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Resurgent back-to-the-land and the cultivation of a renewed countryside

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Abstract

In connection to concerns about, for example, climate change, peak oil, pandemics and the depopulation of many rural areas, there has been a counter-migration from urban to rural areas in past decades. An important part of this counter-migration is the so-called 'back-to-the-land' migration of former urban residents who move to rural areas and adopt primarily agrarian lifestyles. Through a review of 48 migration letters in which migrants write about their experiences of moving from urban to rural areas to commence agriculture, this article explores the underlying ideals and agricultural practices of the back-to-land phenomena and discusses what significance this form of agricultural migration may have for understanding broader sustainability transformations and contemporary rural change. Important questions concern: What kinds of motives, practices and ideals underpin back-to-the-land migration? What relevance does "back-to-the-land" have for how we comprehend rurality and how the current food landscape is changing? Based on the letter reviews, this article illuminates four interconnected themes with regard to back-to-the-landers practices and ideals. Back-to-the-land as (i) rebelling against payroll work and

meaningless lives in the cities, (ii) reinvention and retrotopia, (iii) reconnecting with nature and cultivating resilient alternatives and (iv) resistance and silent revolution. The article argues that the current back-to-land migration contributes to the construction of a renewed rurality—a reinvented form of rurality—that are adapted to suit both present and future needs in a world that is perceived as becoming more unruly. The article further suggests that, although back-to-the-land migration may not yet have any significant material implications on the current food system, the ideals and practices the back-to-the-landers profess, provide an important imaginary of how we can comprehend an alternative 'rurality' that reconnect people, land and food in more sustainable ways, through, for example, benign ways of practising agriculture and organising the food system. In this light, the current back-to-the-land phenomena can be seen as a particular form of sustainability migration of voluntary peasantry that is based on retrotopian ideals of a rural past that is paired with progressive sustainability practices of the present.

KEYWORDS
back-to-the-land, renewed rurality, retrotopia, rural sustainability, new peasantry, urban rural migration

INTRODUCTION

Back-to-the-land migration is back! In Sweden, the increase in back-to-the-land migration can be supported through the following brief panoramic review, which together point to the existence of a new 'wave' of back-to-the-land migration. For example, the number of small holdings (0—2 hectares) has increased in recent years according to official statistics (Swedish Board of Agriculture, 2017, 2020)[1] and the demand for abandoned farms and houses in the countryside has increased during the past decade according to statistics from Sweden's largest property portal (Hemnet, 2014). Furthermore, since 2013, there are more people moving into sparsely populated municipalities than moving out according to Swedish official statistics[2] (SCB, 2014, 2021). Paralleling these demographic trends, courses in self-sufficiency and smallholding have proliferated at Swedish folk high schools,[3] and in books shops, there now exists separate bookshelves that handle different topics related to self-sufficient farming. The growing interest in smallholding agriculture and self-sufficiency practices is also evidenced in the upswing of people engaged in the network of World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms (WWOOF, 2020) where

volunteers get the opportunity to spend time and work on an organic farm to learn what it is like and how it works. There have also been a number of popular reality TV shows about people who move to the countryside to practice self-sufficiency farming.[4] Similar tendencies of an upswing in back-to-land migration have also been reported in Italy (Wilbur, 2013, 2014a, 2014b), Greece (Benessaiah, 2018), Spain (Calvário, 2017), Canada (Ngo & Brklacich, 2014), UK (Halfacree, 2006, 2007a, 2007b, 2008; Halfacree & Rivera, 2012) and Finland (Backa, 2018).

Back-to-the-land migration is poorly researched in contrast to the body of work on, for example, more conventional counter-urbanisation and lifestyle migration taking place in the vicinity of towns and cities. In Sweden, several studies have examined urban to rural migration (e.g., Agnidakis, 2013; Amcoff, 2020; Bjerke & Mellander, 2017; Eimermann et al., 2020; Niedomysl & Amcoff, 2011), but these studies primarily focus on general population redistribution rather on migration patterns connected to agriculture. Common reasons for moving to the countryside are summarised in terms of environmental factors, improved housing standards, general lifestyle factors and downshifting ideals (ibid) and recently also by the coronavirus pandemic. The practices that the back-to-the-land migrants engage in and the ideals that these migrants profess are important to study since they may reveal not just important motives behind migrants' decisions to move but also new understandings of how the contemporary rural food landscape is changing both materially and discursively. This article explores the underlying ideals and agricultural practices of the back-to-land phenomena and discusses what significance this form of agricultural migration may have for understanding rural change, drawing on Bauman's (2017) concept of retrotopia and van der Ploeg's (2010, 2014, 2018, 2020) concept of the new peasantry. Important questions concern: What kinds of motives, practices and ideals underpin back-to-the-land migration? What relevance does 'back-to-the-land' have for how we comprehend rurality and how the current food landscape is changing?

According to Bauman (2017), we live in a time that seems to be in love with the past, a past where life is portrayed as simpler, the roles clearer and the world more homogeneous. Bauman calls these kinds of expressions of longing for the past, retrotopia, a utopia placed in the past, which serves as a protection against an unmanageable, unruly present and a frightening future. In this regard, retrotopia is both archaeological and forward-looking, in the sense that it involves the reconstruction of pieces from the past in combination with alternative ideas of how society can be organised for the future. Bauman's argument on retrotopia centres on the emancipation of power from a territory, as a result of which nation states with increasingly permeable borders have difficulties fulfilling their traditional tasks. This political instability, has according to Bauman, redirected the utopian desires towards the space of collective memory, in which people take shelter in the past. Bauman suggests that retrotopian thinking is largely a result of a failure to develop a cosmopolitan consciousness, despite living in a cosmopolitan world. Part of this rather pessimistic retrotopian view, as will be further elaborated, can be challenged by the current back-to-the-land ideals and practices. While van der Ploeg's seminal work on the new peasantry (e.g., see van der Ploeg, 2010, 2014, 2018) builds on a broad range of smallholder farmers, this study particularly concerns smallholders from primarily non-agrarian backgrounds that voluntarily have moved from urban to rural areas to cultivate the land and adopt a peasant like condition. In this endeavour, as will be further elaborated, particular sustainability ideals and agricultural practices of the past are professed.

The article is structured as follows. First, the article provides a brief literature review on the topic, including a brief background to the current back-to-the-land phenomena in Sweden and a methods and data collection section. Second, the article describes and analyses the ideals and practices that underpin back-to-land migration through an assessment of 48 migration letters

where back-to-landers write about their experiences of practising 'back-to-the-land'. Against this backdrop, the article concludes by providing a synthesis of the various ideals and practices that back-to-the-land migration involved in and discusses what significance this particular form of livelihood migration may have for how we comprehend the contemporary countryside and how the current rural food landscape is changing.

BACKGROUND TO BACK-TO-THE-LAND

Back-to-the-land has been a well-established social phenomenon across the global North since the 1970s but has received little attention in academic research (except in the US). The term was popularised and the practice promoted by the activist Bolton Hall in the US at the beginning of the 20th century, who wrote several books and articles on the subject (Hall, 2020[1907]). The phenomenon has, however, been around for much longer and has waxed and waned throughout history. The 1970s saw yet another wave of back-to-the-land migration, which was coupled with the peace and the environmental movement where thousands of mainly young Americans and Europeans reversed the urbanisation trend and migrated from the city to the countryside to live an alternative lifestyle as opposed to that of the city (Jacob, 1997, 2003). They set out to construct a different kind of life from their parents, based on ideals and practices of smallholding farming and homesteading practices.

The type of migration discussed in this study should not be mixed up with labour migration in agriculture, nor should it be confused with the migration of a more economically compelling nature, such as the back-to-the-land migration that has occurred during different periods in connection with, for example, the crumble of the Roman Empire, the collapse of the Soviet Union or Greece's recent economic problems (see Gkartzios, 2013). The kind of back-to-the-land migration that is in focus in this article concerns people from primarily non-agrarian backgrounds that voluntarily move from urban areas to rural areas to cultivate the land and adopt an agrarian and rural lifestyle often based on principles of self-sufficiency. It can be seen as a form of ideologically oriented sustainability lifestyle migration as opposed to other forms of urban-rural migration that may be more of a more compulsory nature (e.g., labour migration).

Earlier studies on back-to-the-landers have predominantly been focusing on the developments in North America (Belasco, 1989; Brown, 2011; Jacob, 1997). The studies from the US are mainly historical records of the self-sufficiency movement (agrarianism) from the early 19th century to the hippie movements in the 1960s/1970s (ibid). Some of the studies also provide detailed typologies on who back-to-the-landers are, based on occupation and self-sufficiency ratios (e.g., Jacob, 1997). Some of the research on the contemporary back-to-the-landers has focused on the migration itself to understand migration patterns and why people are moving to the countryside (Wilbur, 2013). Halfacree's (2006, 2007a, 2007b, 2008) and Halfacree's and Rivera's (2012) studies of counter-urbanisation in the UK, which includes back-to-the-land migration, argue that back-to-the-landers can be positioned at the margins of a broader counter-urbanisation trend. Halfarcree (2006) notes a resurgence of back-to-the-land, and he argues that what distinguishes back-to-the-land migration from other forms of counter-urbanisation is the ambition to attain a 'consubstantial' life with the land, soil and places where they settle. Similar to the concept of consubstantiality, Vlaslov (2020) elaborates on the concept 'ecopreneurs', to show how 11 back-to-the-land households in northern Sweden are involved in a special form of entrepreneurship that aims to reconnect them with the land. Other studies on back-to-the-land migration in a European context include Calvário's (2017) case study from the Basque country (in Spain), in which a

Via campesina member organisation struggle towards food sovereignty through re-peasantisation. Research by Wilbur (2013, 2014a, 2014b) on back-to-land migration in Italy has broadened the picture by studying the role back-to-the land migration has had for the developments of alternative food networks as well as the gendered implications of moving back-to-the-land. According to Wilbur (2013, 2014b), back-to-land migrants have been beneficial and crucial for the development of local food networks in Northern Italy, while at the same time some migrants tend to 'go back' and adopt more traditionalist gender roles.

In Sweden, the current back-to-the-land phenomenon can be characterised as a network that has two closely related channels for communication: the paper magazine *Åter* (which can be translated to return and anew in Swedish) and a website called *Alternativ.nu*. The website is a discussion forum (in Swedish) where one can receive help to become more self-sufficient by reading, asking questions and discussing issues pertaining to a self-sufficient lifestyle. Most submissions, both in the magazine and on the website, are focusing on experiences of moving to the countryside and giving practical advice on how to perform self-sufficient farming. The number of subscribers to the paper magazine has increased steadily each year and is about 6000 (in 2021). The website has about 50,000 members and more than 300,000 unique visitors every month (*Alternativ.nu*). This means that about 3%–4% of the Swedish adult population visits the site every month, thus giving an indication of the outreach of the website.

METHODS AND DATA

This article is based on a text review of 48 out-migration letters published in the paper magazine *Åter* between the years 2010 and 2020. Each letter is 3–5 pages long, in total, comprising more than 200 pages of text. In the letters, the back-to-the-land migrants share their experiences on moving from the city to the countryside to practice farming. Each letter offers a unique insight into how it is to live a life of 'back-to-the-land' and the letter writer also reflects on his/her new livelihood situation in the countryside.

Through a text analysis of the letters, it has been possible to discern a number of common discursive themes with regard to people's motives, ideals and agricultural practices. Examples of questions that have been asked in relation to the text material have partly been of a substantive character (e.g., size of the farm, occupation, educational background, household composition, geographical settlement, acres under cultivation) and partly of a more discursive nature (motives and ideals). The letters generally also contain rather detailed descriptions about what types of agricultural practices and activities people engage in when performing 'back-to-the-land', as well as personal reflections on the experiences they have encountered when moving to the countryside to live a life that to a large extent is based on self-sufficiency.

By paying attention to how the back-to-the-land migrants describe how they practice self-sufficient farming (back-to-the-land) and what they say about their cultivation practices, one can reveal important sustainability ideals and motives behind the migrants' decisions to move, which can contribute to important understandings of how the rural is changing. How back-to-the-landers describe how they practice 'back-to-the-land' are also important to study, as such practices may also reveal benign agricultural practices that in themselves can contribute to understandings how rural areas are changing both discursively and materially (also see Halfarcree, 2007a). The letters also, generally, include stories on people's plans and aspirations about their farming and new livelihood situations, thus contributing to imaginaries of what their places and smallholdings would look like in the future. By conducting a review of all migration letters between the years

2010 and 2020 (10 years), it has also been possible to discern changes in how the migrants frame their motives to broader changes in the sociopolitical environment over time.

Generally, the migrant letters are written in a personal manner (I-form or in we-form) and the narrative of the letters generally follows the following structure[5];

(i) a general description of the migrants' families' background, past lives and motives for why they chose to move to the countryside;
(ii) move to the countryside, initiation and descriptions of a variety of projects to become self-sufficient in food, energy and shelter (e.g., house renovation projects);
(iii) reflections on which projects have been successful and less successful;
(iv) future aspirations and general reflections on how the new livelihood situation in the countryside has turned out.

Inspired by qualitative content analysis approach (Bryman, 2018) the text material was explored to find patterns with regards to back-to-the-landers practices and ideals. The letter material was analysed abductively, where the interpretation and thematisation of data were carried out through an iterative process of going back and forth between conceptual preconceived notions about the back-to-land phenomenon in relation to what could be revealed and interpreted from the text material. Several ideals could, for example, be revealed in statements that address motives behind the decisions to move, while back-to-the-landers' practices could be more clearly disclosed in sentences that, for example, addressed experiences of producing and refining their food. Relevant quotes perceived as typical and revealing common patterns with regard to ideals and practices were translated from Swedish to English and sorted into subcategories, which in turn were categorised into four main themes as outlined in the section below.

Main practices and ideals

Cultivating self-sufficiency is at the heart of back-to-landers motives for migration. All of the assessed migration letters talk about the desire of becoming self-sufficient, not just in food, but also in energy, clothing, medicine, housing (shelter) and so forth. A typical migration letter describes the journey of being entangled in what is perceived as a modern 'unsustainable' urban lifestyle and the first steps taken of becoming more self-sufficient. For many of the back-to-the-landers, obtaining a high self-sufficiency ratio as possible is described as a goal in itself, and for some, it also embraces the resources required for production, for example, agricultural fertilisers, healthy soils, biodiversity, water resources and seeds. Consistent with the ideals of becoming self-sufficient, 'smallholding' or 'subsistence farming' is at the heart of back-to-the-landers practice and the farm size of the surveyed letters range from less than half a hectare to farms with more than 35 hectares under cultivation.

From the migration letters, it is possible to trace where in the country the back-to-the-landers have settled down. A crude geographical review of the migration letters reveals that it is not just the most fertile land in the vicinity of larger towns and cities in the south of Sweden that are the sites for back-to-land settlements. The migration letters show a rather broad geographical dispersal of back-to-land settlements, ranging from the far north to the far south, and both close and far away from larger towns and cities. The educational and occupational backgrounds are also wide-ranging, with a slight overweight of middle-aged university-educated people from large cities.

Besides the overriding ideal and practice of self-sufficiency, it is from the migration letters possible to distinguish the following four (discursive) themes (four Rs) that characterise back-to-the-land migration, which will be further elaborated below. Back-to-the-land as

(i) Rebelling payroll work and meaningless lives in the cities;
(ii) reinvention and retrotopia;
(iii) reconnecting with nature and cultivating resilient alternatives;
(iv) resistance and silent revolution;

(i) Rebelling payroll work and meaningless lives in cities:
For several back-to-the-land farmers, rebelling or escaping from a 9 to 5 job city life, represents one of the core motives to why back-to-the-landers become involved in self-sufficiency farming in the first place. Quite a few, about half of the reviewed letters, contain criticism against salaried work and urban lifestyle, which are depicted as lacking a meaning. A recurring theme in many of the migration letters is narratives about the perceived meaninglessness and pointlessness of living in the city. This is often paired with a critique of consumerism and with expressions of wanting to get closer to nature. A former IT consultant who earlier lived in Berlin describes his situation before moving to the countryside in the following way:

> "I worked way too much. I almost went crazy with all the pixels, all the grey concrete, the total lack of nature and that it was never quiet… I just sat on a chair— sometimes 16 hours a day – and pressed buttons. Everything was plastic, the shops, the people, the rent, the job and all the food felt like empty, nutrient-poor inventions. I was sad and angry and heading into depression." (Roxendal, 2019, p. 42)

Most of the reasoning for the choice to move to the countryside revolves around a perceived serfdom in the city and being stuck in a job that the back-to-the-landers did not feel they could relate to. Letter writers describe how they want to get rid of the prceived 'treadwheel of meaningless productivity' (Sareklint, 2017, p. 19) and the routines they associate wage labour and the city life with. This is often paired with an equal emphasis on wanting to have more spare time. 'I do not want to make a job career, I want to make a leisure carrier' (Nilsson & Book, 2018, p. 17) as one back-to-lander expressed herself in one of the letters. In another letter, wage labour is expressed as something that is standing in the way of obtaining a meaningful life:

> … we noticed that the work [the payroll work] was almost pointless… The investigations became shelf warmer without any significance. (Ericsson, 2019, p. 17)

This quote begins with a longer reasoning from a couple where the focus is on wanting to take responsibility for their own survival and quality of life. The cultivation at the farm and the new rural life create both a more meaningful existence and togetherness in society, according to them, than producing 'shelf warmers' [public investigations] for the society at large.

> Our whole self-sustaining life is based on a modern reality that made us constantly ask questions … We experienced a feeling of inner emptiness [in the former urban life] even though the outer world was filled with constant meetings and activities…

> Maybe it's because we felt that much of what we used to do had no real cause or meaning. (Erendal, 2018, p. 32)

The above quote, like some of the previous quotes, express a reasoning about the perceived meaninglessness of wage labour and what life in the city offers and stands for. The city and wage labour symbolise a kind of artificial everyday life that is depicted as deceitful and futile. Instead, the back-to-the-landers seek a lifestyle in the countryside that is described as more authentic, meaningful and real. The migration to the countryside and the attempts to live more self-sufficient can thus be interpreted as a way of trying to 'shake off' the perceived compulsion of wage labour and city life. In this way, self-sufficiency is not only about being able to produce one's own food, shelter and energy, but also about rebelling the compulsion to work for wages, which the urban life, they feel, forces them to do. Through expressions of such discontents and in the attempts to create alternative ways of living in the countryside, the back-to-the-landers can be regarded as a counter-culture to urban norms and lifestyles (also see Halfacree, 2007a).

Even though several of the migration letters talk about 'liberating oneself' from the obligation of wage labour work and the treadmill of the urban lifestyle, several of the back-to-the-landers work part-time by teleworking and/or by distant commuting to larger cities and towns. Access to money and wage labour, thus, seems to be something that is difficult to get away from completely. For many of the letter writers, total distancing from the urban life and wage labour is, however, not entirely desirable, even if they seek to minimise the need for monetary dependency in various ways.

Instead of relying on external wage labour, several migration letters, talk about the involvement in activities that generate additional incomes from the farm through, for example, the development of agro-tourism, green care farms, community-supported agriculture (CSA), on-farm selling of eggs, honey-making and food processing. Many of the migration letters describe experiences or intentions to develop new ways of capturing added value from the farm, either in the form of selling agricultural produce or by developing other forms of income-generating activities (e.g., courses in homesteading and permaculture design). Wage labour from external income sources outside the farm is generally expressed as a non-viable option in the long term. Instead downshifting, life quality and to live a sustainable life are highlighted as important virtues, as exemplified by the following quotes:

> We want to avoid the burden of the typical payroll work and spend more time in contexts that are vital for us, together with the people who are important to us. (Tangen, 2013, p. 20)

> I have a strong desire to live sustainably, to reduce my footprint and to show others that it is possible to live without IKEA and supermarkets—by downshifting and by living small scale, one can instead have a higher quality of life. (Högberg, 2017, p. 28)

For many back-to-the-landers, the resistance against wage labour involves downshifting and a lifestyle based on principles of voluntary simplicity. The virtue of thrift is also often highlighted in the back-to-the-land stories, and a proverb from one of the migration letters captures this eloquently in the following way:

> It is not the income you get rich of, but with the small expenditures. (Comstedt, 2013, p. 26).

The migration letters also contain descriptions of the hard manual work that is required to practice smallholding and to live a life that to a large extent is based on principles of self-sufficiency. Going back-to-the-land, as many letter writers point out, does not necessarily mean less work—rather the opposite—it may instead imply more hard and tiresome manual work, compared to the wage labour work in the city. Instead, the freedom of steering 'ones' own time and to work hard with the body is emphasised:

> Today we control our own time and it gives an enormous freedom. Hard work is less burdensome when the fruit of work goes to ourselves. That is what we call quality of life! (Sjöstrand, 2014, p. 14)

Some of the above reasoning about labour and perceptions of independence is consistent with Calvário's (2017) study from the Basque in Spain, where the back-to-the-landers talk about the advantages of working outdoors, less stressful rhythms of work, greater autonomy and control of their lives, and a better work–life balance, compared to their former city lives.

(ii) Reinvention and retrotopia:
Another recurring theme in the migration letters is praise and acknowledgement of old agricultural practices and techniques. Several of the letters frame their migrations stories as a search for an authentic lifestyle. This search for authenticity and praise of old agricultural techniques are, for example, common in descriptions of the types of cattle that are raised, the crop varieties that are grown, the way food is being processed, the building and farming techniques that are used and not at least how the whole farming system is designed. A large part of the magazine *Åter* is devoted to different forms of advice and tips on how to use farming and homesteading techniques from the past. For example, most letters state that they raise Swedish heritage breeds[6] and seeds.

One letter writer described his mission with his farming by alluding to the classical science fiction comedy movie 'Back to the Future' from the 1980s.

> We must learn to think in old ways—back to the future gets a new meaning [when going back-to-the-land]. (Karmhag et al., 2019, p. 41)

The migration letters often contain stories and descriptions of how they practice back-to-the-land, including stories of how they till and cultivate the land, take care and process food and how they renovate buildings. In almost all these stories, references and practices to the past are acknowledged and paired with statements on the importance of economising on resources:

> To economize on resources, i.e. eating your leftovers, stuffing your socks or putting a new handle on the leaf rake should be desirable, and much nicer than buying new. The fact that we do not to take advantage of the old is, in my eyes, because the exceptionally abundant access to cheap energy … but the era of cheap energy is a parenthesis in history. While waiting for other times, it is best start learning how people did things in the past. That's what we're trying to do. (Ornelid, 2017, p. 8)

Several of the letters describe how earlier knowledge of farming and homesteading techniques has been lost and how they now rediscover, refine and reinvent such techniques. Back-to-the-land advocates a reinvention of not just only agricultural practices but also a rediscovery of food processing knowledge as well as house construction techniques and so forth. In this way, back-to-the-land resonates well with Bauman's (2017) concept of retrotopia and his observation that there is a general emergence in many Western societies of a longing for the past and how such ideas and practices resurge in times of economic and social crisis. By striving for a return to an imaginary 'superior' past, many of the letter writers seem to hope to restore an order that they perceive existed earlier.

Farming for self-sufficiency can be seen as a way to resolve and bring back local food and place relationships that have been lost in a globalised and unruly world. By focusing on developing socialised food relations, through self-sufficiency practices (to the land and the soil) and by placing some of the risk-taking in one's own hands, back-to-the-land migration can be seen as a way to take control of one's own life in a society that is perceived as unruly. 'It [self-sufficiency] is a good way to face a shaky future' (Andersson, 2013, p. 16), as one letter writer state, who also mentions peak oil as one of the core reasons behind the decision to buy a house in the countryside in 2008 and finally move there in 2011. In a similar vein, another back-to-the-lander writes about increasing one's preparedness and reducing one's vulnerability when going back-to-the-land:

> One's preparedness increases and vulnerability decreases. We always have food even if the grocery store temporally runs out or if we really becomes snowbound. (Ornelid, 2017, p. 7)

Several of the migration letters mention climate change as both a threat and a motivating factor as to why they moved to the countryside in the first place. One letter writer phrased it in the following way:

> It all started with the climate threat ten years ago. We started making our own consumables such as soap, shampoo, detergents and beeswax ointment. (Lagerstål, 2016, p. 5)

In this way, back-to-the-land can also be interpreted as an effort to build existential security in a world that is perceived as truly insecure and unruly. The perceptions of an unruly future and search for a stable past is in the above quotes also consistent with Bauman's (2017) notion of retrotopia, that is, a utopia placed in the past, which serves as a protection against an unmanageable, unruly present and a frightening future.

It is also possible to see shifts in how the letter writers frame their back-to-the-land decision in relation to broader changes in the political economy and state of the world. In the letters from 1998 to 2010, concerns about peak oil, financial crisis and food crises are mentioned alongside concerns about climate change. From 2010 to 2020, concern about climate change dominates as an overarching motive and pull factor. Not surprisingly, the last two migration letters from 2020 contain reflections about the coronavirus pandemic and the importance of being prepared for sudden events. Although there are a few differences in the way people motivate their decisions moving back-to-the-land, they all unify in descriptions of a world that is becoming more unruly.

(iii) Reconnecting with nature and cultivating resilient alternatives:
The criticism of careerism, payroll work and city life is often paired with an equal emphasis of wanting to come closer to nature (through cultivation) and building a more sustainable lifestyle as illustrated by the quotes below:

> We will have all the time in the world to develop a close collaboration with everything that grows—with nature. (Roxendal, 2019, p. 45)

> In addition to the fact that we both like to be in nature, it is for both of us very much about an ideological conviction. We see small-scale self-sufficiency farming as one of the few environmentally sustainable alternatives. In addition, we like the idea of having power over our own time and our lives. If we had lived in town, we probably had occupied uninhabited houses and collected food from ICA [the major food retailer in Sweden] containers. (Book, 2014, p. 18)

The attempts of creating a sustainable lifestyle and reconnecting with nature also become salient when reviewing the range of agricultural practices the letter writers typically state they are involved in, for example, agricultural practices that aim to capture more carbon than it releases, by the introduction of agroforestry and permaculture practices or through the experimentation with no-till agriculture or by using fodder from pollard trees and by growing perennial crops. Some of the cultivation systems are also in the letters associated with agricultural practices that aim to enhance biodiversity by restoring former biodiversity-rich pastures by re-introducing cattle grazing and by practising old scything and haymaking techniques. A majority of the letter writers mention that they practice either permaculture, food forestry gardening or agroforestry. These cultivations techniques and systems are described in one of the issues (Säfve, 2020 p. 26) as being 'resilient ecosystems, with richer biodiversity and better carbon storage capacity than cultivations with just annual crops'.

Two of the letter writers (Fredriksson, 2019; Tuvstarr, 2015) also mentions the writings of the American naturalist, writer and philosopher, Henry David Thoreau as an important source of inspiration behind the decision to move to the countryside and to 'immerse of oneself with nature' as one letter writer expresses it. One even paraphrases Thoreau's classic book *Walden*[7], when explaining his motive to move to the countryside and live an alternative life:

> I want to have it like Thoreau wrote in his book Walden; 'I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived'. (Fredriksson, 2019, p. 15)

From the letters, it is also possible to distinguish between at least two broad groups of back-to-the-landers, namely, 'rational back-to-the-landers' and 'romantic back-to-the-landers'. Rational back-to-the-landers stress the tangible contributions efficiently managed smallholders can make to the environment and to people's livelihoods, whilst romantic back-to-the-landers partly following the path trod by Thoreau, emphasising the moral, emotional and spiritual man and nature relationships.

(iv) Resistance and silent revolution: In the migration letters:
The motives behind moving back-to-the-land are often described as forms of resistance. The forms described are not descriptions of any overt resistance in the form of demonstrations, public speeches, barricades or house occupations. Rather, they are in the form of subtle covert everyday political resistance. This is salient in how, for example, the letter writers describe how they talk about wage labour and consumerism, but also in how they describe how they practice farming. In a migration letter from 2018, Isabelle and Mikael state, 'We usually plant the potatoes on the first of May as a political action' (Nilsson & Book, 2018, p. 17). Planting potatoes, on labour day (1 May), can here be interpreted as a symbolic act of resistance and protest against wage labour and the corporate (capitalistic) food model.

These forms of covert everyday practical political resistance are also salient in other practices related to farming and food processing. For example, this came through in descriptions of how they till the soil without ploughing, deal with pests and weeds by using cover crops and sophisticated rotation schemes, process and store food without using artificial preservatives and so forth. Such examples of practices that serve to promote an enhanced degree of self-sufficiency can, similarly to van der Ploeg's (2010, 2020) studies on the new peasantry, in themselves be seen as subtle acts of everyday resistance against the corporate food regime.

Most letters also contain photos displaying different features of their farm and activities in relation to food self-sufficiency practices. Some of these photos can in themselves be interpreted as representations of an oppositional use of space, visibly expressing resistance against conventional ways of doing agriculture (monoculture), while at the same time demonstrating alternatives to the mainstream. In these photos, the cultivation of a diversity of crops is often portrayed alongside pictures of heritage breeds and the practice of old farming techniques.

For some back-to-the-landers the act of eating is also expressed as an act of everyday political resistance against the corporate agricultural food system, which is well-illustrated in the following quote from the last sentence of a migration letter:

> Eating is a political stance. Every time you eat sustainably grown food from your neighborhood, you cast your vote against monocultures, environmental degradation and global warming and for smallholder farming and a better world for animals, plants and people. (Erendal, 2018, p. 32)

For these back-to-the landers, eating locally produced food is described as an act of everyday, political resistance against monocultures, environmental degradation and global warming. Monocultures are contrasted against smallholder farming, which is portrayed as a solution that would improve the world. By catering for their own food needs, either by growing their own food or by buying from neighbors, back-to-the-landers lower the demand for commercial food and thus vote with both their own spades and forks against the global capitalist agrifood system.

The resistance against the corporate food regime and modern society at large is not just visible in how the back-to-the-landers practice agriculture and process their food and what they eat. It is also discernable in how they market their surplus production and earn some cash income from their farms. The migration letters, but also several other articles in each issue of the magazine *Åter*, are full of advice on how one could process food, develop and engage in alternative food markets and how to receive added value and cash income from smallholder farming. One increasingly popular way of increasing cash incomes is direct sales from the farm and through CSA. On the home page of one migration letter writer, Maja states why she became involved in CSA:

> It was because I wanted more people to enjoy freshly harvested and tasty vegetables, as well as being able to follow the vegetables from soil to table as I became involved in Community Supported Agriculture (CSA). But it was also because I want to be involved in creating a safe and sustainable food system based on the local community. This year we will grow vegetables that are enough to feed 100 people in the vicinity. This feels very good! (Söderberg, 2017)

From the quote, it becomes clear that food is not just seen as a 'whatever' commodity. Back-to-the-landers tend instead to sell food primarily where economic-food relations are socialised and embedded in deeper meaning-making processes and place relations (see also Gross, 2009).

Several letters stress in this regard local solutions to the perceived global problems, or as one back-to-land migrant stated in her migration letter:

> To cultivate locally and to think globally—that is the whole point of moving to the country and cultivate for self-sufficiency. (Karmhag Olsson et al., 2019, p. 40)

In some of the letters, practising back-to-the-land is portrayed as a subversive forward-looking practice, as highlighted in a letter from a couple who moved to the countryside in 2012: 'We are not backward, we are free, rich revolutionaries' (Lagerstål, 2016, p. 7). The revolutionary forward-looking side of the back-to-the-land is also salient in a letter from a couple who try to make a living from a two hectare small-holding in the southeast of Sweden:

'We want to be the change we want to see in the world. Why wait for the revolution when you can carry it out here and now. We believe that self-sufficiency is a good way of living from an environmental perspective. (Nilsson & Book, 2018, p. 15).

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

What significance, then, does back-to-the-land have for how we comprehend the rural and how the current food landscape is changing? The migration letters and their interpretation in this article provide some data on how the back-to-the-land phenomena are unfolding with a focus on the migrants underpinning practices and ideals.

This study shows that the unfolding character of back-to-the-land migration builds on ideals and practices that:

(i) Rebel payroll work and perceived meaningless city life.
(ii) Reconnect people to each other and to the land through benign and resilient ways to how food is being produced, processed and marketed.
(iii) Reinvent old smallholding practices that are adapted to both present and perceived future needs.
(iv) Resist consumerism and the corporate capitalistic food model.

With these ideals and practices in mind, the back-to-the-land phenomena can be seen as part of building an emerging renewed form of rurality that cannot be defined as either productivism or post-productivism (also see Halfacree, 2007a, 2007b). The ideals and practices the back-to-the-land migrants convey represent something anew. They are based on retrotopian ideals that are paired with particular sustainability ideals and practices, which advocate personal

food sovereignty aiming to reconnect people, land and food in renewed ways, in a world that is perceived as unruly. In this sense, the contemporary back-to-the-land phenomena can be seen as both backwards-looking and progressive.

The form of agricultural practices and food processing, in which the back-to-the-land farmers engage in, honours and builds on agricultural techniques that were common before the advent of industrialised agriculture and the green revolution. The ideals and practices that the back-to-the-landers transmit and engage in, can in this light be seen as expressions of a reinvented rurality—that are adapted for both present and perceived future needs. Their material forms and practices contribute in this way to the cultivation of a new outlook on how rural spaces should be used that actively contests and covertly resists 'conventional' and 'modernist' ways of performing agriculture (also see van der Ploeg, 2020; Wilbur, 2014a). Similar to van der Ploeg's (2010, 2013, 2014) studies on new peasantries and with the back-to-the-land from the 1970s, the back-to-the-land migrants studied in this article seek the resurgence of wanting to reduce dependencies from corporate-run food supply chains and gain autonomy by adopting a 'peasant' condition.

Several of the practices written in the letters can be seen as an oppositional use of space, visibly expressing resistance against conventional ways of doing agriculture while demonstrating alternative agricultural and livelihood practices for the future. By cultivating their own food, back-to-the-landers also lower the demand for commercially grown and processed food, and hence in this way, 'vote' with both their spades and forks against the corporate global agro-food system model.

The kinds of ideals and practices that underpin the contemporary back-to-the-land phenomena are similar to Dryzek's (2014) environmental sustainability discourses on green radicalism and green anarchism. These particular discourses reject aspects of industrialised society and imagine a radically different society, based on fundamentally different understandings of human–environment interactions (ibid). Some of the ideals also resemble the philosophy of deep ecology (ecosophy; Naess, 1981), in which all life forms, including river systems and mountains etc, have a right to live, flourish and realise their potential. At the core of Naess' ecosophy is the call for the "realisation of the Self", which implies acting with deep identification with the entire ecosphere. These ideals resonate well with some of the back-to-landers' ambitions to attain a 'consubstantial' life with the land/soil and places where they settle (also see Halfacree, 2007a, 2007b; Pretty, 2002; Vlasov, 2020). In light of the above, the current back-to-the-land phenomena can be seen as a particular form of sustainability migration of voluntary peasantry that is based on retrotopian ideals of an imaginary rural past that is paired with progressive sustainability practices of the present.

The current trend of back-to-the-land migration has emerged parallel and in resistance to the corporate model of agriculture, in combination with growing concerns of climate change, peak oil, pandemics and war. The contemporary back-the-to-the-land phenomenon has also evolved in parallel with new technological advancements in social media and telecommunication that have made it easier for people to work at a distance and facilitated new direct marketing channels for food and other forms of knowledge exchange for living a life in the countryside based on a large degree of self-sufficiency.[8] The fact that many back-to-the-landers of today are noted IT users also challenges how retropric and 'backward' they really are.

Individually several of the agricultural practices that the back-to-the-landers are involved in could be dismissed as innocent expressions of resistance against the corporate food regime and a critique against consumerism and industrial agriculture, but together, they could become powerful with the potential to transform the current food regime towards a more sustainable trajectory. In Sweden, some of the back-to-the-land discourses have to some extent already been embraced and appropriated by some of the dominant food retail actors and in public food procurement

to municipal schools. For example, the dominant food retailer in Sweden (ICA) has started to actively seek local food suppliers (Sedenius, 2017), and a number of municipalities have entered into procurement agreements with newly started CSA farmers, all of which regard themselves as 'beginners' in farming (Johnson, 2020). The involvement, participation and construction of alternative food networks that link producers and consumers in new ways thus seem to represent an important feature of going back-to-the-land in Sweden. Wilbur (2013) has reported similar tendencies from Northern Italy, where he argues that the back-to-the-landers have been instrumental in constructing local and alternative food networks. Through such involvements, back-to-the-land migration contributes to open up a new agrarian food landscape beyond conventional farming and how foods are supposed to be processed and distributed.[9] Between 2010 and 2020, it has mainly been the middle-sized farms (50–100 hectares) that have decreased in Sweden, whereas farms above 100 hectares have increased alongside smallholder farms (less than 5 hectares; Statistics of Sweden, 2020). What emerges is, thus, not a rural and agrarian landscape that existed prior to the industrialisation of agriculture after World War II, but instead a more divided and diversified rural landscape, where continued farm restructuring and farm mergers occur parallel with a growing number of smallholders that grow food and enter farming as part of a sustainability agenda based on retrotopian ideals. Similar tendencies have also been noticed by Halfacree (2006) in the UK, who suggests a diversity of rural space emerging in the light of a 'post-productivism', where back-to-the-land initiatives evolve alongside 'powerful' interests, for example, 'super-productivism' and other forms of mainstream counter-urbanisation.

In contrast to Bauman's (2017) rather pessimistic view of retrotopian thinking with regards to, for example, failure of developing a cosmopolitan consciousness, several narratives from the migration letters point in another more positive direction of retrotopian thinking. According to Bauman, the retrotopian aspiration is geared towards the return to an ideal past more than towards the construction of a brighter future. With the contemporary instability of our increasingly complex and unruly world paired with the insecurities of a fragmented and individualised liquid life (Bauman, 2000), Bauman argues that a return to a 'tribal attitude' and an acceptance of indifference toward inequality seems 'rational'. Indeed, such tendencies are apparent in several parts of the rural world (and probably also among certain groups of back-to-the-landers), but overall the current back-to-the-land illuminates a more forward-looking character of retrotopia.

Back-to-the-land can on the one hand side be viewed as an egocentric move embracing elements of 'tribal attitudes', but on the other hand, most of the ideals and practices that back-to-the-landers profess seem to point in another direction. Beyond benign ways of cultivating the land, several of the migration letters speaks about opening up their homes to refugees or bringing people living in other parts of the world to them, and several letters state that they arrange courses and invite interested people to their farms (e.g., see Arvidsson, 2017; Norrby, 2020). Together, this points to the direction that retrotopian thinking might not necessarily be connected to a failure of developing a cosmopolitan consciousness, nor about constructing 'tribal attitudes' as proposed by Bauman. Rather, the kind of retrotopia professed by the back-to-land letters can be regarded as a constructive expression of building resilient futures in a world of perceived growing insecurity.

Furthermore, the ideals that back-to-the-land migrants convey and transmit can at a first glance be dismissed as being a naïve and as a utopian expression of a lost past, and obviously these new farmers' contribution to the national gross production of agricultural goods is small. However, the underpinning ideals and perspectives that the back-to-the-land migrants convey to the broader public through social media, television and through their involvement in the creation of alternative food networks are probably of much more significance than their economical and

material achievements at their respective farms, although these are not inconsiderable if putting them together.

From a broader rural development and agricultural point of view, 'back-to-the-land' can be seen as a vitalising force for rural areas, reinforcing new interfaces between the urban and the rural, involving new ways of organising and socialising around food. Back-to-the-land adds new perspectives on how one can practice agriculture that challenges dominant conceptualisations of what the rural is and how agriculture should best be practised. Similar to Amin's (2006, p. 1010) suggestion that utopian thinking may be transformative, retrotopian thinking and practice with regards to back-to-the-land can be seen as transformative, enabling its practitioners to both think and act beyond previously established production and consumption patterns. Back-to-the-landers, thus do not just seek a stable retrospective rural idyll but a lifestyle aiming to contribute to a transformative change of the rural towards a more sustainable trajectory. In this way, the back-to-land can rather be regarded as more forward-looking and *avant-garde* than as an urban escape and backward practice. Related avant-garde notions of rural life and practices are also echoed and forwarded in Halfacree's work on back-to-the-land (2006, 2007a, 2007b, 2010) and in van der Ploeg's (2018, 2020) work on the new peasantry. In Halfacree's (2010) work on rural consumption practices, he suggests that the contemporary rural (which is inclusive of back-to-the-land) as an 'active heteretopia' could be used to forge an alliance between different notions of consuming the rural to support and justify a social movement oriented towards the politics of everyday life (Halfacree, 2010, p. 269).

In this light, the rural is no longer just an arena for production and resource extraction (productivism), nor just an arena for rural consumption (e.g., rural tourism) and amenity production (post-productivism). Instead, it is increasingly becoming an arena for people with a desire to bring lasting changes in how one relates with the environment (to land), to food and people in benign ways.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available in the paper magazine *Åter* and on request from the corresponding author.

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ENDNOTES

[1]The increase of the number of registered small-holdings have occurred parallel to continued farm size rationalisations and structural development of agriculture, where the average farm size has become larger not just in Sweden

but as well in large part of the global rural north (SCB, 2014; Swedish Board of Agriculture, 2020; Waldenström et al. 2018; Kuns et al. 2016 and Marquardt et al., 2022).

[2] That more people move into many sparsely populated municipalities than moving out does not preclude that sparsely populated municipalities loose inhabitants due relatively high mortality rates and low nativity rates.

[3] Swedish high folk schools are institutions for adult education that generally do not grant academic degrees.

[4] *Mandelmans* (TV4), *Hundra procent bonde* (Hundred percent farming; Swedish Television SVT) and *Hjälp vi har köpt en bondgård* (Help we have purchased a farm, Swedish Television SVT).

[5] There could be a potential bias towards letter writers who regard themselves relatively successful in becoming smallholders. None of the reviewed letters tal about giving up smallholder farming.

[6] For example Swedish redpolled cattle (*rödkulla*), North Swedish horse (*nordsvensk häst*) and Swedish mountain cow (*fjällko*).

[7] Thoreau is best known for his book *Walden*, where Thoreau himself moved 'back-to-the-land' to live and reflect upon a life of simple living and coming closer to nature. Thoreau's philosophy propagates the methods of civil disobedience and searching for an ecology of place.

[8] Other contributing factors for moving to the countryside are, for example, high housing costs in Sweden's major cities.

[9] See also, for example, Dubois (2018, 2019) and Milestad et al. (2010) for discussions on the development of alternative food networks and the emergence of a food landscape that cherishes food market proximity in a Swedish context.

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