Dr.polit. Thesis, Department of Geography, NTNU, Trondheim. 286 pp.

Gunhild Setten’s thesis titled ‘Farmer and Landscape. Histories of nature, practice, and morality in the province of Jaeren’, is divided into 10 chapters. The introduction (chapter 1), presents the general framework for the study and formulates the guiding research questions. Chapter 2 focuses on the more recent history of agricultural politics in Norway, whereas chapter 3 deals with the specific past of farming in three coastal municipalities (central Låg-Jaeren), in the province of Rogaland in south-western Norway. Chapter 4 introduces the farmers and their views on the ongoing socio-environmental changes in agricultural practices and politics. This part of the thesis is based on the interviews conducted with 30 farmers during the field work. Chapters 5-8 further develop the geographical theoretical perspectives on nature, landscape, and morality. Chapter 9 draws the views of the farmers together and broadly connects them to the scope of agricultural politics. Finally, chapter 10 is devoted to methodological reflection upon the difficulties in studying landscapes ‘from below’, that is: from inside the daily life of the farmers.

The thesis grows into an extensive excursion into the natures and landscapes of the Jaeren farmers, widely informed by the more recent conceptual development within human geography. Setten describes the farmers as the (geohistorical) actors who have concretely ‘scaped’ the marginal coastal land into a fertile and profitable landscape. According to her, this historical success even grew into an exemplary model of agricultural modernisation in Norway. However, since the 1960s, this success model, including the mentality of progress behind it, was gradually challenged by ecological concerns from outside the circles of farmers. In the 1980s, moreover, ecological worries were accompanied with demands of cultural landscape conservation. The progressive Jaeren mentality faced the programmes of ecological and aesthetic conservation, and this change in societal values thoroughly politicised the agrarian natures and landscapes. The thesis describes well the confusion among the farmers coping with the administration that asks them to take care of ecological values and aim at cultural landscape production, instead of agricultural food production. The analysis of this confusion is perhaps the most original and stimulating part of the thesis.

Theoretically, Gunhild Setten is admirably well integrated in the latest geographical debates on landscapes, natures, and moral issues, and this is also confirmed by several related articles written by Setten and published by internationally distinguished journals during the recent years. This kind of active internationalisation is undoubtedly due to the innovative research milieu provided by the key advisors of the research in Trondheim. The view on landscapes in the thesis is well informed by the latest ‘turns’ toward substantial, practical, and embodied dimensions of landscape research, and from this background Setten develops an approach that is
informed by Nordic (and Norwegian) ‘land traditions’ and environmental concerns. The elaboration of ‘nature’ is also well grounded in the thesis and gains a particular attractiveness as related to the conceptualisation of time. The chapter titled ‘Naturen som tid - tiden som natur’, presents a creative look towards multilayered time-spaces of geography. Finally, the sensitivity to moral issues guides the researcher towards a deeper understanding of Nordic/Norwegian ‘land ethics’. The emphasis of moral issues helps the researcher, and the reader, to understand the role of the embodied and silent ways of moral knowing (den tause, kroppsliggjorte kunnskapen) among the Jaeren farmers. This emphasis is indeed an original extension to the dominating lines of thought within the fields of moral geography.

The strengths of the thesis are hence easy to identify. The dissertation is an ambitious piece of human geography and it covers a wide area of interrelated challenges, theoretically, methodologically, and empirically. This ‘wideness’ has also resulted in some weaknesses.

First, the overall theoretical approach formulated by Gunhild Setten, while profoundly linked to the major narrations on Western views on nature, landscape, and morality (originating from the ancient Greek), occasionally seems to shadow the local northern layers of land and life. In places, the reader cannot avoid the impression that the conceptual framework constructed loses the contact to the daily life of the local farmers. Hence, even though the explicit aim for Setten is to develop a view from below, from within the farmers life worlds, the overall approach occasionally emerges as too broad and extensive for the purpose of identifying the intensity of the local forms of life. The explicate perspective diminishes the farmers into interviewees, or study objects, who seek answers to questions (on landscapes, nature views, etc) that are at bottom alien to them. In other words, the ‘dress’ selected, or sewed, by Setten turns as if too large for the ‘body’ it is planned to cover. Consequently, the documented dialogue between the Jaeren farmers and the Western etymological past appears slightly unfair, and this asymmetry is also reflected in the composition of the thesis (see below). Setten aims at tracing the perceptions of nature and landscape that are loaded with messages about what is right or wrong, good or bad, natural or unnatural -- but she does not reflect enough upon the centrality of such perceptual categories in a Jaeren context. The question remains unanswered: how good, or how natural a concept is ‘nature’ (or ‘landscape’) in the daily life of the communities in Jaeren.

The problem of theoretical ‘overdevelopment’ surfaces during the brief sketching of historical geography of morality and ethics (p. 167-188), too, which again starts from the ancient Greek but -- in a few pages -- reaches the ideals of discursive communication based on Jürgen Habermas. The ‘long bridges’ constructed are fascinating as such but leave some doubt about their relevance in connection to this case study. The conclusion associating moral awareness with discursive communities is convincing and theoretically important but gives no help in the search for the specific embodied and silent ways of knowing in south-western Norway. The more focused utilisation of theoretical perspectives would inevitably have given the Jaeren farmers more space to breath in their own land- and lifescapes.
Second, for some reason Setten has preferred to locate the discussion about her own position (at the interface between local farm life and academic geography) in the final section of the dissertation. The order of the chapters is surprising in this sense. Eventually, however, the solution seems to function rather well, and the last chapter serves as a post-research reflection upon the personal experiences in conducting such research. The final part of the thesis thus provides answers to several of the ethical and methodological questions (on the researchers own stance) surfacing during reading. Disappointedly, one of those questions that receives only a fragmentary answering is the question of researchers own emeddedness to the issues and the area studied. Gunhild Setten asks, that where does my histories come from -- Hvor kommer mine historier fra? (p. 244) -- but hardly answers the question, as if been too shy to do it, or perhaps, afraid of revealing too much of her personal background in the pages of the thesis.

The result is slightly unsatisfactory and leaves the reader alone with her/his own confusion: the thesis broadly paints a Norwegian rural political landscape with two colours; the black one draws the contours of the administration whereas the white one represents the local people and their communities. The setting undoubtedly mirrors the contested politicisation of nature and landscapes in Norway but leaves some worries for the readers (at least for those from outside Norway) on the justification of such a dualistic picturing. Finally, the question is, how much the researcher has committed herself to the local communities she is studying and, at the same time, tended to see the administration as the threatening ‘other’ -- to be treated as an invader from the outside. Methodological and ethical work on ethnographic reflection, committedness, thirddspaces (between academia and activism), and people’s geography have progressed well during the last decades, and a closer examination of these debates could have helped the researcher to explicate more openly her subject position and involvement with the issues studied.

The critical remarks above have no deeper influence on the general inspiring composition of the thesis. It is wide in scope and well articulated -- both theoretically and empirically. In addition, some sections can be read as innovative remarks and guidelines for the paradigmatic development in human geography. This is especially true in the excursions into the moral terrains of community remembering but also in connection to the multilayered timescapes of geographical thinking. In fact, the formulation of the past, as existing in a multilayered way in our present circles of land and life, can be seen as the guiding principle for reading Gunhild Setten’s thesis (see especially pp. 195-205). The remark, or conclusion, might even serve as a message for a broader audience, beyond the circles of human geographers: The current debates on global-local sustainability (from Rio de Janeiro to Johannesburg) are much based on the speculative projections of well-being for the future generations but not much attention has been paid to the generations already past. The past, however, is present here and now, and can also guide us towards sustainable futures, as Gunhld Setten convincingly underlines in her thesis.
Broadly, the central message of the thesis is well developed and articulated, and it contains several theoretical innovations. The three members of the evaluation committee therefore recommend that the thesis is put forward for public defence.

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