, the use of so-called "expert knowledges" to assess multifunctional quality may need to be questioned at all scales, and methodologies involving both "experts" and "non-experts" may assume greater importance (WILSON 2008b). Just as the notion of strong multifunctional quality means a blurring of the boundaries between "traditional" sectors in rural areas (such as agriculture) and "new" activities (such as the location of high-tech industries in rural settings), the possible transition towards strong multifunctional quality concurrently necessitates a readjustment in the way academics and scientists will research rural-level transitions in the future. This has important repercussions for the selection of appropriate methodologies to assess multifunctional quality, and it is evident that any investigation of multifunctional quality requires the use of "multifunctional" methodologies (see below). As the 3rd Anglo-German Rural Geographers' Meeting has shown (see introductory chapter), rural geography, at the interface between the natural and social sciences (DEMERRITT 2009), may emerge as an ideal disciplinary base for such an analysis.

As Figure 1 shows, the normative view of multifunctionality allows for the juxtaposition of temporal and spatial pathways of agricultural decision-making which, in turn, can be used to explain individual farm development pathways. Building on VAN DER PLOEG'S (2003) notion of different "farming styles", the figure shows that farm development pathways can span the entire multifunctionality spectrum (e.g. farm "a"). It would be rare for a farm to stay at the same level for a long time period. Although changes may be small (e.g. farms "d" or "f"), subtle changes in the position of a farm in the multifunctionality spectrum will *always* occur, based on changing personal, farm-level or external circumstances (e.g. MEERT et al. 2005). Most *agri-businesses*, for example, are likely to be located towards the weak end of the multifunctionality spectrum due to their profit-maximizing productivist orientation (FRESHWATER 2002; WALFORD 2003). However, agri-businesses may also embark on moderate or even strong multifunctionality pathways with *some* of their farm decisions (VAN DER PLOEG and ROEP 2003; MARSDEN 2003). *Lifestyle or hobby farms*, meanwhile, may be most closely linked to the non-productivist end of the spectrum (HOLLOWAY 2002; MATHER et al. 2006). As these farmers adopt farming as a hobby and do not rely on the sale of food and fibre for economic survival, they can focus on agricultural land as a *consumption* good rather than as a *production* asset (BOHNET et al. 2003). Yet, hobby farming should not be over-romanticized as the "most" strongly multifunctional farm type, as they may also straddle moderate multifunctionality pathways, especially as these farmers are often urbanites who have not been brought up in the region where they bought their farm (the strong multifunctionality dimension of "local embeddedness" may, therefore, be relatively weak).

Figure 1
Multifunctional farm-level transitional trajectories

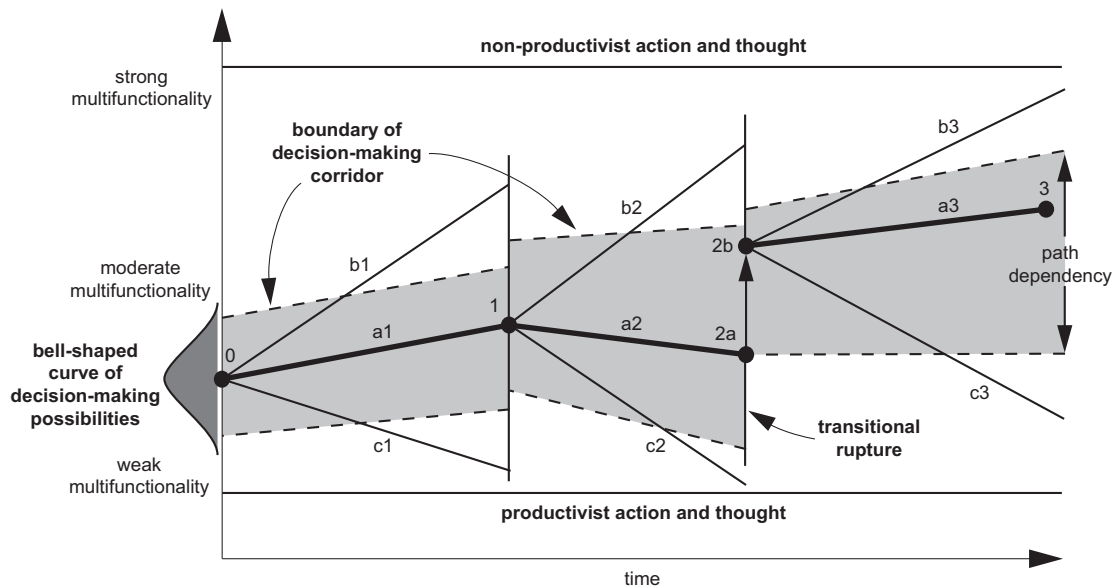


Source: WILSON 2007, 284

Drawing on concepts of complexity theory (O'SULLIVAN 2004) and evolutionary economic geography, the concept of *path dependency* is central to the conceptualization of farm level transitional trajectories (Figure 2). Path dependency relates to both the starting position of a given system and its history and geography. The probability of a system (be it a farm, a region, or whole economic sector) making an extreme change away from its starting point is, probabilistically, low (bell-shaped curve of decision-making possibilities and low probability of pathways b1-b3 and c1-c3 in Figure 2). Thus, when analyzing the transitional trajectories of farms inside the multifunctionality spectrum, farmer's decisions are not only shaped by cultural framing (THRIFT 1999). Since the history of preceding decision-making trajectories remains inscribed in the "memory" of the farm, the range of possible future trajectories at a given time (i.e. from nodal points 0-3 in Figure 2) is constrained by a 'decision-making corridor'. The boundaries of this corridor may widen over time as the influence of system memory decreases and new constraints and opportunities act as cumulative new drivers. In some instances (e.g. farm sold; land use changes to activities beyond agriculture) immediate factors may lead to a fundamental rupture in the transitory trajectory and shape of the decision-making corridor (shift from nodal point 2a to 2b in Figure 2). However, path dependency at this point is still partly defined by characteristics (and system memory) of the farm itself. Thus, "geography matters" as the choice of strong multifunctionality pathways may not be entirely dependent upon the farm decision-maker but on the locational multifunctionality potential of the farm. In addition, individual farm development pathways also depend on structural factors: first, on path dependency characteristics of the whole

communal, regional and national context in which farmers' activities are embedded (MARSDEN 2003) and, second, on the "thickness" and co-evolution of the locally-specific institutional framework whose drivers (e.g. extension services, street level bureaucrats, research institutes) are tied together with the farmers into regional networks of collective learning.

Figure 2
Transitional shifts, decision-making corridors and transitional ruptures



Source: WILSON 2007, 288

Despite of the multitude of internal and external drivers influencing individual (and collective) agricultural pathways, recent studies nonetheless highlight that for many farmers (at least in the European Union), the boundaries of transitional corridors may be getting narrower (MARSDEN 2003; WILSON 2007, 2008a and 2008b). This is linked to forces often beyond the control of farmers such as climate change (although this may also offer additional opportunities in some farming regions), the impact of global policy compacts such as agreements on tariffs and trade by the World Trade Organization (POTTER and BURNEY 2002), and, most recently, the impact of the global economic recession which may lead to a productivist "backlash" with a concurrent narrowing of non-productivist opportunities for many farmers.

3 Multifunctional pathways in the UK and Germany: convergence or divergence?

The normative framework of multifunctionality can provide a conceptual framework for the empirical assessment of multifunctional quality of any agricultural/rural region. In the context of the general Anglo-German rural theme explored in this book, the UK and Germany would be particularly appropriate for a comparative study because of

- 1) similar endogenous (e.g. incentives for extensification) and exogenous policy pressures (e.g. through the CAP and the WTO) forcing farmers to rethink farm management strategies) (DÜNCKMANN 2004a; POTTER and TILZEY 2007);
- 2) a wide spectrum of productivist and non-productivist pathways available to farmers in both countries (WILSON 2008a);
- 3) complex institutional and actor networks within which farmers are embedded (CLARK 2005; FEINDT and LANGE 2007);
- 4) a similar loss of farming's relative position and importance within wider society (WINTER 1996; WILSON and WILSON 2001).

Any comparison between German and British agricultural pathways needs to take into account the similarities and dissimilarities regarding the national conditions of rural development in general and of farming in particular. Germany and Great Britain can both be described as postmodern societies in which counterurbanization and rural restructuring fundamentally shaped the development of rural areas during the last decades (LASCHEWSKI 2002; MARSDEN 2003; WOODS 2005). However, when looking closely at the political, economic, and socio-cultural conditions under which farmers and other rural actors have to make their decisions, there exist fundamental differences concerning the system of policy making and regional planning, the agricultural policy, the regional dynamic of economic and demographic change, or the cultural meaning of rurality and farming.

When comparing the national structures of state authority, it is important to highlight that, in contrast to Britain, Germany is a federal state and hence has a distinctly decentralized system of planning with a nested system of different layers of political decision making. Alongside the national government, the federal states (*Bundesländer*) and the municipalities (*Gemeinden*) are equally important. It is the duty of the central government, first of all, to define the general guidelines of policy. Recently the German Federal Office for Building and Regional Planning laid out the general principles of the future spatial development in the whole Federal Republic of Germany (BMVBS 2006). Under the headline called "Preserving Resources, Designing Cultural Landscapes" the report identified two general types of rural areas: those regions suitable for arable agriculture and the intensive production of food and fibre as well as those regions with a potential for extensive agriculture and tourism. This differentiation resembles the distinction between productivist or strongly multifunctional and post-productivist or weakly multifunctional landscapes (Wilson 2001). It remains to be seen, how this general principle of spatial development will be translated into actual guidelines for planning. However, if any tangible consequences for regional development will result from this directive they will have important effects on the spatial differentiation of multifunctional pathways of farms.

The federal states possess a large part of the competence to decide about issues of spatial and environmental planning or social policy, as well as having the capacity to initiate own programs of regional development.