



Identifying Wright's “cowboys” among Swiss farmers

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ABSTRACT

Economists would assume that farmers with a net benefit will adopt programs incentivizing the delivery of public goods. Farmers who reject participation in such programs for principled reasons challenge this wisdom. This paper borrows from Will Wright's description of the North American cowboy to illustrate the motives and beliefs of this group. A survey in Switzerland about possible incentivizing programs in the realm of animal health is used to identify and characterize Swiss ‘cowboys.’ 22 % of the sample rejects any participation in incentivizing schemes. Their income and education levels are relatively low, and their ages tend to be high. They emphasize individualism and autonomy, rejecting interventions of the state in their ways of farming. The more ‘cowboys’ manage farms, the less successful incentivizing programs become.

1. Introduction

It is a longstanding narrative in public economics that externalities should be internalized through incentives (Schelling, 1983; Kolstad, 2010). Particularly in the agricultural sector, programs rewarding farmers for generating positive externalities or for avoiding negative ones have become commonplace (Scheper et al., 2013). This rationale presupposes that recipients are more or less rational actors who will subscribe to incentivizing schemes if their marginal benefits exceed their marginal costs. Only under these conditions will incentives lead to a social optimum.

While some economists (Frey and Stutzer, 2008) started criticizing this strong emphasis on extrinsic motivations, it is important to note that public programs may fail if farmers have non-economic reasons to abstain. Research has addressed the reason for such behaviour in several ways. They range from family-related factors (Fitz-Koch et al., 2017) to knowledge and skills (Dessart et al., 2019). One approach that has been particularly fruitful has been the discourse around the ‘good farmer’ (Mankad, 2016; Burton et al., 2021), whose resistance to change is culturally rooted and makes it difficult for the state to initiate major changes in agriculture. Another explanation which has gained attention in the Swiss context has been the aspect of farmers’ autonomy (Stock and Forney, 2014; Forney and Häberli, 2017). With every program they subscribe to, farmers lose another part of their autonomy in everyday decisions. While this literature emphasizes the importance of autonomy for farmers in general, in this contribution we focus on a specific group of farmers whose claim for autonomy clashes with the rationales of

agricultural policy makers. When borrowing from Wright's (2001; 6) description of the ‘cowboy’ as an individual “defined by his strength, honor, and independence, his wilderness identity”, we hypothesize that the powerful image of cowboys may develop this explanation that already includes aspects like self-dependence and individualization into a more holistic image of resistance against incentivizing programs by the administration. His concept is very American and certainly needs adaption if applied to Swiss farmers, but Section 2 will show the possible commonalities and remaining differences.

Our empirical case is the current plan of Switzerland's government to extend the instrument of incentivizing payments (BLW, 2020). While many schemes to protect natural resources and to preserve biodiversity have been set up over the past 20 years (Mann and Lanz, 2013), the overuse of antibiotics has become a large challenge for decision-makers. As a reaction they consider incentives for improving animal health or promoting lower antibiotic usage, markedly extending the realm of government involvement. This follows the general rationale of public economics, but is a new intervention into farmers' lives and therefore a suitable case to study the effect of such impulses. Section 3 describes a survey that analyses the willingness of farmers to participate in such schemes. While the survey originally was not aimed to identify Swiss farmer ‘cowboys’, our research was inductive in the way that the link to Wright's cowboy concept only appeared after quantitative answers and qualitative comments made parallels to this concept obvious.

This methodology will be applied qualitatively (Section 4) and quantitatively (Section 5) in order to understand value constellations that limit the potential of incentivizing programs. Conclusions will be

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drawn in Section 6.

2. Wright's cowboy and swiss farmers

The sociologist Will Wright (2001) transforms the image of numerous Western movies, books, and stories into a sociological archetype of a person representing freedom and equality.

“This standard cowboy story is a cultural drama of individualism. The cowboy symbolizes individualist ideas, as does the rugged scenery of the American West. All the images of the West – cowboy hats, horses, buffalo, red rock canyons – carry the cultural message of freedom, equality, private property, civility: the promise of individualism. The cultural story reflects a theoretical story, a story of rational individuals building a civil market. This theoretical story was originally told by the early individualist theorists: Thomas Hobbes and John Locke in the seventeenth century and Adam Smith and Thomas Jefferson, among others, in the eighteenth century” (Wright, 2001, p. 16).

While the cowboy's agricultural profession would serve as a simple parallel to Swiss farmers, Wright emphasizes that:

“The mythical cowboy is not always a working cowboy in the sense of herding cattle. Often, he is a gunfighter, sometimes a gambler, and he may be a rancher, a sheriff, or scout, even an outlaw. The ‘cowboy’ of the myth is defined by his strength, honor, and independence, his wilderness identity, not by his job. He has no privileged lineage, no aristocratic status. He emerges from the wilderness a free and equal individual. He is the cultural version of the theoretical individualist, and the culture calls him cowboy hero whether he herds cattle or not” (Wright, 2001, p. 6).

Wright's cowboy is located on America's western frontier, where the government has not yet arrived. Accordingly, the cowboy is extremely skeptical of undue government intervention. While governments may eventually be needed to keep up law and order, any unnecessary or even unjust intervention must be avoided.

Compared to the more descriptive approaches by other scholars when approaching the cowboy myth (Dye, 2002; Moskowitz, 2006; Frantz and Choate, 2016), Wright's analysis of a cowboy is a laudable attempt to link the popular myth of cowboys to social sciences. He identifies the theoretical paradigms underneath the behavior that characterizes cowboys in novels, movies and arts. This work has influenced many strains of sociological research. This includes gender studies (Ainsworth et al., 2014), where the cowboy depicts a certain brand of masculinity and research on conformism (Wolf and Zuckerman, 2012), as the cowboy is a stout nonconformist.

This reliance on Wright's work has been largely confined to North America, whereas the image of the cowboy has not. Petty (1996), for example, remarked that the myth of the cowboy is even more popular in Germany than it is in the United States. It is questionable whether the relevance of the archetype presented by Wright (2001) is geographically limited.

Wright (2001; 27) explains the power of the cowboy myth through the fact that “America was created on individualist ideas and market institutions.” That definition applies to Switzerland as well. The myth of the Rütli Schwur, the foundation of the Swiss state in 1291, centers around a group of farmers who aimed to be free and finally liberated themselves from an interventionist state (Zimmermann, 2000). While the two myths differ in respect to the role of unity, they show clear parallels in terms of a grave rejection of governmental intervention.

There are not only reasons to assume that the Cowboy paradigms can relate well to Swiss traditions, but also to link them to the professional group of family farmers. As a self-employed group of people, usually living and working on their own land, not only the aspect of autonomy (see above), but also characteristics like honour (Stølen, 1998) and strength (Hickson, 2014; Jaza et al., 2018) are often linked to farmers. Even if the contemporary cowboy does not necessarily herd cattle any more, it is no coincidence that the generation of the powerful cowboy image took place in an agricultural setting. Therefore, it may be worthwhile to explore the link between Wright's cowboys and Swiss

farmers empirically. Which socioeconomic characteristics do farmers with rationales as described in Wright's seminal book have? And how far do the parallels go?

Swiss agricultural policy provides ample room to suffer from interventions and to demand independence from the state. Since World War II, Swiss farmers owe more than half their income to government support. What has changed, however, is the visibility of these interventions. Until the 1990s, almost all support was organized through market control, keeping food prices high. Eventually, per-hectare and per-animal payments replaced tariffs and product subsidies so that farmers began noticing that parts of their paychecks were due to government influence (Mann, 2003). In 2014, it became even more obvious that farmers would have to deliver public goods in return for public money, as government programs were transformed into biodiversity payments, landscape-quality payments, and similar instruments (Mann and Lanz, 2013). However, these interventions were limited to arable and grassland production and two animal welfare programs.

Cowboys would not have approved these policy shifts. Wright (2001) shows that environmental concerns do not exist in the myth of the cowboy, as the environment is assumed to be indefinite. Likewise, it is unlikely that cowboys would consider animal health a rationale for government intervention. A survey on possible state interventions in the new terrain of animal health and the reduction of antibiotics which the Swiss government plans to enter provides the opportunity to look for patterns that resemble Wright's cowboy in the rejection of state involvement and the emphasis on liberty and self-determination.

3. Method

A mixed-method design offered an ideal solution to identify both commonalities and differences between thus-defined Swiss cowboys and Wright's cowboy archetypes. Methodologically, it was guided by the socioeconomic paradigms that combining the analysis of both economic and social forces will provide the best possible explanation of individual decisions being made (Etzioni, 2003). And the research was empirically grounded in the way that the link between Swiss farmers and Wright's cowboys only became apparent when our survey was in the stage of being analyzed.

This survey about potential programs tackling the use of antibiotics and animal health (financed by the Swiss National Science Foundation) was thoroughly prepared by sending out a pilot survey to 250 farmers that was subsequently adapted on a larger scale.

In November 2019, 2000 questionnaires were sent out electronically to farmers keeping cattle and/or pigs. Paper questionnaires later served as a reminder leading to a return rate of 33 %. There was one questionnaire about the farm and one questionnaire each for dairy cows, calves, other cattle, fattening pigs, and sows. After a collection of general data of the farm and the farm manager, the focus of the survey was to analyze the acceptance of hypothetical agricultural policy programs that tackle the overuse of antibiotics or the overall health status of farm animals. Depending on how many animal categories farmers kept, they were asked to evaluate two-to-ten possible (yet hypothetical) government programs, such as financial support for close monitoring by veterinarians or a premium for the 25 % of farms with the lowest use of antibiotics. Farmers were asked about the levels of money they would need in order to accept the hypothetical programs, provided they were willing to subscribe.

There are, of course, many reasons to decide against participation in such a scheme. We assume, however, that Swiss farmers with a cowboy mentality are defined by refusing any scheme participation in the realms of animal health or antibiotic reduction.

For the qualitative part, respondents had, at several points of the questionnaire, the possibility to share their own thoughts. Many farmers felt they should write down individual statements. This included numerous persons fulfilling the ‘cowboy’ criteria as defined above, both in the pilot and the main survey. Some excerpts of these ‘cowboys’ as

documented in Section 5 were evaluated by using objective hermeneutics, focusing on interviews where they defended their program participation choices. This objective hermeneutics method has been applied in many contexts, ranging from family analysis (Oevermann, 1979) to policy evaluation (Mann and Schweiger, 2009) and entrepreneurial decision-making (Mann, 2018).

This method does not aim to make a standardized statement. According to its founder, Ulrich Oevermann (2004), standardizations miss the object of research to the degree in which the object is not itself standardized. Instead, an attempt is made to explore the lowest level or substance of social reality. This exploration is not claimed to be representative, but the specific characteristics of the case to be analyzed are important. In our context, it is intended to serve as an illustration of a possible reality behind the statistical connections.

Excerpts or sequences are taken from parts of the data (in this case excerpts of written statements on the questionnaire) which seem to be particularly relevant for the research question. The microscopic text analysis used in objective hermeneutics includes taking single phrases in the text and putting them in different social contexts. This means that analysts look for potential situations in which phrases like, for example, “It is good to think about” (see F1 below) would be likely to be voiced. By a collection of possible contexts and an emerging image of their commonalities, this leads to a thorough reflection of the ‘objective’ meanings of the terms used. It enables a deeper understanding of the sequence, and finally of the specific case in its social context. This has, of course, the disadvantage that only a small fraction of the transcripts can be considered. Nevertheless, objective hermeneutics was the method than allowed to draw the maximum benefit from the remarks made by single respondents in the questionnaire. As it is “decidedly a method of reconstructing the structure of cases” (Wernet, 2012: 187), there is probably no other method taking the individual reality of single cases as serious as this one.

After such a qualitative understanding of ‘cowboy’ farmers who would not respond to incentives, a quantitative analysis identified structural and demographic characteristics that significantly distinguish ‘cowboys’ from other farmers, using several hypotheses which were mainly taken from existing studies:

- The cowboy is a genuine male concept (Allen, 1998) so that it is reasonable to assume that more male farmers fall under this category than female farmers.
- Taking into account that adaptability decreases over the course of life (Bartone et al., 2018), it could be assumed that “cowboys” are rather of older age.
- People farming organically are usually more open toward the government’s responsibility to provide public goods in agriculture (Kings and Ilbery, 2010; Bravo-Monroy et al., 2016).
- Although farmers with major off-farm income may be able to totally farm according to their own preferences (Darnhofer, 2010), it is difficult to imagine cowboys employed in some office job, so that part-time farmers may be less likely to qualify as ‘cowboys’.
- Programs are usually reimbursed on a per-animal or per-hectare base. This implies that larger farms have higher opportunity costs for non-participation, which may make them more inclined to subscribe.
- The “disenfranchised learner,” as described by Wallace (2011), possesses some parallels to the appearance of cowboys by emphasizing individualist values and rejecting asymmetric situations. It is therefore fair to assume that farmers with a cowboy attitude undergo less formal education than average.
- If we thus imagine cowboys as less adapted to the societal mainstream, it will also be plausible to hypothesize that their incomes will be below average.
- Mountainous regions may be better suited for people with highly individualist values who want to draw back from the societal mainstream (Sutch, 2013). As this has also been shown in

Switzerland (Calabrese et al., 2014), Swiss ‘cowboys’ may be concentrated more in the mountains than in the lowland region.

To test the different hypotheses, a probit analysis was carried out that vetted the independent variables as depicted in Table 1 to predict if a respondent, according to our definition, qualified as a Swiss ‘cowboy’ or not, i.e., Would choose non-participation for each of the offered programs. The table also shows that between a fifth and a quarter of our sample would qualify as farmer with a cowboy attitude. Finally, it can also be shown that the sample has slightly larger farms (26 vs. 20 ha) and a higher share of organic farms (15 vs. 11 percent) than Swiss agriculture in general.

4. Quantitative results

Table 2 displays the results of the probit analysis identifying predictors for belonging to the group of cowboys, defined as rejecting participation in all programs suggested in the survey. The table begins with a surprise factor: although the literature on cowboys is strongly tied to the image of masculinity, the Swiss equivalent of this subculture seems to have a disproportionately large share of cowgirls if measured by the gender division of farm managers. It is important to remember, though, that only 5 % of the respondents were female, as the vast majority of Swiss farm managers are male. In fact, it can be read from Table 1 that all (few) female farm managers fall under the category of “cowboys”. It seems that the untypical career of a female farm manager can only be sustain if the persons pursue values such as independence and self-reliance.

It can be confirmed, however, that the population of cowboys is significantly older than the rest of respondents. Age is an important predictor for qualifying as a Swiss cowboy, as the probability of being or becoming one rises by 0.7 % every year.

While it is not possible to significantly confirm the connection between the full-time or part-time status of the farm and cowboys, it is possible to confirm that “cowboys” are usually not inclined to run their farm organically. From Wright’s description of cowboy values, it is understandable that external labels are not something that would modify the way in which “cowboy” farmers run their business.

Another insignificant variable is the size of the farm, measured in hectares. However, the data suggest that ‘cowboys’ make less money from their farm than other farmers, even if one controls for farm size, so it may be concluded that they are less willing to adapt quickly to market requirements.

It is also possible to show that the educational level of Swiss ‘cowboys’ is relatively low. This might be due to the fact that it is not easy to order the many educational pathways of Swiss farmers on a one-dimensional scale.

Finally, there is apparently no spatial concentration of farmers with a cowboy mentality either in the mountain or the lowland region.

5. Qualitative results

Although scholars in objective hermeneutics often restrict themselves to a single case (e.g., Garz, 2007), we found it helpful to depict some range of different Swiss ‘cowboys’ so that we finally ended up with three different comments taken from questionnaires, the first two translated from German, the third from French.

F1 is a dairy farmer from Switzerland’s hill zone. He is male, 38 years old, has studied agriculture at an applied university, and both his agricultural income and his acreage are slightly below average.

F1. “It is good to think about animal health and in particular reduction of antibiotics. The high standard prevalent in Switzerland is sufficient in most cases. Incentives to steer are certainly good, but the money will finally be missing in other areas. Therefore, I clearly favor self-reliant and self-dependent agriculture. Every farmer has a good education

Table 1
Descriptive statistics.

Variable	Measurement	Mean	Minimum	Maximum	Mean “cowboys”	Mean others
Dependent variable						
Cowboy	1 if no willingness to subscribe to a program, 0	0.224	0	1	1	0
Independent variables						
Male	0- female 1- male	0.949	0	1	0.885	1
Age	years	47.5	22	70	51.1	46.5
Organic	1 – organic 0 otherwise	0.151	0	1	0.106	0.163
Mainocc	1 – more than 50% of income from agriculture 0 otherwise	0.656	0	1	0.732	0.634
Farm size	hectares	26.5	0	492	20.6	28.2
Income	From 1 – 0–20000 Fr./year to 7 - >120000 Fr./year	3.24	1	7	2.82	3.35
Education	From 1 – none to 8 – University degree	4.71	1	8	4.38	4.82
Region	From 1 – lowland to 3 - mountains	2.44	1	3	2.68	2.38

Table 2
Results of the probit analysis (n = 605).

Variable	Coefficient	p	Marginal effects (%)
Male	−0.573 (−2.81)	0.005	−18.8
Age	0.0300 (4.61)	0.000	0.83
Organic	−0.379 (−2.05)	0.040	−9.26
Main occ.	−0.226 (−1.32)	0.186	6.66
Farm size	−0.00308 (−0.76)	0.448	−0.085
Income	−0.143 (−2.65)	0.096	−2.42
Education	−0.107 (−2.34)	0.020	−2.95
Region	0.0156 (0.21)	0.831	0.431
Pseudo R2	0.099		

z-values in parenthesis.

and knows the risks and particularly his farm. I see policy in a role to create good and fair business conditions. As a farmer, I want to produce food and not to work as a cheaply employed landscape gardener of the Federation. It would become very expensive if farmers gave up because they could not follow their convictions anymore and then the public administration would have to maintain the land.”

This sequence begins with an encouragement for the authors of the survey. It is noteworthy that the first sentence clarifies who has the authority to make normative statements. Rather than “in my opinion” or “I consider”, **F1** decides about normative facts. This is done in the strongest way possible, as the distinction between good and evil is much less ambiguous than the classification into appropriate and inappropriate, for example. After having made clear that the farmer has the normative authority, the next verdict is issued: The legal framework “is sufficient in most cases”. This implies that cases where things are done above the legal standards may be occasionally helpful, but usually they are perceived as unnecessary. This legal framework is, at the beginning of the sentence, classified as “high standard”, therefore presupposing what the sentence intends to show: Switzerland’s standards are a priori high standards.

F1 continues to claim moral authority. While it is only “good” to think about animal health, it is “certainly good” to provide incentives. This does not come over so much as an augmentation, but rather as a polite concession, clarified by the fact that money will be missing. The “finally” is only a weak translation of the German ‘schlussendlich,’ which marks the final point in time in a doubled way.

After having defined the normative framework, **F1** comes to a conclusion which brings him close to the cultural icon of the American cowboy as both self-reliant (Braucher, 2008) and self-dependent (Wister, 2009). In this sequence, however, the farmer does not characterize himself in this way, but rather agriculture, which raises the question of what a sector could rely on and from what it may depend. This question is answered by the subsequent sequence. It is “every farmer” whose qualifications and competence make the sector self-reliant and self-dependent. While it is left open how a “good education” is defined, it

is also made clear that education enables this particular farmer to make decisions without any support whatsoever.

Both Wright (2001) and Manderson (2012) link the cowboy to the ideal of the minimal state. This concept is now mentioned by **F1**, using an almost textbook formula for the description of a laissez-faire state. After a rather general sentence, **F1** transforms this ideal into his personal work ethic. These ethics not only echo the well-known self-image of farmers as food producers (Kvakkestad et al., 2015), but also draw upon a gloomy picture of a badly paid gardener who is dependent not only from the regional infrastructure but from the federal government. **F1** ends his comment with a warning to bureaucrats: shifting responsibility away from the farmers to the state will loosen a causal chain. Farmers who cannot stay faithful to their individualist work ethics might “all give up,” and it would be thus be left to the government to find ways of cultivating the land.

F2 is a 35-year-old male farmer from the lowland. He is mainly engaged in pig breeding. Both his acreage and his agricultural income (20,000–40,000 Fr./year) are clearly below average. As with many farmers, he finished higher practical education.

F2. These are all programs where farmers need to register very much and certainly will be controlled again in order to generate payments. Many will thus be happy to forego the money to not become even more transparent. Because controls stress and strain farmers in addition. My hint, assume that farmers do it well, but when a black sheep is uncovered, there be consequential and tough.

Compared to **F1**, **F2** does not start with empathetic acknowledgements but makes his point bluntly. He refers directly to the programs he was asked to evaluate, emphasizing the common characteristics between them. Although **F2** is a farmer himself, he chooses to formulate his point from an outsider’s view, describing what farmers need to do in order to qualify for the money.

The Oxford Dictionary explains “to register” by “put name on list.” Registering «very much» would then probably mean to put a name on many lists. The respondent, in any case, expresses his concern that farmers will become increasingly involved in rising bureaucracy. The use of the term “again” indicates that this concern is nourished from experience—that of being controlled. The image that **F2** draws is one of a machine in which the farmer has no human counterpart, but rather has to handle technology in a way that money is set free, strongly related to Max Weber’s description of the administration as an iron cage (Mitzman, 1970).

Although it is not difficult to guess **F2**’s own perspective on the program, he consequently avoids speaking from a personal position. Instead, he speaks of “many.” While it is obvious that he refers to many farmers, the point of his omitting his own professional standing is to express that the rejection of the administration’s iron cage is not specific to the farming sector. To become transparent—or ‘gläserner’ as in the German original—seems to be something that has to be avoided by

almost any cost. As Schoemann (1984) describes the (literal) veil to cover mouth and nose as a standard equipment of cowboys, F2 describes the informational veil as the standard equipment of not only the Swiss farmer, but as overall common sense. The most interesting point of the following sentence is not that administrative controls are dismissed by F2 as much as gun-controls by cowboys (Kopel, 1992), but that they are labelled as an “additional” burden. It is left open what the farmers’ primary burden is, but it is made clear that farmers suffer regardless.

At this stage, F2 finally becomes personal, introducing the final sentence with a possessive pronoun. The black sheep, which is now cited, was referenced in multiple comments by cowboy farmers on the questionnaire. The cowboy’s heroic struggle against the villain is, in fact, a frequent theme in cowboy stories and repeatedly reflected in the sociological literature on cowboys (Boatright, 1969; French, 2000; Wright, 2001), while most farmers are apparently the individuals who make “it” good. The “consequential and tough” strategy recommended by F2 against the black sheep finally leads us to a description by Kipp (2008; 8) that summarizes many of the issues raised by F2: “Cowboys are tough and work long, hard hours and ride dangerous horses for little pay.”

We do not know much about F3 except that (s)he holds a university degree and keeps suckler cows in the mountain region, because most of the fields in the questionnaire were left blank. However, F3 left comments on several points of the questionnaire, of which the longest reads:

F3. “One more filth for stealing from us, increase the paperwork and in addition a loss of time and freedom!!!! One should know that all amounts that are ‘given’ to us are stolen elsewhere! In 30 years’ time, there will be no more Swiss producers, people eat stuff imported and produced anyway, so for the time that is left to us stop inventing bullshit for creating jobs and annoying us.”

It is easy to note that F3 is the most aggressive of the respondents, dismissing all potential incentivizing programs as filth—or “saloperie” in the French original. According to F3’s first sentence, these programs seem to have three different intentions, although there is a strong logical overlap between the second effect—causing paperwork—and part of the third, stealing time. However, freedom (the loss of which F3 fears) has been highlighted as a traditional value of the cowboy myth by Lambert (1967) and Brown (1989). The claim of theft raises another longstanding theme of the cowboy myth. Frantz and Choate (2016) show historically how ‘real’ cowboys organizing themselves against theft contributed considerably to the emergence of the cowboy as a cultural figure.

F3 makes it clear that their statement is not an opinion but rather a fact, and that this knowledge should be widely distributed. They do not mention money or payments but amounts, so that their statement possesses a rather general character. Twice in these first two sentences, there is an un-reflected usage of “us.” This indicates a strong feeling of identity as, probably, a Swiss farmer. The fate of being deprived after seemingly receiving resources is therefore not an individual consequence, but a collective one.

While the first sentence is a characterization of the survey and the second is a general statement about the treatment of Swiss farmers, the third is a forecast, with the same certainty as the sentences before it. Neither in other parts of the sequence, nor in this forecast, F3 would ever explicitly raise agriculture or farmers as the specific sector (s)he is referring to. Only the context would tell us that “producers” are not industrial or service producers but agricultural producers. This emphasizes implicitly that production is the very professional core of farming, not other societal responsibilities. If F3’s forecast is put into the context of the entire comment, it is likely that the projected extinction of Swiss farmers will be due to the fact that they have been deprived of their resources.

F3 links the projected extinction to a change in consumption patterns. Apparently, Swiss farmers have a special way of producing food, one that will be lost when domestic production is replaced by imports. On the grounds of this reminder about the special abilities of Swiss

farmers, F3 apparently hopes that the authors of the questionnaire can be convinced to leave them in peace. While the government supposedly incites “bullshit” with the objective of creating jobs, Swiss farmers should be able to mind their own affairs for whatever time they have left.

6. Conclusions

It was the overarching goal of this paper to determine whether the description of cowboys by Wright (2001) and other sociological scholars can be taken out of the geographical context of North America’s West and fairly characterize other groups of people.

Finally, the reader will have to decide to which extent the image of Wright’s cowboy helps for an understanding of the sub-sample of Swiss farmers that rejects any participation in animal health schemes. In any case, their strong individualism that rejects any undue involvement of the state in personal businesses, is not constrained on pure autonomy, but is linked to a strong normative ambition to identify and punish ‘black sheep’ who try to take advantage of the liberties they have to damage others. They do not seek status in formal education or in becoming wealthy. Instead, they focus on their personal work ethics.

The multifunctional agricultural policy that Switzerland’s government pursues, in which farmers are supported in return for contributions to the larger ecosystem, including animal health, may make these characteristics more visible. There is a group (albeit a minority, roughly 1/4) of Swiss farmers that carefully maintains its (at least perceived) independence from the bureaucracy and concentrates on producing food its own way.

There is some uncertainty regarding this quantification. On one hand, some of the farmers unwilling to subscribe to any of the suggested programs may have found the specific programs inappropriate, in general or for their farms, although they themselves may not meet any of the social characteristics of cowboys. This may have led to an overestimation of Swiss cowboys. On the other hand, the image of a cowboy filling in a questionnaire is almost contradictory. While self-selection bias is always an important aspect in surveys (Heckman, 1990), this applies here in particular. Assuming that a large majority of Swiss farmers with a cowboy mentality just burn the survey in their bonfire would lead to a considerable underestimation of their share among farmers. This latter point may also justify the fact that at least F1 and F2 in our sample were young and partly well educated. The more radical ‘cowboys’ usually did not bother to write any comment into the questionnaire.

As to every comparison, there are also limits to the one between Swiss farmers and cowboys. The most visible difference between classical and Swiss ‘cowboys’ is the gender aspect. Among Swiss farmers, the few women are even more likely to stress their independence and autonomy than their male counterparts. There may be an evolutionary aspect behind that. In the traditionally male-dominated agriculture of Switzerland (Rossier, 1996; Contzen and Forney, 2017), a woman needs more strength and independence to assert herself among her colleagues, so that ‘cowgirls’ may be advantaged in persevering in their profession. Therefore, the traditional masculinity of the cowboy is no longer one if transferred to the context of Swiss farmers.

Also, beyond the aspect of gender, Swiss ‘cowboys’ are, of course, not simply a copy of the North American cowboy myth. While the profession of American cowboys, as mentioned above, is secondary, Swiss ‘cowboys’ emphasize the art of producing quality food. This is the very activity where they want to receive their appreciation.

Nevertheless, by linking the cowboy myth to social sciences, Wright has enabled fruitful transfers of this image to other geographical and historic circumstances. Thus, the import of the cowboy image to agricultural systems like that of the Swiss one may help to understand why the potential of incentives is limited. Not every farmer with a net benefit will adopt public programs, and a large part of this group will not do so for principled reasons. The image of cowboys drawn by Wright from a broad social science perspective offers a key for understanding why the

economic rationale may fundamentally fail for a certain group for farmers. It remains to be seen whether the future will bring about farmers more strongly integrated in an educational system that will make them follow incentives, or if farming increasingly becomes a niche where Wright's "cowboys" may find options for their way of life and where governmental incentives will only have a very limited impact.

Internationally, this paper is only one in a row (eg. Burton et al., 2008; Gilg, 2009; Oostindie, 2015) that indicates that a stable group of farmers cannot be reached by incentivizing schemes. The low share of "our" cowboys working under organic labels indicates the threat that attempts to organize the delivery of public goods through incentives may fail. Command and control methods will always be needed if the public wants to make sure that certain practices are terminated in agricultural production.

Credit author statement

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