“Nourishing ourselves and helping the planet”

WWOOF, Environmentalism and
Ecotopia: Alternative Social Practices
between Ideal and Reality.

By

ELISABETH KOSNIK

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Abstract

A growing number of people around the world are becoming familiar with the phenomenon of ‘World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms’ (WWOOF). This movement originated forty years ago in England, but has since spread around the world. Estimations suggest that WWOOF currently has more than 90,000 signed-up members internationally. Over the last four decades WWOOF has developed as part of an environmentalist social trend in contemporary, although predominantly Western, societies. The members of WWOOF largely share a green, “ecotopian” attitude towards nature, living in the country, and the sustainable use of resources, health and nutrition, anti-consumerism and anti-capitalist ideals. This thesis is the first comprehensive ethnographic study of this international phenomenon. In it I provide an analysis of the complexities of this environmentalist social trend, and the interconnections between environmental, socio-economic, and political processes within WWOOF.

By applying a combination of methods, including participant observation as a WWOOFer in Austria and New Zealand, interviews and informal conversations with WWOOFers, hosts, directors, and voluntary organisers, as well as the founder of WWOOF herself, and the analysis of documents produced by WWOOF groups, and e-mail interviews with a number of WWOOF directors, I was able to gain a multi-sited and multi-layered perspective of the international WWOOF movement. In this analysis I ask where the ideals of WWOOF originated and how the morality of “ecotopian” thinking informs the lifeworlds of the participants. The aim of this thesis is to investigate the international WWOOF movement as it is experienced, narrated, and negotiated by its members. It demonstrates the tensions between ideals and lived reality, the contradictions and compromises, and the vast range of interpretations of their ideals that lead to internal conflict. In trying to overcome these tensions, social practices emerge that blur the boundaries between “ecotopian” green values and mainstream attitudes. I argue that by engaging in a range of alternative environmental, social, political, and economic practices the members of the WWOOF movement feel that, despite some contradictions and necessary compromises, they at least partially succeed in achieving the aims and ideals of WWOOF and their visions for a greener lifestyle and ecological society.

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Introduction

A growing number of people around the world are becoming familiar with the phenomenon of ‘World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms’, known as WWOOF. This movement originated forty years ago in England, but has since spread around the world. Estimations suggest that WWOOF currently has more than 90,000 signed up members internationally.¹ Over the last four decades WWOOF has developed as part of a social trend of environmentalist, green world views in industrialised, contemporary societies. Green world views represent a positive attitude towards nature and living in the country, as well as the sustainable use of resources, but also incorporate anti-consumerism and anti-capitalist ideals. This thesis is the first comprehensive ethnographic study of the international phenomenon WWOOF. In it I provide an analysis of the complexities of this social trend, the “green way of life”, and the interconnections between environmental, socio-economic, and political processes within the WWOOF movement.

The green, environmentalist movement is a growing global trend that has a significant impact on society, influencing and changing attitudes towards the environment, the market, and politics. It goes beyond growing concerns of climate change, destruction of the natural environment, and exploitation of finite natural resources. The members of this movement identify a link between environmental practices and the current economic system, which many perceive to be based on profit-maximisation and exploitation, causing financial insecurity and social injustice around the world. This is connected to a growing sentiment of dissatisfaction with current forms of democratic systems, criticism of large and unresponsive bureaucracies, and neoliberal politics. Such concerns have led to a “green response” to contemporary social issues. Studying this phenomenon is an increasingly important topic within social and cultural studies. Ethnographic research can provide valuable insights from the grassroots level of this global movement.

The members of the green alternative lifestyle movement search for alternative, what I call “ecotopian”, practices – environmental, socio-economic, and political alternatives to

¹ Document provided by WWIND: WWOOF Around the World in 2011.

mainstream society. This thesis introduces the reader to the worldviews and lifeworlds of the environmentalist social trend through the example of WWOOF. WWOOF is an international organisation whose members embody these current social concerns of contemporary societies, representing the alternative practices and utopian ideals in one global organisation. By analysing the social processes, the symbols, narratives, rituals, and conflicts I investigate the members' values, ideals and morals, and their struggles to implement them in their projects for alternative ways of living in contemporary societies.

This social trend based on environmentalist ideals has received some attention in academic research in various fields, where a variety of terms are used to describe the phenomenon. Marius deGeus terms it 'ecotopias', the "quest for an ecologically responsible society" (1999:22). Stephen Wearing refers to this trend as an 'ecocentric philosophy' (2009). Lucy Sargisson writes in respect to green intentional communities² that "[t]here generally exists a consensus within (if not across) these groups about what is wrong with modern society and members share a core of ideas about a better alternative" (2012:132). I extend this concept, applying it to a wider context of individuals and institutions identifying with a set of "green utopian ideals" and "ecotopian thinking". Sargisson and Lyman Sargent discuss utopianism not as a "blueprint" for a perfect society – perfection with its "suggestion of completed, finish, static, and unchanging" (Sargent 1994:21) – but as a process of imagining alternatives to the existing socio-economic and political systems (Sargisson 2012, also Sargent 1994, Sargisson and Sargent 2004). Sargent refers to this as 'social dreaming': "the dreams and nightmares that concern the ways in which groups of people arrange their lives" (1994:3), whether this might incorporate radical changes or familiar concepts of society. Taking these discussions of a "green utopian thinking" as a point of entry, this ethnographic study of the international WWOOF movement provides insights into the lifeworlds of the diverse range of people living and imagining a green utopianism and an alternative sustainable lifestyle.

The members and the organisation do not only imagine alternatives, they attempt to transform their ideals into practice, thereby continuously negotiated, changing, adapting, and developing through learning and sharing experiences with other members of the

² Sargisson defines intentional communities as "groups of people who have chosen to live (and sometimes work) together for a common purpose" (2012:129); green intentional communities "identify the environment as a core shared value" (2012:13).

movement. In my thesis I do not attempt to compare the ideals of an ecotopia with their practical reality in order to assess the level of success or impact on society. Instead, I ask how the participants experience and negotiate their lifestyles as different to and yet existing within mainstream society. They find themselves between the ideals of sharing, gift-giving, and the need for economic survival, between living in the country, off the land, and rural isolation, as well as the ideals of harmonious relationships of an extended household and the reality of power inequality and social distance. The members struggle with the constant tension between ideal ways of organising WWOOF groups based on equality and the reality of stratification, profit-making, and centralised authority. On an international level, WWOOF directors wish to engage in deliberative decision-making processes but are confronted with the formation of elites. In trying to overcome these tensions, social practices emerge that blur the boundaries between “ecotopian” green values and mainstream attitudes. Compromises and pragmatic decisions are part of this negotiation; ecotopia is not a design for a perfect society, rather it is a process. I argue that through these processes of constant negotiation the members of this green lifestyle trend, exemplified by the members of the WWOOF movement, develop alternative environmental, socio-economic, and political practices that do realise their ecotopian dreams at least to some extent.

Different to other studies in environmental anthropology this research does not focus on the non-Western world, on food security, and development (Fairhead and Leach 2012). Rather, it focuses on contemporary, industrialised, urbanised societies. It is a multi-sited study with an international scope, investigating the moral order that connects environment, socio-economic, and political processes. In order to examine these processes, experiences, and contradictions of the WWOOF movement as part of a social trend, I draw on literature from a range of fields in anthropology as well as interdisciplinary approaches. In this way, research in human geography, rural sociology and environmental anthropology, economic anthropology and kinship studies, alternative tourism studies, social studies of organisations, and political science, will be discussed in one framework, contributing new insights by demonstrating relations and connections between these fields as I examine WWOOF as part of an alternative lifestyle movement. This research project is a comprehensive ethnographic study that cuts across various analytical fields, providing an in-depth illustration of the WWOOF movement and its members. It contributes to anthropological discourses on alternative economies and fictive kinship, alternative

organisations and democratic processes. This research also provides an ethnographic contribution to the study of rural space, and the imagining of the countryside as the “better life”.

I first found out about WWOOF after finishing school. I took a gap year and was looking for volunteer work in the environmental sector where I could “get my hands dirty” and do some practical work while supporting the environment. At the local youth centre I found out about WWOOF. The aims and ethos of the organisation immediately appealed to me – getting into the countryside, connecting with nature, learning about organic farming. The possibility to do this in another country was particularly interesting for me and so I joined WWOOF-UK. I spend four weeks as a volunteer in Scotland on a small sheep farm in the Highlands, looking after the animals as well as supporting the elderly owner of the farm. As an urbanite I may have arrived with a romantic idea of what farm life would be like. However, it was a cold winter month and I soon realised that farm life could also be a challenge. Still, it was an equally fun and rewarding experience and I returned to the farm some years later (although this time during summer).

The aims of WWOOF, broadly shared by the independent national WWOOF groups, are to connect the urban population with the country, give volunteers first-hand experience of organic farming, provide practical assistance to help farmers make organic production a viable alternative, and generally foster relationships within the organic movement.³ The WWOOF exchange is the central concept of the organisation; it is a non-monetary exchange between organic growers (the WWOOF-hosts) and voluntary helpers (called WWOOFers). The role of the WWOOF groups is to provide volunteers with the contact details for WWOOF-hosts, where the WWOOFers help in exchange for food and accommodation.

WWOOF was conceptualised within the context of the back-to-the-land movement and counter-cultural movement of the 1970s. It was founded in England and was first and most successfully established in New Zealand and Australia, Northern and Central Europe, and North America. Even though the WWOOF movement is an international phenomenon with fifty national groups, its origins and values derive from a Western middle-class

³ See for example the homepages of WWOOF-Austria <http://www.woof.at/> [16/05/2012], WWOOF-NZ <http://www.woof.co.nz/> [16/05/2012], and WWOOF-UK <http://www.woof.org.uk/> [16/05/2012].

context. Keith Halfacree (2008) cautions against the use of concepts such as ‘counter-urbanisation’ derived “from village England” (2008:485) in an international context. This, I argue, equally applies to green utopianism. Sargent, however, proposes that utopianism is not the sole product of the “Christian West” and in his broad approach of ‘social dreaming’ states “that the overwhelming majority of people – probably it is even possible to say all – are, at some time dissatisfied and consider how their lives might be improved” (1994:3). The larger focus of the present thesis is on several well-established Western WWOOF groups and their members’ ideas of green utopianism, back-to-nature, and organic movement. However, I also investigate the international perspective of WWOOF outside this dominant sphere, where members try to apply the ideals of the WWOOF philosophy to their own situations. These principles, as the members themselves find, do not always translate easily to a non-Western context, and therefore can cause conflicts. Ideals are also not static but they are modified over time because of outside influences and developments inside the movement.

Ethnographic research and participant observation provided the opportunity for me to become part of the WWOOF movement and be involved with the organisation on all levels, including helping on organic farms as a WWOOFer. However, considering my limitations of time, money, and energy, I could not visit all countries where WWOOF operates. Instead, I decided on two case studies for participant observation as a WWOOFer, as well as getting to know the directors of, and working as a volunteer for, these WWOOF groups. My primary criteria for choice of field site was that both countries should be as different as possible in terms of their involvement with the WWOOF movement, yet small enough to develop a sense for WWOOF, and the organic and back-to-the-land movement more generally, in that country. My choice fell on Austria in central Europe, where a small WWOOF group is part of an active organic movement with a long history. Secondly, I chose New Zealand which is not only geographically on the opposite side of the world, but, in terms of the WWOOF exchange, is significantly different to its European sister organisation.

My two case studies, the WWOOF groups in Austria and New Zealand, are from within this dominant Western perspective of the WWOOF movement that is based on a shared historic experience of industrialisation and urbanisation. In both countries I was a WWOOFer myself, staying with eight and nine WWOOF-hosts in each country, as well as

traveling/living with the WWOOF directors. Austria and New Zealand have some characteristics in common, like their relative small size and economically peripheral status in comparison to their larger northern neighbours. Both countries are nuclear-free, a movement that influenced a strong environmental discourse in these nations since the 1960s and 1970s, concerning environmental protection and conservation (Groier 1999:280, Belich 2001:435). Austria and New Zealand also have an active organic movement to which I will return in the next chapter. However, these two case studies also demonstrate the diversity within the WWOOF movement, as conceptualisation and practice of WWOOF can be significantly different depending on the context.

WWOOF-New Zealand (WWOOF-NZ) emerged in 1973, only a year after the original group in the United Kingdom (WWOOF-UK) was established. New Zealand with its colonial past is an Anglo-centric settler society with an indigenous population and historic ties to the UK. It is now one of the largest WWOOF groups in the world, with more than two thousand hosts attracting a diverse range of members particularly among low-budget tourists. Operating as a privately owned business this group is a strong advocate for the formation of an international WWOOF association. WWOOF-Austria, in comparison, was established in 1996. It is a comparatively small group with about two hundred hosts, with a more homogenous membership base of largely domestic and German-speaking participants. It is operated by a group of volunteers as a not-for-profit association with neither the former nor current director having an interest in participating in the international WWOOF politics. These two groups exemplify two distinctly different positions within the WWOOF movement: European and non-European, small non-profit organisation and large business, with a different membership base and policies, and distinctly different views on the international relations of WWOOF groups. Choosing these two groups as my case studies enables me to discuss WWOOF as a complex movement, demonstrating their shared values as well as the diversity within it.

Academic analyses of WWOOF

Academic interest in the WWOOF phenomenon emerged only recently over the last decade with a noticeable surge within the last five years. This interest coincided with a general growth in membership numbers and the establishment of new WWOOF groups around the world. Other research confirms my own observations that there are two significant factors responsible for the growing interest in the WWOOF movement: an increasing awareness in environmental issues, organic farming and food concerns (McIntosh and Campbell 2001, Nimmo 2001, Obojes 2007), and the spreading of the internet as a new communication tool at the beginning of this century (Nimmo 2001, Seymour 2007a, Bernkopf 2009). Systematic research about WWOOF has emerged predominantly in tourism studies, but also in social and cultural studies, as well as some academic research in environmental studies. Research so far has often focused exclusively on the WWOOF exchange, not on the larger WWOOF movement, as well as restricting the study to either the experience of hosts or WWOOFers. They are predominantly quantitative studies that provide some statistic data about WWOOF. Most existing literature on WWOOF is limited in their focus to single national groups. My study is the first PhD thesis focusing on WWOOF. It has a far broader scope than has been attempted previously. The international movement and relationships between directors, which have not been analytically discussed before, form a substantial part of this study. Previous studies on WWOOF, the majority of which are Master theses, are largely unaware of each other's research and, therefore, do not draw on previous findings. In the following review I will discuss the literature on WWOOF in a systematic way, thereby providing a first overview of the existing research concerned with the WWOOF phenomenon and its members.

Rural space and counter-urbanisation

In my thesis I discuss WWOOF within the larger context of the back-to-the-land movement, its connection to the organic movement, and how these movements influenced the development of the aims of WWOOF. These aims include the intention to “reconnect”

the urban population with nature, food production, and country life. Tourism studies focus on this movement from urban to rural spaces, as well as on the WWOOFers as international travellers, addressing questions of if and how WWOOF can be considered a form of (alternative) tourism. These studies focus on analysing WWOOFers as alternative travellers who visit rural areas, WWOOF-hosts as farm-tourism, and WWOOF groups as providers of alternative tourist activities. The exclusive focus of research on WWOOF as a tourist activity has received criticism from within the WWOOF movement. I discuss the question as to why the members reject the connection with tourism in Chapter One, thereby acknowledging the perspective of the WWOOF members,.

Much of the existing research on WWOOF has developed within the context of 'alternative tourism', such as sustainable, eco-, and volunteer tourism. The term 'alternative tourism', as opposed to 'mass tourism' or 'conventional tourism', has been in use since the later part of the 20th century (Wearing 2001, Wearing and Neil 2009). Wearing and John Neil discuss how ecotourism as a form of alternative tourism derives from an attitude towards nature that is fundamentally different to mainstream views: "In essence, ecotourism experiences are sustainable in respect to both the environment and local populations, their culture, needs, and desires" (2009:12). The term 'sustainable tourism' came into use in the 1990s, with sustainability referring to a sensible use of resources to ensure their continuation (Weaver 2006). In Chapter One, I will discuss the term 'sustainability' in more detail, demonstrating its connection with the organic philosophy in a wider context.

Scholars have attempted, and often struggled, to classify WWOOF as a particular form of tourism, often at the expense of the diversity that exists within the WWOOF movement, and despite the WWOOF members' apprehension against WWOOF being labelled as a tourist activity. Researchers find that WWOOF-hosts do not understand themselves as farm stays (McIntosh and Campbell 2001), that WWOOFers wish to distinguish themselves from tourists (Nimmo 2001), and directors of WWOOF groups wish to distance WWOOF from tourism altogether (Ord 2010, Dana 2012). These studies often generate a tunnel view, focusing on the WWOOF exchange as facilitating a service to tourists and remain blind to the context of the movement, the relationship between members, and the global network of WWOOF. While these studies in tourism choose a typological approach, labelling WWOOF as various forms of tourism, analysing services

and consumer attitudes, my own ethnographic approach allows me to give a voice to my participants, explaining WWOOF in relation to their experience within the movement.

A number of studies have been conducted by a research team around Alison McIntosh on WWOOF as alternative tourism, focusing on the South Island of New Zealand (Campbell 2000, McIntosh and Campbell 2001, McIntosh and Bonnemann 2006, McIntosh 2009). WWOOFing (participation in the WWOOF exchange) is popular in New Zealand particularly among low-budget backpacker tourists, a phenomenon that also caught the attention of academia. McIntosh and Tamara Campbell (2001) analyse WWOOF-hosts' contribution to farm tourism. Their study is based on a quantitative survey exploring the abilities of WWOOF-farms to provide tourism opportunities, but reaches the conclusion "that the motivations and experiences of WWOOF-hosts were notably different from that of other farm tourism hosts. In particular, environmental ethic and shared knowledge of organic practices were considered essential" (2001:1). They provide demographic details about WWOOF-hosts, exploring their motivation, values, and attitudes. Their study also draws attention to the dimension of gender, how female hosts are often responsible for the WWOOFers, although without discussing this topic in greater depth. My own observations regarding gender issues led me to explore this aspect in greater detail, analysing the social dynamics of the WWOOF exchange in Chapters Two and Three.

McIntosh and Susanne Bonnemann (2006) extend this research by McIntosh and Campbell, analysing the WWOOFers' perspective of the alternative farm stay experience. Building on the findings of McIntosh and Campbell, a qualitative approach was chosen to evaluate hosts' and volunteers' experience with WWOOF as an alternative form of farm tourism. In her Master thesis, Tamara Campbell (2000) explores WWOOF as an aspect of farm tourism. She analyses the motivations, values, and experiences of hosts in a quantitative analysis. Her study has been criticised for not taking the hosts' diverse cultural background into account (Nimmo 2001). In her Master thesis in social science, Kathryn Nimmo (2001) explores WWOOF as a form of eco-tourism. In this interview-based analysis of WWOOFing as a travel opportunity for low-budget backpackers she analyses how push and pull travel motivations in eco-tourism create a demand for the "service" WWOOF has to offer. Like Nimmo, other studies recognise the "romantic gaze" of the WWOOFers wishing to escape the urban life in search for the alternative lifestyle (McIntosh and Bonnemann 2006, Bernkopf 2009). Elena Stateva (2012) understands

WWOOFers as farm tourists with a romantic gaze who search for the “authentic” farm life experience. However, since not all WWOOF-hosts are farmers or necessarily rural, and offer various experiences to their volunteers, I propose that the premise of these studies is too simplistic. In my research, I explore this notion further in a broader context, asking where this romantic ideal of rural space derives from, and how hosts deal with WWOOFers’ (occasionally unrealistic) concepts of country life.

Organic farming

Organic is an intrinsic aspect of WWOOF, as it is also part of the name. Yet most previous studies on WWOOF lack an in-depth discussion of the basic concepts of the WWOOF movement such as organic. In my analysis I investigate what organic means in the context of WWOOF, demonstrating the important influences of the organic movement and organic philosophy which are of much greater importance to the WWOOF movement than organic as a particular farming method. My analysis also extends this discussion further by demonstrating how the philosophy of organic influences the morality of the WWOOF exchange and the organisational structure of WWOOF groups.

McIntosh and Bonnemann critically analyse the “organic-ness” of WWOOF, revealing that not all hosts use organic principles and not all helpers are interested in learning organic practices, which leads them to conclude that WWOOF has undergone a shift from ‘organic’ to ‘alternative living’ (2006: 97). Where McIntosh and Bonnemann (2006) see a shift within WWOOF the findings by Cynthia Ord suggest that both could be understood as the same. Ord (2010) analyses WWOOF as a form of volunteer tourism in Canada. She defines WWOOF-Canada as a form of “volunteer farm tourism that is non-commercial and organic values-based” (2010:12). Ord identifies the meaning of ‘organic’ as not only a method in agriculture but also as a way of life. In my research I take this observation further, discussing WWOOF within the context of the organic movement, and how this incorporates alternative lifestyles as well as organic philosophy.

In Austria, two studies have been conducted concerning WWOOF and the organic movement. In her Master thesis in cultural anthropology on organic farming as a form of

alternative lifestyle, Petra Obojes (2007) relies exclusively on WWOOF-hosts as her research participants, but does not further analyse WWOOF or its influence on the movement. Obojes provides an ethnography of organic farming in Austria, critically examining the extent to which these farmers employ an organic, alternative, and sustainable lifestyle. Although all her participants are WWOOF-hosts, the study does not consider the influence of the WWOOF movement on the hosts' attitude and lifestyle. Nastassja Dana (2012) conducted a Master thesis on WWOOF-Austria as a form of alternative tourism. She finds that three fundamental aspects of WWOOF-Austria are organics, non-monetary exchange, and volunteering, while it does not fulfil her definition of eco-tourism. Since both are Master theses they are of course limited in their scale of research, focusing on the development in Austria. In my own research I am able to extend the scope considerably to include an historic as well as an international perspective, while discussing each case study in its own specific context, in order to develop insights into the processes within the WWOOF movement.

Alternative lifestyle and social movement

Like organic, the alternative lifestyle aspect in WWOOF is often a taken-for-granted concept of the WWOOF movement that has not received much analytical study so far. In my research, I discuss WWOOF within the broad context of the counter-cultural movement, the organic and back-to-the-land movement, and green utopianism. The trend of alternative lifestyles among WWOOF-hosts has been noted in some studies (McIntosh and Bonnemann 2006, Bernkopf 2009, McIntosh 2009, Engelsted 2011). Other research also mentions WWOOF in the context of communal living, communes and eco-villages (Komoch et al 2003, Sargisson and Sargent 2004).

A number of existing studies discuss WWOOF particularly within the context of the slow food movement, which is one aspect of my far broader approach. Angela Maycock (2008), in her article on WWOOF-USA, situates WWOOF within the local food movement concerned with promoting local and self-grown produce. Margo Lipman and Laurie Murphy (2012) discuss WWOOFing in Australia in the context of slow tourism, an aspect of the slow food movement, concerned with environmental sustainability, low impact

travel, reduced mobility, and engagement with local communities (2012:90). However, the slow food movement is just one of the aspects of WWOOF and the green utopianism of the members, as I will demonstrate in the following chapters. My analysis of WWOOF extends this perspective considerably, demonstrating how WWOOF is rooted in, and influences, the organic and back-to-the-land movements, as well as the alternative lifestyle movement, therefore belonging to a broad social trend.

Non-monetary exchange

At the heart of WWOOF is the WWOOF exchange between hosts and WWOOFers. This aspect has received some attention in academic research as an alternative form of exchange (Mosedale 2009, 2011, 2012, Farfeleder 2012). In my ethnographic study of WWOOF I engage with classic theories in economic anthropology which leads me to extend the discussion of WWOOF as an alternative form of non-monetary exchange and barter, arguing that WWOOF is in fact a form of household economy. Sue Seymour (2007b), a former WWOOF-UK director who conducted a postgraduate study in human ecology on WWOOF, defines WWOOFing as a system of alternative economy, exchange and sharing. Seymour draws attention to WWOOF as a form of ‘gift exchange’ in a Maussian sense. She argues that because WWOOFers and hosts live together similar to family members they enter a form of social sharing, of mutual obligations and non-monetary exchange. I extend Seymour’s observation in my analysis by applying theories of reciprocity and householding that, I argue, more closely resemble the members’ understanding of the exchange relationship. This includes volunteering as an intrinsic aspect of this exchange relationship which I will discuss in regard to the non-monetary exchange and gift-relationships. In previous research, WWOOF as volunteering has only been mentioned within the context of tourism, such as WWOOF as a volunteer programme and WWOOFing as a form of volunteer tourism (Schloegel 2007, McIntosh 2009, Ord 2010, Stateva 2010).

Katrina Engelsted (2011), in her postgraduate project in geography, studies the socio-economic background of WWOOF-hosts in the USA. She suggests that WWOOF-hosts are “existing sustainabilities” (2011:17), however, my observations show that this is an

ideal of green utopianism rather than reality. She observes how WWOOF is rooted within the back-to-the-land movement, promoting a sustainable lifestyle, which Engelsted interprets as a radical alternative to the market challenging mainstream thinking. She draws on Jan Mosedale (2009) and Katherine Gibson and Julie Graham's (Gibson-Graham 2006) concept of multiple economies in her analysis. Mosedale (2009, 2011, 2012) engages with Gibson-Graham's theory of the alternative and non-monetary economy in his analysis of WWOOF and diverse concepts of economy in tourism. He discusses WWOOF as barter within the category of 'alternative economy' (between the categories of market and non-market economy). Engaging with Mosedale's findings, in my research I analyse how the WWOOF exchange can go far beyond this form of exchange, demonstrating how it is perceived by the members as generalised reciprocity and householding, which closely resembles the non-economic sphere. However, as I will demonstrate in Chapter Three, the boundaries between concepts of market, alternative market and non-market become blurred in the WWOOF exchange.

In my observation of the WWOOF exchange, questions emerged about social hierarchies between host and helper, and the distinction between work and non-work. Johanna Bernkopf (2009), in her Master thesis in anthropology, conducts a micro-study on the social dynamics between one host and his WWOOFers on a WWOOF-farm in Portugal. Her research reveals the issues and problems that arise on the local level between hosts and helpers when the system of mutual exchange fails. Her personal disappointment with the WWOOF-host, who turned the alternative living project into a tourist venture with the help of his WWOOFers, led her to conclude that the WWOOF exchange is an exploitation of the volunteers (2009:4). Other studies have also mentioned the unequal exchange relationship, like Stateva (2010), who observes a hierarchical element in the host-helper relationship. Nimmo shows how WWOOFers can feel exploited as cheap labour when hosts are not willing to share their home life (Nimmo 2001:124). WWOOF-hosts, in comparison, can feel that their hospitality is being exploited by work-shy volunteers (McIntosh and Bonnemann 2006:91). In Chapter Three, I will extend the discussion of the WWOOF exchange by applying anthropological concepts of the gift exchange, reciprocity, and redistribution.

Dagmar Cronauer (2012), in her Master thesis in tourism management, examines the interpersonal relationships between host and WWOOFers in New Zealand, and their

motivations for, and perceived benefits from, the WWOOF exchange. She finds that most participants enjoy the close personal encounter of the WWOOF exchange, but points out that the relationship is dominated by the host who determines the conditions of the relationship, questioning whether there really is a reciprocal exchange. Cronauer defines the WWOOF exchange as barter, drawing a clear division between work and social sphere. This perspective neglects the social aspects of work and exchange, which I will further investigate in my thesis, regarding gift-exchange relationships between host and helper, and the merging of the spheres of work and private life.

Fictive kinship

A significant aspect of my thesis, which has not received any academic attention in previous research about WWOOF, is fictive kinship relationships within the shared WWOOF household. A number of studies, however, investigate WWOOFing as an alternative learning experience. I discuss the learning and teaching aspect of the WWOOF exchange in the context of fictive kinship, examining experiences of sharing a household and the intimate relationships between host and helper. Tom Stehlik (2002) reflects on his experience as a WWOOF-host, stating that WWOOF is a form of alternative adult learning outside mainstream institutions. Engelsted (2011) notes teaching as a significant aspect of the WWOOF exchange for the participants. With her Master thesis in environmental studies, Maggie Melin (2012) conducted one of the few studies analysing WWOOF within an international scope. In her quantitative online survey she explores WWOOFing as a form of “active learning”, investigating behavioural change in her participants. She recognises an attitude among WWOOFers who are “testing the water” of the alternative lifestyle through WWOOFing. Melin observes the importance of a positive relationship between host and WWOOFer for a successful learning experience.

In my research I discuss the learning experience as an aspect within a much larger context as a way of socialising the WWOOFer into the household of the host. This, I argue in my thesis, is an element of “being part of the family”, and fictive kinship. The members of WWOOF refer to this aspect as the ‘cultural exchange’. McIntosh and Bonnemann (2006) state that more research is needed to explore how and if cultural exchange and the sharing

of knowledge happens between hosts and volunteers. In my thesis I have identified ‘cultural exchange’ as an intrinsic part of the WWOOF ethos and rhetoric, discussing it in much detail in Chapter Three.

While only a few researchers studying WWOOF have first-hand experience as WWOOF-hosts or WWOOFers (Nimmo 2001, Stehlik 2002, Bernkopf 2009, Stateva 2010, Farfeleder 2012) the majority rely on quantitative data from (online) questionnaires, or on a number of, often very limited, interviews. Interviews can provide some insight into the lifeworlds of the participants; however, it is participant observation that allows the researcher to experience the lifeworlds of the participants him/herself. The researcher gains knowledge through experience, a phenomenological, physical and emotional experience, and can then draw on this knowledge to interpret the lifeworlds of the participants. I will discuss my own methodological approach further in the following section.

Interpretative framework

Before I began to study WWOOF as a researcher, I was a WWOOFer myself. Therefore, I am not an outsider but rather a member of the movement, sharing many of the values and ideals of the WWOOF philosophy. Because of this I chose the epistemological approach of ‘lifeworld ethnography’ (Hitzler and Honer 1988, Honer 1989, Knoblauch 2003). In particular I draw on Hubert Knoblauch’s (2003) discussion of ‘lifeworld ethnography’. In the context of religious studies Knoblauch discusses ethnography “at home” – that is, the use of qualitative methods and participant observation in a field with which the researcher is largely familiar. This methodological discussion derived from Knoblauch’s interest in how to do ethnography of religion in the researcher’s own society. In my thesis I replicate this approach in order to study the WWOOF movement, green utopianism and the alternative ecotopian lifestyle movement in contemporary Western societies, a field with which I am familiar to some extent.

Lifeworld ethnography emphasises the participation aspect of ethnographic research, to become part of the field and experience what it means to be a member of a household, organisation, or other social group, to share the same (physical) experiences and take on (at least temporarily) their relevance system. This approach emphasises the possibility to draw on one's subjective experience as data. Other researchers also take this approach. Janet Carsten (2012) emphasises the importance of what she calls "total immersion" in the field. John Van Maanen discusses the application of participant observation in organisation studies and states that "the use of such techniques in organizational studies literally forces the researcher to come to grips with the essential ethnographic question of what it is to be rather than to see a member of the organization" (2007 [1979]:293). David Mosse points out that the researcher learns about an organisation by "engaging in 'observant participation' rather than 'participant observation'" (2001:161). These statements apply to both my levels of research: on the "grassroots" level of engaging as a WWOOFer with hosts and other WWOOFers, and the organisational level of WWOOF groups, with which I was also involved to some extent, meeting, living and travelling with WWOOF directors, and helping out with various tasks as a voluntary organiser.

Knoblauch reminds his readers that researchers need to develop an understanding of the significance an experience has for the people under study, and at the same time establish what their own understanding of this activity is. This second aspect leads to the dilemma of the 'hermeneutic circle'. Knoblauch states that the researcher can only study what she or he already knows (2003:31). Knoblauch emphasises that in a lifeworld ethnography the 'hermeneutic circle' can be used to reflect and draw on this pre-existing knowledge on which researchers base their studies. I agree with this position that being familiar with and sharing many aspects of a green world view and belief system has provided me with pre-existing knowledge about the context of environmental discourses and attitudes towards nature on which I could draw not only in my analysis of the data, but also during field research when engaging with the participants of my research.

Michael Jackson (1989) calls the total immersion and acquiring knowledge through lived experience the radical empirical method. Jackson draws attention to the importance of the reciprocal activity of debating and exchanging points of view with the participants. It is this reciprocal activity that added to my understanding of the lifeworlds of hosts, directors, and other WWOOFers whose experiences I did not share or whose points of views differed

from mine. In discussions with my participants I could draw on this pre-existing knowledge of environmental issues, often discovering a certain likeminded-ness in ecotopian thinking that would connect me with my research participants. In Chapter Three I will return to this issue of shared ideals between hosts and WWOOFers, and how this can be the basis for close personal relationships. Beliefs did not always concur in every respect. However, this did not automatically mean that there could be no sympathy. On the contrary, participants who discussed their beliefs, lifestyle choices, and necessary compromises illustrated the difficulties of transforming ecotopian ideals into everyday practices.

Being Austrian and living in New Zealand for more than three years also informed my knowledge about these countries, environmental issues and politics. My nationality meant that I blended in with WWOOFers in Austria as well as in New Zealand. In Austria, domestic and German speaking WWOOFers are in the majority and many hosts expressed feeling more comfortable communicating in their first language. My Austrian hosts treated me as an urbanite visiting the countryside, educating me about organic food production and the reality of farm life. By contrast, in New Zealand I was an international traveller, blending in with the mainly foreign WWOOFers. My hosts introduced me, the foreigner, to life in New Zealand, their rural or semi-rural lifestyles, and family life in Pākehā, Māori, and immigrant households. In both countries I was therefore a “typical” WWOOFer for my hosts.

Throughout this study I have included my own voice and position in the analysis of WWOOF, my place as a domestic or international WWOOFer, a young woman, an independent traveller, my expectations towards my hosts and the directors, and a reflection on the joyous, awkward, and disappointing moments which have influenced my findings and interpretations. In the beginning of this introduction I have stated that I was a member of the movement long before I became interested in WWOOF as a research topic. Since then I am committed to the ideological views of the green lifestyle movement, an ecologically conscious urbanite, even though I have not “returned to the country” as a WWOOFer between my first WWOOF experience and my field research. Researchers who utilise lifeworld ethnography emphasise the importance of self-reflection (Honer 1989, Knoblauch 2003). As a single female traveller I often became a confidant in particular, but not exclusively, for female hosts who shared with me not only their

opinions on WWOOF and a green lifestyle, but also their life stories, fears, hopes and dreams. Other hosts and WWOOFers have told me of similar experiences.

On the grassroots level, the concept of the WWOOF exchange made access to the field immediate and easy. Immersion into the lifeworlds of my participants (although only short-term) was uncomplicated, as it is an intrinsic aspect of the WWOOF exchange, which I will discuss further in Chapter Two. However, it was also intense and sometimes emotional and exhausting. WWOOF-hosts saw me first and foremost as a WWOOFer, working and living like other WWOOFers in their home, and often, I found, asking similar questions to other volunteers who were equally interested to learn more about their hosts' background and lifestyle. It implied experiencing the rural lifestyle of hosts, engaging in an alternative economy (the WWOOF exchange), and being a member of an extended household (the fictive kinship of the WWOOF household), and their everyday work and home life. Carsten (2012) observes about her own field experience that she would often doubt she "was behaving like a proper anthropologist" (2012:9), when engaging in mundane household tasks. Having myself spent many hours cleaning windows, pools, and bathrooms as part of my fieldwork, this is a sentiment to which I can relate. However, this immersion in my hosts' everyday life did provide me with the experience of the WWOOFer and the alternative lifestyle of hosts, enabling me to reflect critically on these aspects of the WWOOF exchange.

The narratives of my participants are an important aspect of my study, "the storylines and discursive practices through which people make sense of themselves and their relations with others" (Eränta et al 2009:351), reproducing and transforming cultural meanings, norms and values. The narratives of the participants, the members of the organisation, carry their individual and also collective understandings of what constitutes the social group (Götz 2007). It is important to note, however, that the narratives collected from participants are already interpretations, their interpretations of the phenomenon (Van Maanen 2007 [1979]). Ethnographic writing, Helen Schwartzman (1993) points out, is characterised by the unresolved tensions between diverging perspectives of the participants' voices and their assumptions about what is taken for granted, and between the participants' point of view and the ethnographers' description. Albrecht Lehmann (2007) observes how personal experience and their interpretations are never objective since all

consciousness is built on subjectivity. It is the living, acting, expressive human being that is at the centre of the analysis of consciousness.

Narratives can be contradictory, as I found out particularly in regard to the conflicts among the WWOOF directors on an international level. There is a tension in ethnographic writing how to represent differing points of view. Multiple actors involved in the organisation demand the representation of multiple and possibly competing views, each with their “distinct interests, concerns, and priorities” (Mosse 2001:160). WWOOF is a diverse network of relationships, on a grassroots level between host and helper, on an organisational level, and on a global level; all levels of engagement are part of this study. Members facilitate, participate in, and interpret the WWOOF exchange, making sense of and transcending its meaning to other levels of engagement and thereby constructing the dynamics within the social group. Consequently, I engaged with participants with differing perspectives in various field sites which occasionally contradicted each other. Instead of trying to establish what is “true” or “real”, I aim to represent different positions within the WWOOF movement.

The present study on WWOOF is not only multi-positioned (Mosse 2005:11), but also multi-sited (Marcus 1995). WWOOF does not exist in one specific place but in many different spaces, at national offices and international meetings, wherever hosts meet volunteers, and even in virtual space of online forums. It is a multi-sited field that requires a multi-sited ethnography. Multi-sited ethnography, as George Marcus states, moves the focus away from the bounded field site to a global perspective:

Ethnography moves from its conventional single-site location, contextualized by macro-constructions of a larger social order, such as the capitalist world system, to multiple sites of observation and participation that cross-cut dichotomies such as the “local” and the “global”, the “lifeworld” and the “system” (1995:95).

Instead of the intensive ethnographic investigation of a single field site, Marcus suggests to trace and “examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects, and identities in diffuse time-space” (1995:96). Extending this concept, Ghassan Hage defines the ‘global research site’ as a geographically non-contiguous space with a specific transnational culture and enduring social relations. Within this site, the researcher studies “global relations and the circulation of goods, communication, money, people and emotions that occur within them” (Hage 2005:467). WWOOF lacks a central authority, mission statement, regulations and

standards. It is the connections, associations, and relationships between the members that need to be analysed as constituting the WWOOF movement.

While WWOOF is multi-sited, I agree with critiques of a multi-sited ethnography that it can be too broad in its approach and an unrealistic attempt to capture every aspect of the research subject (Hage 2005, Candea 2009, Carsten 2012). Matei Candea sees the multi-sited ethnography as a call for a new holism, demanding complete accounts of field sites, which he argues, is something no ethnography can ever achieve. Instead, Candea argues in favour of the bounded field site, which he states is in itself always multi-sited, based on many physical locations, historical, institutional, and conceptual spaces (2009:35). In this sense, refining Marcus' concept, the WWOOF movement could be conceptualised as a bounded field site, not in a spatial sense, but as a social group. Hage (2005), who studies the Lebanese diaspora, also reaches the conclusion that his study is in fact single-sited, or what he calls a 'global site' (2005:466). For Hage, a geographically dispersed research subject is not necessarily multi-sited. Each location is a sub-cultural group with its own variation. Hage suggests two ways of studying such a dispersed subject: either to study one group and its sub-culture in relation to the local culture, or to study the relations between the sub-cultural groups. Most previous studies about WWOOF have analysed independent WWOOF groups exclusively within their national context. I extend this approach by studying the relations between the members, exploring the transnational culture of the WWOOF movement, while grounding the research within my two case studies.

Hage focuses on the "transnational culture at the expense of their settlement culture" (2005:467). He deems it an impossible task to do both at the same time. In my research I too had to exclude certain aspects, like a discussion of the visual imagery used by WWOOF groups that often seem to emphasise the image of a "rural idyll". There are also a number of amateur documentaries and video blogs about WWOOF available on the internet, which I do not draw on in my research. The analysis is largely limited to the "real life" interactions between members, excluding for example online blogs and communications about WWOOF on social networking sites. While I am aware of these fields, and how they might well add to the picture of the international WWOOF movement, I decided it was too expansive for the present study to include them. As Hage puts it, it is beneficial for the research to define the limits of one's study: "No ethnography can capture all social relations in any case, but a certain reflexivity concerning the social

relations that one is opting not to cover in depth cannot but be beneficial in allowing a better definition of the limits and limitations of one's research" (2005:466).

However, limiting a multi-sited research might be less of a conscious decision where the choice of sites depends on other conditions, as Carsten points out:

Access to some sites might simply be unavailable to researchers, or limitations of time and energy might severely circumscribe the scope of range of sites. Some locations might be selected mainly on grounds of feasibility or convenience; others might remain undiscovered or off limits to the researcher. (2012:12)

I found it was simply impossible to establish contacts with all WWOOF groups. IT difficulties and language barriers, for example, as well as time constraints and limited funds meant that I could not get to know all WWOOF directors. My in-depth analysis is therefore limited to the well-established WWOOF groups in Austria and New Zealand, the original group in the UK, and Australia, the biggest WWOOF group in the world. This defines my research focus to a large extent. Carsten critically points out, that "only those sites that have been selected can be linked together in a particular 'logic of association'" (2012:12). To avoid a too narrow perspective, I therefore made an effort to include at least to some extent other, also non-Western, WWOOF groups in this present study. Through telephone and e-mail conversations and interviews I became well acquainted with the directors from Bangladesh, Cameroon, Canada, Chile, India, Japan, Portugal, Spain, and USA and their WWOOF groups. These additional contacts added valuable information to the study of WWOOF as an international movement, and in particular to the analysis of the international network of WWOOF groups. In the following section I will introduce my research participants and discuss in detail how I gathered my research data through field research, document analysis, and online research.

Field research and research participants

To gain an in-depth understanding of WWOOF and all its members, from hosts to WWOOFers, voluntary organisers, administrators, and directors, I decided to involve

myself in the organisation in various ways.⁴ To gain data from the “grassroots level”, the WWOOF exchange between host and WWOOFer, I joined the organisation as a WWOOFer in Austria and New Zealand. Both countries are different in their environmental, historic, and social setting, as well as their politics and policies, resulting in diverse engagement with an alternative green lifestyle. By living and working with my research participants, cohesive ideals and shared values, as well as inconsistencies, contradictory perspectives and differences between the WWOOF ethos and real practices were revealed.

My first encounter with WWOOF was ten years earlier when I was WWOOFing in Scotland. My interest in WWOOF as a research topic emerged after having finished my Master degree in European Ethnology. My first contact with the field as a researcher was an exploratory research trip to a WWOOF-farm in Saskatchewan, Canada, in 2009 where I spent three weeks on an eco-tourism and lumber farm. Since this initial research trip I have been keeping a research diary to record conversations and observations, as well as note reflections on my personal and emotional involvement with the organisation and its members. Early research questions emerged from this experience, concerning national differences and similarities among hosts, the roles of hosts and WWOOFers in a shared household, and the question of what constitutes work and non-work in the WWOOF exchange.

After this initial trip I contacted the WWOOF-Austria director, Doris, for a first interview at her suburban home in central Austria. Over the following six months I was continuously involved with the Austrian group as a volunteer. I accompanied Doris on a ‘host-tour’⁵ for two days during which we visited seven WWOOF-hosts. These ‘host-tours’ take place once or twice a year to keep up the contact between the director and the WWOOF-hosts. I met Doris again for two more interviews and at other events where I also helped as a WWOOF volunteer, for example promoting WWOOF at a youth job fair. At these occasions I also met other WWOOF volunteers. I attended the monthly WWOOF gathering in Vienna, a question and answer session for prospective hosts and WWOOFers, and a place to meet for the members. There, I interviewed two other voluntary organisers and observed the event. In 2011 I returned to Austria for further

⁴ Date of ethics approval: 08/12/2009.

⁵ Host-tours are not specific to WWOOF-Austria, other directors have reported similar practices.

research. I met Doris again, who by then had retired as WWOOF director, and was introduced to the new WWOOF-Austria director, Nadine. I accompanied Nadine to another WWOOF gathering in Vienna, again having a chance to meet prospective and current hosts and WWOOFers and observing the social event.

My first lengthy field research took place in the same area in Austria that I had previously visited together with Doris on the host-tour. I chose this approach because I had already established rapport with some of the hosts in this area and hoped that this would benefit my research project. Indeed, all hosts who I approached readily agreed to participate in my research, including a few new ones I had not met previously. I spent about a week each on five WWOOF-farms in central Austria. Participant observation as a WWOOFer meant living in close contact with the host families, developing new skills, and sometimes required demanding physical work on a daily basis. The WWOOF-hosts who I visited on my four trips in total were always clustered closely together. This was done deliberately as it provided me with the opportunity to become involved with the local community. The hosts often knew each other which offered opportunities to share information and gossip. I attended and participated in local events and festivities, got used to the local dialect, and acquired local knowledge. When I returned to Austria in 2011 for a second field trip I chose the Western part of Austria in order to be in an area as different to the first as possible. There I spent four weeks with three WWOOF-hosts. During this final field trip I had the opportunity to review field data that had emerged during my first trip two years earlier, expanding my initial findings.

I conducted one recorded semi-structured interview with my first hosts, but then decided to rely on conversations and written notes from my field diary. Like other researchers in ethnography I prefer this approach to recorded interviews (see for example Weiss 2001). The most “rewarding” conversations often occurred during work and meal times, sometimes with the whole family and other WWOOFers present. It was not practical to use a voice recorder in these settings; working in the fields or in a stable, I found it impossible to carry a recorder with me in case a conversation would emerge. Placing a recorder on the dinner table with the whole family sitting around it I found equally unsuitable, as this would have distracted the normal flow of conversations.

Informal conversations can flow “naturally”, but they are not random. Topics emerge because of the circumstances, while working or eating together, attending an event, or were simply brought up by myself as a starting point for a focused conversation. Such focused conversations can revolve around a topic for a time, discussing it from different angles. Sometimes the conversation would start up again at a different time after my participants or I had time to think the topic over. Language barriers (not only in New Zealand, but also the different dialects of rural Austria) could also be overcome in lengthy discussions, as well as through participation and observation. For clarity, I differentiate in the footnotes of this study between quotes taken from recorded and transcribed interviews, and conversations recorded in my field diaries.

The second field research period took place in New Zealand. Access to the field was straightforward as I contacted potential participants through e-mail or phone, finding their contact details in the WWOOF host-list. Like in Austria, I introduced my research interests up-front, while at the same time offering my help as a WWOOFer. Only very few WWOOF-hosts declined because they did not wish to be part of my research project (some declined because they did not have time for me). My first field trip in New Zealand took place in the northern region of the South Island in 2010. I chose this area because the WWOOF-NZ directors, who I planned to visit during this field trip, also lived there. I spent six weeks with five WWOOF-hosts. During my field trip I conducted semi-structured interviews with three WWOOF-hosts. This more formal interview approach was necessary where I did not work or eat together with my hosts, and therefore no informal conversations took place. This demonstrates the limitations of the conversational approach which I generally preferred. I met two WWOOF-agents in the region who sign up members in their area, as well as many WWOOFers, ten of whom participated in my research. I also interviewed the “WWOOF-coordinator” of a rural commune which I visited six times during my stay in the area. After I had visited my hosts the WWOOF-NZ directors invited me to stay with them for a week. We had a lengthy interview, but this stay also provided me with an opportunity to gain insights into their daily operations since the WWOOF-office was situated within their family home. For the next three years I remained in frequent contact with the directors through e-mail conversations.

In 2011 I commenced a second field trip in New Zealand at the top of the North Island. This choice was deliberate as I hoped to include several hosts of Maori descent in my

research. I stayed with four WWOOF-hosts, spending another five weeks in the field. My research participants in New Zealand are in almost equal numbers of Maori descent, Pākeha,⁶ and immigrants from Europe and North America (this is, however, not representative for the percentage among the total number of WWOOF-hosts in New Zealand, where, according to the WWOOF-NZ directors,⁷ there are far fewer hosts of Maori descent than Pākeha and immigrants).

Two more research trips occurred, one to the UK and one to Australia. WWOOF-UK was not initially part of my research because I had underestimated the importance of this group. During my research, however, I discovered that WWOOF-UK, as the original WWOOF group, still played an important role for the international WWOOF movement, particularly regarding international relationships among groups and the current process of establishing an internationally representative WWOOF association. Therefore, I decided to include WWOOF-UK in my project. I had already established e-mail contacts with Sue, the founder of WWOOF, as well as Nancy, a former WWOOF-UK director. Both invited me for a visit. For three days I stayed with Nancy on her sheep farm in northern England where I conducted a lengthy, semi-structured interview with her and her partner Leon. Only then did I learn that Leon was a director of WWOOF-Italy who was intensively involved with the international network of WWOOF directors, thereby adding valuable insights to my research. Before traveling on I met with a regional organiser of the UK group for an interview. Next, I travelled to a village in the South of England where I visited Sue at her house. I stayed for two days as a WWOOFer, helping her in her garden, which gave me plenty of opportunities for informal conversations, a semi-structured interview, and observations.

The final research trip was a short visit to Australia in April 2012, to meet the WWOOF-Australia director, Ryan, and his office team. I visited Ryan for two days and spent half a day in the WWOOF-Australia office, which provided me with the opportunity to observe the operations of the largest WWOOF group of the world. This trip was financially supported by the WWOOF-NZ directors who firmly believed that I should gain first-hand

⁶ New Zealander of European descent.

⁷ Like almost all WWOOF groups, WWOOF-NZ does not produce any statistical data on membership.

information from WWOOF-Australia, after having visited the directors in the UK. In the final chapter I will discuss the complicated relationship between these groups in detail.⁸

In my thesis I have kept all participants' identities confidential and I have not provided specific details of where they live, apart from the general region to offer some context. Even though the WWOOF community, and especially the network of WWOOF directors, is not very large I want to provide anonymity for the members who expressed their opinions about controversial issues. For this reason I occasionally do not give information even about the gender or nationality of the participant. This applies to all my research participants except the founder of WWOOF, Sue, who, I realised, has too public a profile to remain anonymous. I draw on her essays published on WWOOF-websites, under her name, as well as several interviews published in newspapers and online which the founder herself sent to me. As all of these sources are publically available this does not pose any ethical issues. Sue expressed that she thought it unnecessary to try and keep her name confidential, although I still refrain from disclosing details about her home.

In total I spent more than 15 months doing field research, 23 weeks of which I spent on WWOOF-farms in three countries. During this period I have visited 22 WWOOF-farms, and in total 67 WWOOFers, hosts, directors, and voluntary organisers, as well as the founder herself actively participated in my research. I have translated all interviews and conversations conducted in German (with Austrian and New Zealand participants) into English, as well as drawing on written documents in both languages; these documents I discuss below.

⁸ WWOOF-NZ's offer of financial sponsorship was an ethical dilemma for me, since I did not wish to become biased towards, or pressured to support, their perspectives. However, after it was agreed with the WWOOF-NZ directors that I would remain independent in my research and that they did not expect a certain outcome, I accepted the offer. I could not pass up this opportunity, which I deemed important in order to gain more insights and learn about the conflicts and relationships between the WWOOF directors.

Image 1: Small-scale dairy farm, Austria 2009 (Photo: Kosnik 2009).

Image 2: Self-sufficient grower, New Zealand 2010 (Photo: Kosnik 2010).

Image 3: Maori host, New Zealand 2011 (Photo: Kosnik 2011).

Image 4: Herbal garden, Austria 2011 (Photo: Kosnik 2011).

Document analysis

Beyond participant observation, handwritten field notes, and recorded semi-structured interviews, I draw on written documents produced by the members of WWOOF, such as the three WWOOF conference reports (UK 2000, Japan 2006, South Korea 2011) and conference papers by individual delegates from the UK conference in 2000, the WWOOF-books or host-lists, homepages, (electronic and paper) newsletters, and pamphlets of several WWOOF groups. I also draw on statistic data created by WWOOF-Australia and WWIND (WWOOF-Independents UK). The charter proposal for the International WWOOF Association (IWA) is available online.⁹ It provides details about how the association should operate, its intrinsic values and possible organisation structure. A consultation report by Seymour (2007a), a former WWOOF-UK director, analyses the response of directors to the proposed IWA. The founder of WWOOF published two essays online, one concerning the history and development of WWOOF (Coppard 2006), and *'Reasons to be Organic'* (Coppard 2008). Other documents are three commissioned reports for the UK-group (Mercer 2000, Smaje and Rowlatt 2003, Smaje 2006), which were made available to me by the authors, with the permission of the UK office.

Documents and reports produced by WWOOF groups present a particular image of their own organisations and the aims and values become explicit. They are also part of the members' shared knowledge about WWOOF and influence the relationships among the members.¹⁰ The analysis of these documents as ethnographic data provides an insight into the organisational culture and structure. These documents reveal the self-perception of the groups, their ideals, and how they present themselves to their members and the public. In their discussion of archival research, Cheryl Rodriguez and Yvette Baber (2002) point out that archival data is not necessarily unbiased. Documents are not "neutral" sources, but events and activities are portrayed and narrated in a specific way for their intended audiences (also Lehmann 1983, 2007, Hüskens 2007). Through contact with the authors I developed a better understanding of who they are and under what circumstances the documents were produced. This added to the wider picture as it provided me with information on social interactions and discourses among the members of WWOOF.

⁹ http://www.WWOOFinternational.org/office/iwa_charter_proposals.rtf [17/06/2010].

¹⁰ See in particular Chapter Five.

Online research

In 2010 I contacted all WWOOF directors with whom I had not had any previous interaction. The aim was to gain a more diverse perspective about WWOOF. Out of these 32 national groups not yet contacted by me, eight gave a positive response and answered my questions by e-mail (I refer to these as ‘e-mail interviews’ in the footnotes, different to the more general ‘e-mail conversations’ I frequently had with many former and current directors). Some declined or directed me to online resources because they lacked the time to participate in my research. Many did not respond at all. An aspect frequently mentioned by online researchers is their difficulty to build rapport with participants they never meet face-to-face (Orgad 2005). A lack of trust from the research participants can slow the progress of online research down. This may be a reason for the low number of responses I received.

As others have mentioned, online research requires much time and commitment, answering e-mails quickly in order to keep up the regular flow of conversation (Kivits 2005, Orgad 2005). This process indeed took up more time than I had initially expected and, because of time restraints, I had to be content with the small number of answers I received. Nonetheless, they provided me with additional knowledge to my field research and analysis of documents. In my online study I followed Joëlle Kivits approach and established “pre-interview contacts” (2005:39) by introducing myself and my research. A questionnaire was sent out after receiving a positive response. When the questionnaire was returned I replied to my participants with follow up questions. Through this procedure I received five complete questionnaires and information about eight WWOOF directors in total (Bangladesh, Cameroon, Canada, Chile, India, Portugal, Spain, and USA). This approach also proved useful when I first contacted the founder of WWOOF, as well as one of the founding members of WWOOF-NZ.

By using e-mails as a form of communication I not only gained information about WWOOF groups, but also experienced first-hand how communication processes work between members of the global WWOOF movement. This observation revealed communication problems because of language barriers, technical problems, the slow pace of the communication, and the uncertainty of not knowing the real person “behind the

name”. These issues also shape the relationships among the WWOOF directors, influencing the conflict between groups. I will return to this topic in the final chapter of the thesis. Shani Orgad (2005) explores the process of turning an online research relationship into an offline relationship. I agree with Orgad’s findings that moving from online to offline communication contextualises people’s statements. Initial e-mails with hosts and directors, as well as the founder of WWOOF, generally focused on the exchange of basic information, such as CV’s, statistical data, and official “mission statements”. When these online contacts turned into face-to-face relationships, the initial statements were contextualised with background information about hosts and directors, their opinions, values, and personal experiences.

By applying a combination of methods, including participant observation as a WWOOFer and voluntary organiser, interviews and informal conversations with people who are involved in various ways with the WWOOF movement, analysis of documents produced by WWOOF groups, and e-mail interviews with a number of WWOOF directors, I was able to gain a multi-layered perspective of the international WWOOF movement. In the final section of the introduction I turn to the historic context of this thesis. WWOOF and the green utopianism of the WWOOF philosophy are based on the ideal of connecting with nature and a sustainable ecosystem. This ideology has a historic development, and is therefore not universally the same. How people imagine “the rural” and engage with nature varies depending on the context. I will discuss this briefly in the following section in order to provide some historic background to the discussion of WWOOF in the following chapters. In particular, I will focus on the back-to-the-land movement as a strong influence on WWOOF.

Imagining “the rural”

In his study of Anglo-American images of the countryside, geographer Michael Bunce (1994) calls the romantic notion for rural space an “ancient theme”. It is older than the back-to-nature trend of the 18th century and has parallels in the 1970s experiments of rural communes (Bunce 1994, also Altman and Chemers 1984 [1980]). It is the dream of

escaping urban spaces to enjoy the “good life” (Marsh 1982, Bunce 1994, Braun 2012). In the following section I briefly cover the main points of the back-to-the-land movement, beginning with industrialisation and the Romantic era in Europe as the philosophical background to this movement. I will then turn to the perceptual aspects of rural space, the use of the land and the imagining of the countryside, traditional knowledge of the land and agriculture on one side, and on the other “the rural” as imagined and experienced by the (urban) population. In particular, I focus on England as the birth-place of WWOOF, and New Zealand and Austria as the specific case studies of this analysis.

The Romantic movement in Europe

Bunce (1994) traces the philosophical roots of the back-to-nature movement back to 18th century France, to Diderot and Rousseau:

For Diderot, creative genius drew inspiration from nature rather than society. Rousseau took this idea further by arguing that general human fulfilment was dependent on living a life which was natural. He believed that humans should first seek identity with nature, live in the ‘natural state’. Only then could the perfect human society be formed. Rousseau’s belief in the importance of returning to nature was influenced by his growing antagonism towards eighteenth-century civilisation. It was, of course, a reaction against the forces of rational science and economics; the guiding principles of industrialism. (1994:26)

A socially widespread “romantic attitude towards nature” (1994:26, also Bargatzky 1994) of 19th century Europe was inspired by this philosophy. With modern urbanisation rural space became, in the imagination of many, the sanctuary away from the “alienating conditions of industrialism” (1994:28), discovering the aesthetic value of landscape. This development also initiated tourism as a recreational activity, initially only for the upper classes (Wearing 2001).

While the rural population all across Europe emigrated to the city and country populations declined, nostalgia emerged among some people for the rural lifestyle that was thought to have been “lost” (Marsh 1982, Groier 1999). This notion was at first held among the upper classes, professionals, and artists, who began to seek the escape from the city to a rural utopia. In England, the country became the topic of countless “country books”, the

conservation movement was initiated, and arts, crafts, and architecture were inspired by the “romantic rural idyll” (Marsh 1982). Jan Marsh calls this “collective pastoralism” (1982:247). Rooted in Victorian city life, experienced as the centre of poverty and pollution, urban populations began to imagine “the rural” as the healthier and more natural environment in which to live. Those who could afford it moved to the country, and with the extension of the railway commuted into the city (Marsh 1982).

In continental Europe during the Romantic era, nature societies emerged, as did the vegetarian and conservation movements, and the theosophical and anthroposophical (Rudolf Steiner) movements promoting a holistic lifestyle and spirituality. In Austria, small-scale gardens were established in the suburbs promoting food subsistence, health, and later recreation. Initially, this trend was carried by the middle-class, artists and intellectuals, concerned with overcrowding, unemployment, and promoting self-sufficiency in food production (Groier 1999:25). Small plots of land were used to grow fruit and vegetables for the private household. At first a necessity it later became a leisure activity, cultivating one’s own piece of land on the outskirts of the city (1999:57).

Marsh draws attention to the parallels between the 1890s “forgotten ‘alternative’ movement” (1982:7) in Europe and the counter-culture movement of the 1970s that spread from the US to Europe.

For some, going back to the land meant more than just living there, it meant a deeper sense of returning to cultivation, to agrarian life and a closer, intimate relation with the earth. And this led to individuals and groups – motivated by the same desire as that which impelled similar young people in the 1960s and ‘70s to leave London for hill farms and rural communes – seeking out smallholdings and plots of land, where they endeavoured to grow their own food and live out the Simple Life. Characteristically idealist, they saw their experiments as models for the future, when the whole population would abandon the competitive, commercial world of the city and join the pioneers in a new life of peaceful co-operation and personal harmony. (1982:93)

Many sectarian and religious communities sought the freedom to enact their alternative lifestyles in the rural countryside (Bunce 1999). Michael Groier (1999) states how these utopias of the 19th century challenged bourgeois values similar to the alternative movements of the 1970s. The back-to-the-land movement was never the exclusive domain of one particular ideology or political orientation; positive sentiments for the countryside could be mobilised for different ends. There are “radical” counter-cultural, as well as

conservative and nationalist trends within the back-to-the-land movement, and no consensus over the imagining of rural space.

According to Annegret Braun (2012), “the rural” becomes the canvas for the projections of the desires of the urbanites, for whom it is an “exotic” place associated with holidays and childhood memories, media images and stories. Geographer Gill Valentine (2001) discusses the imagining of the English “rural idyll”:

Within this landscape, the dominant imagining is of a peaceful, tranquil, close-knit and timeless or unchanging community, characterized by harmonious social relationships, which are regarded somehow as more ‘authentic’ and sincere than the falseness and competitiveness of urban relationships... This is a romantic vision based on nostalgia for a past way of life which is “remembered” as purer, simpler, more innocent and closer to nature (2001:256).

The image of the “rural idyll” can also perpetuate a stereotypical rurality as middle-class, white, and heterosexual (Valentine 2001), of conservative family values and male authority (Trauger 2007), and of taken-for-granted dominant religious beliefs and customs. In the following two sections I discuss the image of “the rural”, imaginings of a “rural idyll”, and how people engage with the countryside, in regard to my two case studies Austria and New Zealand.

Austria

In Austria the small-scale self-sufficient family farm dominated rural spaces until the mid-20th century, particularly in mountainous peripheral areas (Groier 1999). It was and sometimes still is based on the ‘stem family’, “a domestic group composed of parents...living with one married child who has taken over the family property and has begun rearing offspring of his own” (Rebel 1978:255). In his research about local knowledge of natural resources among farmers in Austria, Sebastian Wahlhütter (2011) states that the older generation of farmers, who had grown up on self-sufficient family farms in the post-war period, still emphasise the importance of *Grund und Boden*. He describes this as an ideology that assumes that the inherited family land is the only reliable source of prosperity and security, and therefore cannot easily be sold or traded (2011:131).

Wahlhütter observes how this conviction is less prominent amongst younger generations of farmers who prioritise economic benefits over the connection with family land. However, Groier (1999) points out how this attitude can still be the cause of conflict between farmers and newcomers who move to the countryside, purchasing or leasing family land.

Groier (1999) situates the historic roots of the back-to-nature trend in Austria in the early 20th century, with an anti-urban bourgeoisie, suspicious of urbanisation and with a romantic vision of rural space as the superior environment. During the counter-cultural movement of the 1970s and 1980s, intentional communities were established in the (also more affordable) countryside as “drop-outs” and urban newcomers moved to the country, seeking to fulfil their “romantic-reformist” dreams (Groier 1999:77). However, they were (and often still are, as Groier states) met with suspicion and even hostility by the existing rural population, making it difficult for the newcomers to integrate with the (idealised) rural community. WWOOF-hosts can be found among both of these groups, inherited family farms and newcomers to the country.¹¹ And there are those who only partially engage with the country without committing to a country life.

Urbanites buy old farmhouses as second homes where they can recuperate from urban life (Girtler 2006, Braun 2012). Students, pensioners, and artists spend their summers in the Alps as hard working and low paid “milkmaids”, enjoying the freedom and close contact with nature (Groier 1999). Many of these hobby-farmers write about their experiences, reviving the genre of the “country book”. Braun, in her study of the image of country life in the German-speaking media, observes a similarity between these narratives and the classic ethnographies, imagining the native rural population as “noble savages” (2012:22). The rural lifestyle, living “in tune” with the cycle of nature, is conceptualised as the opposite to the restless and boring everyday life of the urbanite in the city (Girtler 2006, Braun 2012). This is what WWOOF offers its volunteers – a temporary escape to the country.

The urban population hopes to (temporarily) escape to the country to experience the peace and quiet of the land, or conversely, enjoy “authentic” ethnic entertainment. The Alps and mountain pastures dominate the image of rural Austria (Girtler 2006), suggesting liberty

¹¹ See Chapter One.

and freedom away from densely populated areas (Groier 1999:59). Lifestyle magazines, TV shows, cook-books and other media distribute the ideal rural image, while excluding the reality of agro-business, intensive mass animal farming, and industrial parks (Braun 2012). Braun points out that the positive rural image was not continuously present since the 19th century. In the 1950s, farming and farm life was to be modernised by the state. This, she states, led to a resurgence of a positive idealised country image since the 1970s, in search of the authentic and traditional pastoralism. With growing agro-businesses a new nostalgia emerged for the vanishing traditional family farmers; heritage tourism (Girtler 2006) and autobiographic back-to-the-land narratives (Braun 2012) thrive on this trend.

New Zealand

British immigrants have dominated the settlement of New Zealand, and they still do (Belich 2001:539). “For early colonisers, New Zealand was a land of opportunity and a perfect location in which to begin a new life” (Sargisson and Sargent 2004:11). The English countryside, as Bunce points out, is a thoroughly domesticated place, while British settlers experienced the new environment in the colonies as wilderness; an utilitarian landscape, not the picturesque landscape of ‘the old country’, to be cultivated by pioneering farmers (1994:34). This expresses an attitude towards the environment that places people above nature, extracting natural resources, dominating and subjugating the environment; a worldview predominant in Western societies (Altman and Chemers 1984 [1980]). Kathryn Scott, Julie Park, and Chris Cocklin demonstrate how policy discourse in New Zealand still conceptualises rural space as agricultural, “as if rural communities were composed entirely of farmers” (2000:427). They also demonstrate that it is the image of the white Pākehā pastoral farming families as “the backbone of the country” (2000:440) that is perceived as “typical” country life. Māori families, the indigenous population, are marginalised in policy discourse concerning rural space in New Zealand.

However, rural space is also inhabited by Māori. *Kaitiakitanga* concerns the connection of Māori with their land. It refers, among other things as Merata Kawharu points out, to the “historical framework of how rights to exercise kaitiakitanga are justified. This means, for example, considering the relevance of ancestral association with lands and resources, and

thus the rights and responsibilities descendants today now find themselves upholding” (2000:352). In English it is often translated as ‘guardianship’, but Kawharu points out the broader concept that is incorporated by *kaitiakitanga*. It “embraces social and environmental dimensions. Human, material and non-material elements are all to be kept in balance” (2000:349). *Kaitiakitanga*, Kawharu states, remains important as key facets in Maori life “in the management of resources and the promotion of identity” (2000:350). It is a guiding principle for Maori, but also one that some non-Maori in the alternative rural lifestyle movement try to imitate and recreate when taking over “responsibility” for a piece of land (Sargisson and Sargent 2004). In recent years, Scott et al (2000) observe the trend of return migration of Maori families moving back to their ancestral homeland, some of whom have become WWOOF-hosts.

There are Pākehā and Maori WWOOF-hosts in New Zealand, as well as immigrants (international counter-urbanisation), who search for the “rural idyll” in a new country (Halfacree 2008). The ‘lifestyle block’ is the realisation of the “better life” in suburban and semi-rural New Zealand. There are also many intentional communities among the WWOOF-hosts. Escaping the mainstream through rural communal living was a big part of the 1970s counter-movement and has a long tradition in New Zealand.¹² Sargisson and Sargent, in their study of New Zealand’s intentional communities (2004), observe how “farmers, tourists and people seeking an alternative lifestyle have all been drawn to New Zealand as a place in which to realise their dreams and aspiration” (2004:11). For the immigrants, New Zealand promised a rural utopia, a green paradise of low density population and natural beauty (Bönisch-Brednich 2003:147).

The image of rural New Zealand is based on the “traditional” rural pastoralism, as Paul Cloke and Harvey Perkins (1998) point out in their study of tourism in New Zealand. Analysing the “branding” of New Zealand in the 1990s, they observe how the country was conceptualised as an anti-urban alternative, “a new environment, with new places, new activities, and a new position vis-à-vis the old (tired, ageing, traditional) order of the developed world” (1998:191). At the same time, it was the “exotic and dangerous wilderness” (Valentine 2001:259) of the New Zealand countryside that had to be conquered through outdoor recreation. The adventure tourism industry expanded on this

¹² One of the oldest still existing intentional communes in the world, established in the 1940s, is in New Zealand and is part of this study.

trend, promoting New Zealand as “one big adventure theme park” (Cloke and Perkins 1998:204). “From pastoral idyll, it is re-emerging as a tourists’ paradise” (Sargisson and Sargent 2004:16). Like the idea of a romantic summer in the Alps in Austria, in New Zealand many WWOOFers are drawn to the countryside by the prospect of exploring the exotic wilderness. The imagining of the country, and the way people engage with the land, has a tradition, and it has changing trends. This is the context in which WWOOF takes place.

Structure of this thesis

Each chapter of this thesis focuses on a different aspect of the WWOOF movement, demonstrating how the green utopianism, the imagining of green alternatives to the dominant systems of society, can be incorporated into aspects of the members’ lifeworlds. Each chapter begins with an extract taken from my field notes, carefully chosen to illustrate the major points which will be discussed in the chapter. The chapters then follow a general structure beginning with a discussion of the ideals of the WWOOF movement, such as organic and sharing, and how they became part of the WWOOF movement. This leads to an analysis of the reality of the lifeworlds of the participants, the constant tension between ideal and reality and the continuous processes of negotiation necessary when trying to incorporate these ideals into their everyday lives. This will illustrate the variety of interpretations of ideals and lifeworlds, the exceptions, and also the shortcomings of this green utopia.

The first chapter analyses the foundational values of the WWOOF movement and the members’ concepts of urban and rural spaces. In this chapter I argue that the members of WWOOF do engage in a range of alternative environmental practices that realise their vision of an alternative lifestyle, as well as fulfilling the aims of WWOOF. I situate the WWOOF movement in a broader context, asking where its ideas and ideologies derive from. Building on the brief historic overview of the introductory chapter, I demonstrate how WWOOF was conceptualised as part of the back-to-the-land movement (Marsh 1982) and influenced by the organic movement, situating WWOOF within a “green utopianism”

(Sargisson 2012). The focus is on how the members of WWOOF describe and negotiate their ideas of a WWOOF philosophy, ecotopian ideals, and boundaries of the WWOOF movement. The chapter situates WWOOF within a historic and ideological context that will be the basis for the discussions of the following chapters.

Chapters Two and Three are interconnected as they both focus on the relationship between host and helpers. In Chapter Two I analyse the WWOOF exchange as a form of alternative, non-monetary exchange and moral economy. I argue that the members of the WWOOF movement engage in a set of alternative socio-economic practices based on ideals of sharing and sustainability that merge non-monetary exchanges, gift-relationships, and mainstream market practices. Engaging with the classic anthropological literature on exchange (Mauss 1974 [1925], Polanyi 1957 [1944], Thompson 1971, Sahlins 1972), this chapter demonstrates how the WWOOF exchange of work for food and accommodation can be interpreted in different ways, as barter with elements of social relationships, as gift-relationship and reciprocity, or as householding, re-integrating the spheres of production and consumption. By analysing the “rules” of this exchange, the open and the concealed ones, ideals, expectations, and conflicts between the participants in the WWOOF exchange become visible.

The next chapter focuses on the basic aspect of how members arrange their households and the sharing of private space. I discuss the origins of the WWOOF members’ ideal of an extended ‘open household’, or ‘family of choice’, and how boundaries are maintained, expressed, and negotiated, and what happens when they are overstepped. In this chapter I argue that the ideal of the extended household is part of an alternative lifestyle that seeks to prevent the perceived alienation of city life and the isolation of the nuclear family. By engaging with the literature on fictive kinship, in particular fictive kinship of the workplace (Maddy 2001, Mellini et al 2007, Fischer 2010), I discuss how everyday practices of working and living together create intimate relations and ‘relatedness’ (Carsten 2000). Discussing what it means to be a member of the household, or what the WWOOF members call ‘cultural exchange’, I demonstrate how their ideals challenge mainstream concepts of the household and taken-for-granted norms of the nuclear family, while the practical implementations of this vision can lead to contradictions and conflicts.

Chapters Four and Five focus on the organisational level of WWOOF groups, the directors, and their relationships with the members of their group and with each other. In Chapter Four, I analyse the organisational structure of WWOOF groups, arguing that the members expect these to be an “organizational manifestation” (Schwartzman 1989:91) of ecotopian ideals and morality. I illustrate how the grassroots level of the WWOOF exchange and the organisational level of the WWOOF groups are interlinked. The values of the WWOOF philosophy (caring for the environment, non-monetary exchange, inclusion, harmonious relationships, sharing and sustainability) have led to certain expectations among the members how a WWOOF group should operate, promoting alternative economic and political organisation practices. However, since not all WWOOF members hold identical ideals, conflicts arise between them.

In the final chapter I focus on the international relations among the directors and their attempts to establish an international WWOOF federation. This chapter discusses the WWOOF directors’ attempts to implement alternative political processes based on deliberative democracy and the ideals of participation and communication, and the practical difficulties in doing so (Dryzek 1995, Sargisson 2012). Some directors are working towards an international WWOOF federation based on the ideals of egalitarianism and consensus, while others are apprehensive of such a scheme. In order to analyse the political processes of the international network of WWOOF directors, I analyse these narratives of conflicts as a sequence of social dramas (Turner 1968 [1957], 1974), and the three international WWOOF conferences as a form of redressive action, with the aim of sealing the breach and celebrating the community of WWOOF. I argue that the ideals of the alternative lifestyle inform the directors’ ideas of non-hierarchical egalitarianism. This chapter asks how they engage with questions of power, leadership, and authority, and ideals of democracy. The analysis, however, also demonstrates the contradictions between ideals and the reality of inequality and pragmatic decision-making processes.

Each of the chapters illustrates a different aspect of WWOOF in the context of a green utopianism, as well as the connections and discrepancies between these spheres. WWOOF members, with various degrees of commitment and success, build their own ‘ecotopias’ or alternative green utopian lifestyles. Sargisson defines utopianism as the meta-concept, while utopias are its manifestations (2012:8). Therefore, while many members of WWOOF are engaged in the realisation of green utopias, the present study is concerned

with WWOOF as part of a larger green utopianism. In this thesis I question where these ideals derive from, and demonstrate how green utopianism informs the lifeworlds of the members, the processes, conflicts, and inconsistencies in trying to realise an alternative green and sustainable lifestyle, while living in a contemporary, industrialised society. Despite these inconsistencies, however, the members of the WWOOF movement engage in alternative environmental, socio-economic, and political practices that in their opinion achieve the aims of WWOOF and realise their vision of a green lifestyle.

1

Temporarily back to the land

Sue, the founder of WWOOF, has told her story many times, in interviews and in her own essay on the history of WWOOF (Coppard 2006). The following quote is taken from an interview sent to me by Sue, to answer my question about the beginnings of WWOOF: “I loved London and my life was interesting and fun, but I did miss the countryside. When I was a kid my brother and I used to stay on my cousin’s farm where we ran wild – exploring the woods, picking flowers, playing by the stream, tree climbing, watching the animals, collecting the eggs and sliding down hay stacks in the barn. Bliss! However, by 1971 I had no friends or family living in the country – no ‘country seat’ where I could invite myself to stay. Watching from my window the leaves bowl along the London pavement one sunny, windy day, I just knew I had to find a way back. I wondered whether I could find a farm which would let me stay? Perhaps in return for my help with their work? But maybe it would be lonely without companions to chat to. I wondered whether anyone else would like to do the same thing? I’d just heard of organic farms while doing some administrative work for ‘Resurgence’ magazine and it occurred to me—correctly—that such places might be more inclined to use unskilled labour than a big, commercial farm. So I set about finding a place to try out the idea... We had a brilliant weekend doing what I can only describe as housework: hacking back encroaching brambles from a field, and clearing out blocked ditches so they ran freely again. The sun shone, the birds sang, we had some interesting conversations, and they gave us a strawberry and cream tea in the barn, with pigeons cooing aloft and the odd moo from a neighbouring cow. My bedroom was in a small cottage with herbs hanging to dry from the rafters, the moon shining in, and owls hooting from beyond. It was heaven. We must have done OK because at the end of Sunday afternoon the farmers said to us: ‘Yes, you’ve done quite well, would you like to fix another weekend?’ And so WWOOF began.”¹³

¹³ Pier 2011, interview.

Introduction

As the story of the founder illustrates, WWOOF was created within a specific time and place. The aim of this chapter is to situate WWOOF within a broader context of social and environmental movements, demonstrating how these influenced the creation of WWOOF. I ask whether there are shared ideals of the international WWOOF movement, thereby examining where the aims of the original WWOOF group, such as ‘back-to-nature’, ‘organic’ and ‘sustainability’, derive from, historically and ideologically, and how these ideals form the basis of an alternative lifestyle of hosts and WWOOFers. In this chapter I analyse the tensions experienced by the members who continuously negotiate their alternative environmental practices between green, organic ideals and the reality of farmlife. I argue that the members of WWOOF, despite and because of these tensions, develop social and environmental practices that allow them to feel that they have realised their dreams, at least to some extent, of a green utopianism, by incorporating these strategies into their lifestyles, living and expressing alternatives to mainstream society. The focus of this chapter is to introduce and discuss the shared and contested ideals, symbols and metaphors, the world views and belief systems of the members of WWOOF. In discussing these issues the chapter will also illustrate how the boundaries of the WWOOF movement are constantly contested.

The narrative of the founder at the beginning of this chapter demonstrates how the original organisation emerged as part of the back-to-the-land movement. The members of WWOOF encompass the entire kaleidoscope of this phenomenon, from the temporary country-escape and projects in “backyard farming”, to organic farms, eco-villages, and dreams of living “off-the-grid” in the remote wilderness. This chapter illustrates how WWOOF members engage in a range of alternative environmental practices that, they believe, enact the aims of WWOOF in various ways and realise their visions of a green (or greener) lifestyle. Some members are from among the ecologically conscious urban consumers, some belong to the back-to-the-land/counter-urbanisation trend, as well as the organic movement. In this chapter about the foundational values of the WWOOF movement, I discover the common ground within these various fields. WWOOF incorporates the urban alternative lifestylers who wish to try the back-to-the-land experience, learn about organic farming and temporarily escape the city, and the organic

farmers and alternative lifestylers living off the land who need additional help with their work and enjoy sharing their knowledge with likeminded people.

The consumer aspects of this green ideology have been studied in anthropology and other social studies interested in the ecologically concerned urbanites. These studies focus on the ecologically conscious urban consumer, such as consumer activism (Orlando 2011, Isenhour 2011), and alternative consumption practices (Zukin 2008, Bubinas 2011, Okura-Gagné 2011). Eco-conscious urbanites seek ways to “reconnect” with nature, or an “authentic” lifestyle, have an interest in sustainable and healthy food and resource management, and identify with the alternative lifestyle as a vision for a “better life”. Many WWOOFers share the characteristics of the urban eco-conscious consumers (buying organic at the local farmers market, or travelling as eco-tourists, for example). In this comprehensive study of WWOOF, however, I do not only focus on the WWOOFer, but also on the WWOOF-hosts (the rural lifestylers and organic farmers), who are generally the more constant members of WWOOF.

Many WWOOF-hosts are among those who moved from the city to rural spaces. The study of counter-urbanisation and back-to-the-land movement has been examined in social geography (Marsh 1982, Cloke 1985, Bunce 1994, Halfacree 1996, 2001, 2006, 2007, 2008, Valentine 2001). The back-to-the-land movement has its origins in 18th century Europe (Marsh 1982, Bunce 1994), but today is often associated with the 1970s counter-cultural movement with its rural communes, spreading from US-America (Halfacree 2007). ‘Counter-urbanisation’, “migration processes which take people into areas which they consider by-and-large to be more ‘rural’ than those they have moved from” (Halfacree 2001:161), is often used interchangeably with the phrase ‘back-to-the-land’. However, it seems there are two trends (although there might be cross-overs): There is the counter-cultural back-to-the-land movement that incorporates a wish to “reconnect” with the land and nature. By contrast, the “sophisticated middle-class urbanite moving themselves and their family to start a ‘new life’ in what is perceived to be an idyllic rural setting” (Halfacree 2008:479) is a more conservative counter-urbanisation trend. WWOOF-hosts, as well as WWOOFers, can be found within either of these trends, which are often not as clearly distinguishable. As this thesis on WWOOF demonstrates, there are many parallels between the attitudes of the urban eco-conscious consumer and the rural lifestyle, their ideas of sustainability, and of the “rural idyll”.

Both trends, the eco-conscious consumer trend and the rural lifestyle trend, have connections with the organic movement, as this chapter will illustrate. Research of social movements has a long tradition in sociology, including a focus on the environmental and green movement (Martell 1994, Staggenborg 2008), and the organic movement in rural sociology (Campbell and Liepins 2001, Reed 2001, Darnhofer 2005, McMahon 2005, Tomlinson 2008). As the word WWOOF suggests, many WWOOF-hosts are organic farmers. Partly they have inherited family farms, as is common among hosts in Austria for example. Others have fulfilled their dreams of moving to the country and living off the land by individually or communally operating organic farms. By discussing all these aspects in the context of the social trend of “green utopianism” (Sargisson 2012), I will illustrate how these fields are ideologically interconnected, advocating alternative, rural, and sustainable lifestyles, while avoiding the “alienating” and “destructive” forces of modern urban life.

I begin this chapter by laying out and discussing the fundamental values of WWOOF, asking where these ideals derive from and how they developed into shared metaphors for the members, before turning to investigate how hosts and WWOOFers try to turn these ideals into practice. An examination of the influences of the organic and back-to-the-land movements on the original WWOOF organisation illustrates how these inform the members’ notions of rural space. By asking how ideals of these movements have become part of the so called WWOOF philosophy, I demonstrate how notions of close connections with nature and harmonious relationships among people have become its ideological basis. In regard to my case studies in New Zealand and Austria, I introduce the WWOOF-hosts and their interpretations and engagement with the WWOOF movement.

This foundational discussion of the history of WWOOF is followed by the analysis of shared ideals within the broader WWOOF movement, illustrating how concepts such as the green philosophy, sustainability, and organic have become the shared metaphors (Cohen 2000 [1985]) of the WWOOF movement. I will demonstrate that this is the moral basis for the alternative green lifestyle ideal – a holistic concept that incorporates not only ecological principles, but can be interconnected with all aspects of the members’ everyday life. However, I also demonstrate how these ideals are interpreted by the members in different ways, lacking a precise definition, and leading to conflicting views about the “true spirit” of WWOOF. I extend this discussion by illustrating how for some members,

including the founder herself, the identity of a “green utopianism” also incorporates aspects of a “green” spirituality.

While this discussion establishes the subjectivity of shared metaphors and boundaries among the members of the WWOOF movement, the question emerges how members negotiate contradictory notions that can lead to discontent. I will investigate this question in the final section of this chapter, asking how participants react to conflicting ideas about the “true spirit” of WWOOF and the “right mind-set” of the members. Based on an examination of the members’ profiles, I will demonstrate that WWOOF is a relatively homogenous middle-class movement, despite its international scope, with limitations and distinct forms of social control.

Back-to-nature: The dream of reconnecting with the land

In this first section, I trace the history of WWOOF, where it came from, its background in and influences from the organic and back-to-the-land movement. Sue’s story situates the original idea for WWOOF within the back-to-the-land movement. Narrated in the beginning of this chapter, this story reflects a nostalgic sentiment for the rural, connected to her childhood memories. In his discussion of the back-to-the-land trend, Groier (1999:95) observes that childhood memories of carefree summer holidays in the country are a common theme among those who dream of “returning” to the country. WWOOF was conceptualised from the perspective of the urban volunteer going to the country, seeking the temporary farming experience, enjoying close contact with nature, food production and consumption, and rural society. Sue said of her initial intentions when starting WWOOF: *“When I first started it, my real intent was to get into the countryside; that was what I wanted to do.”*¹⁴ The first WWOOF weekend in 1971 took place on an agricultural college farm. The founder recalled that the managers *“were sceptical – they didn’t really want townies playing about in the countryside – but they agreed.”*¹⁵ The first WWOOFers were

¹⁴ Interview with the founder of WWOOF, England: 2011.

¹⁵ The Guardian 2006, interview.

confronted with the allegation of “playing farm”, using the countryside as a “playground” (Bunce 1994:77), a recreational site for the urban population. As it turned out, the inexperienced helpers did their tasks well, and the hosts changed their minds. Sue remembered: *“By the end of the weekend, the farm managers said we could come back whenever we wanted.”*¹⁶

“Playing” conjures an image of WWOOFing as a form of “frivolous” entertainment and consumption, a notion from which Sue wanted to distance herself. She emphasises her desire to be involved in country life, in production and consumption, communal work, sharing, teaching and learning; a deep and “meaningful” engagement with country life, not a superficial contact with the landscape.¹⁷ The only possible way to get involved in environmental work she knew of was the UK’s Conservation Corps, and although she joined, she found that it was not what she was looking for:

*There was the Conservation Corps, but they weren’t really taking part in the country, they stayed in the kind of Scout huts. They just stayed together and they worked on, maybe making steps or digging out a pond or hacking down trees to keep the environment as moorland, that kind of thing. It wasn’t really taking part in the country, not country life.*¹⁸

What Sue envisioned was to experience work and life on the small-scale family farm, while industrialisation and agro-businesses had become the reality of rural life (I will return to this development in agricultural practices further below). Valentine states that the English attitude towards the land is characterised by “a desire, particularly among the middle classes, not simply to visit the rural but to possess it by buying into this way of living” (2001:257). Some move to the country, some enjoy a farm-stay holiday; WWOOFing has emerged as another option – a temporary country escape.

For the first volunteers, recruited from among the readers of *“London’s trendy ‘Time Out’ magazine”*,¹⁹ WWOOF involved a temporary back-to-the-land country escape with the added benefit of gaining practical knowledge of environmental issues. Sue stated: *“People, especially the town-bound, were dying to get into the country for their fix of Green*

¹⁶ The Guardian 2006, interview.

¹⁷ Conflicts between newcomers to the country and existing rural communities can occur; I will discuss this further in Chapter Three.

¹⁸ Interview with the founder of WWOOF, England: 2011.

¹⁹ Pier 2011, interview.

*‘Vitamin C’. Fortunately, farms and smallholders also heard about us and invited us to come and help them’.*²⁰ I will return to the question of why these issues had become important for a wider segment of society in the UK in the 1970s. Sue found new WWOOF-hosts while working as a secretary for the “quirky ‘alternative’ little magazine ‘SEED’...I learned a lot about health, nutrition and spiritual matters typing all those articles, and would contact the organic farmers I read about, offering them weekend WWOOF help.”²¹

The idea of “trying out” country living is not new, it was popular (and still is) with rural communes in the 1970s (Sargisson and Sargen 2004). The trend goes back to the 19th century, as Marsh (1982) observes about ex-urban cottage farmers, living individually or communally in the country: “Like the communes, they attracted visitors, especially in the summers, who came to see how it was done and share, temporarily, in the rustic dream” (1982:113). The idea of sharing the alternative rural lifestyle with other likeminded people who are interested in joining the movement has a long tradition. WWOOF turned it into an organised scheme where one no longer needed personal contacts, but joined the WWOOF movement to gain access to a large network of organic, permaculture,²² and biodynamic farmers,²³ rural communes and green spiritual retreats.

Sue, the founder, originally intended to experience a “partial escape”; she never intended to completely break with urban life and move to a remote rural area: “In 1971, I was living in London...having a wonderful time – London in the 70s was very swinging – but I desperately missed being able to get out to the countryside.”²⁴ WWOOFing was her idea of a temporary country escape. For many WWOOF members a “partial escape” from their city lives was enough – enjoying the rural lifestyle while never losing their urban sources of income, service, and entertainment, as exurban commuters, country weekenders, hobby-farmers, and pensioners moving to the country.

²⁰ Pier 2011, interview.

²¹ Pier 2011, interview.

²² Permaculture is a term coined by Bill Mollison and David Holmgren, referring to the design of sustainable human settlements (Phillips 2010).

²³ Biodynamic farming, or biodynamics, derives from Rudolf Steiner’s (1861-1925) lectures on agriculture (Reed 2010). Predating the organic movement, it is a worldwide movement promoting a “farm-as-organism” approach where soil, food production, landscape, and livestock are understood as interlinked (Coffman 2010).

²⁴ The Guardian 2006, interview.

The original WWOOF group drew its influences from counter-cultural back-to-the-land trends and rural communes on one side. On the other, it was influenced by conservative counter-urbanisation trends, environmental and conservation movements, and romantic images of the “rural idyll”. Another connection links WWOOF to the organic movement. I asked Sue about her initial intention, assuming that she was either interested in learning about the practical side of organic farming, or in the philosophy of the organic movement; I was surprised to find that her intentions were quite different:

*I thought I want to go and stay on some farms, maybe they would let me stay with them in return for helping. And I thought, big commercial farms won't want me on them but a small organic farm might be quite glad to have some unskilled labour. That was what I thought. I just knew a little bit about organic. I knew that they used more hand labour than the big commercial mechanised farms. So it was a matter of scale, I suppose you could say.*²⁵

Sue hoped the organic community would be more receptive of her endeavour and therefore conceptualised her organisation right from the beginning as ‘Working Weekends on Organic Farms’.²⁶ However, I argue that the connection between back-to-the-land movement and organic movement goes further. The return to the country is imagined as the return to a non-industrialised space of alternative farming practices (Bunce 1994, Valentine 2001).

The literature refers to these organic farming practices, favoured by the back-to-the-land movement, as ‘alternative technologies’ (Bunce 1994) or “radical” rural practices (Halfacree 2006). Bunce (1994) states in reference to the Anglo-American context that:

[T]he growing interest in flavouring exurban living with the taste of rural authenticity extends to the revival of small-scale and traditional ways of farming. Much of this is associated with the increase in demand by exurbanite society for produce fresh off the farm. Free-range eggs, organically-grown vegetables, hand-made butter and cheese have become an essential part of the exurban lifestyle. (Bunce 1994:109)

In the following three sections I will illustrate how these notions of small-scale, “traditional”, and organic became an intrinsic part of the WWOOF philosophy, expressing a specific world view and morality. First I will discuss the original group in the UK, before

²⁵ Interview with founder of WWOOF, England: 2011.

²⁶ In Chapter Four I will analyse the history of the acronym WWOOF.

I turn to my two case studies in New Zealand and Austria, as while WWOOF is similar everywhere, there are certain differences because of their national contexts.

WWOOF and the organic movement in the UK

The development of the aims and ethos of WWOOF reflects the discourses in the organic movement more generally, regarding concerns about health and food, organic farming, social justice, and the ideal of sustainability. Several studies in rural sociology use discourse analysis to investigate the themes of the organic movement (Campbell and Liepins 2001, Reed 2001, Tomlinson 2008). Similarly, I analyse the discourses of organic within the WWOOF movement, which forms the basis of the organic philosophy of WWOOF. The meaning of the WWOOF-acronym has changed several times over the last forty years, but one of the O's in WWOOF has always stood for 'organic'. However, 'organic' is an ambiguous concept. There is no consensus between the national WWOOF groups (or within the organic movement in general) about how to define 'organic'.

Within WWOOF, 'organic' refers to practical farming methods as well as to philosophical aspects of their organisational ethos. The question of what 'organic' means is omnipresent within the WWOOF movement. Despite the lack of definition, it is part of the aims of WWOOF. These aims, in versions that differ slightly from each other as well as in various translations, are published by the national WWOOF groups. The final draft of a new "mission statement", put together by the attending delegates at the latest international WWOOF conference in 2011, reads as follows: "WWOOF is a worldwide movement linking volunteers with organic farmers and growers to promote cultural and educational experiences based on trust and nonmonetary exchanges helping to build a sustainable global community" (Conference Report 2011:6). The statement summarises the most general aims of the organisation: organic, sustainability, and the (voluntary and non-monetary) sharing of resources, knowledge, and lifestyle. It can be used as a template by the independent national WWOOF groups.²⁷ However, there is no central authority and no individual member or WWOOF group can impose their interpretation of 'organic' on others.

²⁷ See Chapter Five for a discussion of the politics of the international WWOOF-network.

In contrast to the global mission statement, the national groups focus on the local community, food, work, and the rural lifestyle. The WWOOF groups in the UK, New Zealand, and Austria, for example, express their aims in similar, yet slightly different ways: The WWOOF-UK homepage states that WWOOF means reconnecting with the soil, getting your hands dirty and getting grounded; reskilling and helping revitalise ancient knowledge; gaining first-hand experience of organic and biodynamic farming, growing, harvesting, preserving and animal husbandry; tasting totally fresh produce; meeting and finding inspiration in likeminded people; and rediscovering the relationships between local food production, social community and spirit.²⁸ The WWOOF-NZ homepage states that their aims are to enable people to learn first-hand organic growing techniques; to enable town-dwellers to experience living and working on a farm; to show alternative ways of life; to improve communication within the organic movement; to help develop confidence in becoming self-sufficient; and to meet interesting people and make useful contacts.²⁹ The WWOOF-Austria homepage states that WWOOF encourages volunteering, as well as learning about organic farming, while enjoying the lifestyle and warmth of a rural family home.³⁰ No group gives exact definitions or standards of ‘organic’; rather, it is about images of a wholesome and healthy lifestyle experience. This reflects a larger development within the organic movement more generally.

When WWOOF was established in England in the early 1970s the concept of organic farming was marginal. Until the late 1960s “there was no sizeable area of Britain farmed organically and no noticeable demand for organic food” (Reed 2001:139). After the Second World War, the government’s focus had turned to the increase of food production (Tomlinson 2008), intensifying the use of chemicals and introducing new technologies – a farming method that is now known as “conventional” agriculture. The organic movement in the UK pre-dates this modernisation, but received a significant influence from the Soil Association after the Second World War. The Soil Association, founded in 1946, developed into a political pressure group and social movement involved in developing organic policy, as well as becoming the official certification body for organic produce in the UK (Tomlinson 2008).

²⁸ Slightly paraphrased and shortened, http://www.woof.org.uk/WWOOF_world [25/01/2012].

²⁹ Slightly paraphrased and shortened, <http://www.woof.co.nz/faq.php> [25/01/2012].

³⁰ Translated, <http://www.woof.at/de/startseite/home.html> [25/01/2012].

According to Matthew Reed (2001), the people involved with the Soil Association were authors and journalists, academics, scientists and physicians, politicians, aristocrats, and “agricultural philosophers”, as well as farmers; men and women of various political and ideological backgrounds. The protagonists of the movement were suspicious of the drastic changes brought about by new technologies, mechanisation, the use of chemicals, and selective breeding (Tomlinson 2008) that were modernising farming and increasing productivity. Reed (2001) demonstrates how they sought scientific proof of the superiority of organically grown food. The members of the early organic movement also introduced schemes to promote general public health. These elements of a preference for pre-industrial, organic farming practices, health and moral concerns remained part of the organic movement. Since the 1960s, concerns have been raised about conventional farming, the health of the soil, and the quality of food grown with chemicals. By the 1970s, moral justifications began to outweigh the (inconclusive) scientific argument for organic growing. Reed states: “Organic food was to become both morally and chemically safe” (2001:141).

WWOOF was established during this re-orientation of the British organic movement, in 1971. From early on there was a connection with the Soil Association, although not a good one at first, as Sue remembered:

I had just joined the Soil Association and written to its secretary...asking for a farm host contact. He was very patronising – and useless ('How nice that young people want to help the Organic Movement') and told me to (in effect) run along and join the Conservation Corps – which I already had and found it not what I wanted.³¹

The conservative ideals of the Soil Association (of healthy food through non-conventional farming methods) were consumer concerns. In comparison, back-to-the-land idealists were seeking the “hands-on” experience – farming as a form of production and the communal lifestyle of rural society. It was the editor of the Soil Association’s magazine who gave Sue the first contact for a WWOOF “trial weekend”: “*Emerson College in Sussex, an Anthroposophical³² College for Adults studying mystic Rudolf Steiner's philosophy. The College had a bio-dynamic farm, and [the vice-principal] requested the farm managers to*

³¹ E-mail conversation with the founder of WWOOF, 2010.

³² Anthroposophy is the philosophy developed by Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925) (Yandell 1998); his lectures on agriculture form the basis of biodynamic farming (Reed 2010).

hold a trial weekend with us.”³³ As a college for adult learning, teaching practical and philosophical knowledge of anthroposophy, the farm managers might have been positively inclined to take on volunteers who expressed an interest in learning. This encounter fulfilled the first WWOOFers’ dreams of a hands-on experience of farm life and provided a taste of the alternative lifestyle.

Biodynamics and the emerging organic farming movement appealed to the members of the new WWOOF movement. While the reality of commercial farming changed (and the country landscape with it), the back-to-the-landers were looking for a “simple” pre-industrial rural space of hand-labour and a “deeper” connection to the country. As Halfacree (1996) points out in regard to the English countryside, the idea of the “rural idyll” is as much an imagining of the serene landscape as it is about the socially stable community of the village. This image of rural space, as Bunce (1994) states in regard to the Anglo-American context, has a significant influence on the environmental values of the people, questioning mainstream attitudes of their societies.

Through her contact with the Soil Association, their journal, and the anthroposophical college, Sue developed her own organic philosophy that became part of the organisational ethos of WWOOF, and WWOOF became an active member of the organic movement.

*It wasn’t long before we began to learn what the Organic Movement was all about, and the more we learned the more enthusiastic and keen to help we became. On one of the early WWOOF weekends, [the] Soil Association director...sat us down after Saturday dinner and gave us a long discourse on the how’s and why’s of Organic, and we became total converts to The Cause. From then on, WWOOF had a win-win dual function: nourishing ourselves and helping the planet. The way I see it now is that WWOOF was hanging about in the stratosphere looking for a way to ‘manifest’, and picked on me as a suitable channel: a London secretary with modest organizational skills who needed to get out into the countryside!*³⁴

I will come back to the spiritual aspect of Sue’s philosophy later. Like for the organic movement in general, Sue’s “green philosophy” for WWOOF (or WWOOF philosophy) emerged as a holistic approach to organic as a moral ideal, incorporating ideas of a healthy, protected, and sustainably managed environment as the basis of healthy food, and social justice of sharing this environment and its resources, as well as preserving it for

³³ E-mail conversation with the founder of WWOOF, 2010.

³⁴ Pier 2011, interview.

future generations.

This section has illustrated the context of the original WWOOF group in the UK, arguing that ‘organic’ is about more than farming techniques. The organic philosophy is a significant element of the alternative green lifestyle. While conventional food production has become the very expression of alienation from the land, the volunteers were seeking the wholesome rural experience on small-scale organic farms. I will now turn to my case study of WWOOF in New Zealand and Austria, introducing the WWOOF-hosts and their endeavours in organic farming and alternative lifestyles. This will demonstrate how the organic movement developed differently in these countries, and how hosts engage differently with the land.

WWOOF-hosts in New Zealand

The national organic association, the Soil and Health Association NZ, was established in 1941, before the Soil Association in the UK.³⁵ *As a social movement, the organic movement appeared in the 1970s (Campbell and Liepins 2001:27), at the same time as WWOOF-NZ was established.* The current directors of WWOOF-NZ recalled what they had learned from their predecessors: *“In 1972 or something a farmer in New Zealand, or was it 1973, soon after WWOOF started in the UK, a farmer in New Zealand advertised in the UK for WWOOFers.”*³⁶ A young couple from England (he working for an engineering firm, she at Lincoln College³⁷) were among his first WWOOFers; together they established WWOOF-NZ.³⁸ This first WWOOF-host and director of WWOOF-NZ was well known throughout the WWOOF community in New Zealand for his devotion to the philosophy of organics and WWOOF-NZ continued to grow. During the 1990s organic food production expanded significantly in New Zealand, although mostly in export, supplying markets in Europe, USA, and Japan (Campbell and Liepins 2001). Commercial organic farming existed parallel to the organic grassroots movement, to which WWOOF-NZ belonged.

³⁵ <http://www.organicnz.org.nz/support> [1/11/2012].

³⁶ Interview with WWOOF-NZ directors, New Zealand: 2010.

³⁷ University for agricultural and environmental studies in New Zealand.

³⁸ E-mail interview with founding member of WWOOF-NZ, 2011.

This movement, which included non-commercial and non-certified endeavours in organic farming, remained small and concerned with local production and consumption.

In their analysis of the organic discourse in New Zealand, Hugh Campbell and Ruth Liepins (2001) state that two processes distinguished the development in New Zealand from that in Europe: the settlement “of European migrants who were committed to the organic agricultural movement” (2001:27) and the emergence of ‘lifestyle farming’. Indeed, many New Zealand WWOOF-hosts are immigrants and ‘lifestyle block’ owners. As Anna, the WWOOF-NZ director pointed out, a majority of WWOOF-hosts in New Zealand are among these smallholders and hobby-farmers:

The lifestyle people, who are not trying to earn a living of their land... they have more time to spend with the WWOOFers. Whereas if your source of income was from your organic agriculture/horticulture, that's your business, you wouldn't have a lot of time [for WWOOFers]. I'm wondering if that's why there [are] not so many registered [organic] farms [in WWOOF-NZ].³⁹

These lifestylers, “people who live on small blocks of land but derive most of their income elsewhere” (Scott et al 2000:434), are part of a counter-urbanisation trend. Lifestylers only partially retreat to the country, often living in suburbs or semi-rural areas.

There is a large variety of WWOOF-hosts in New Zealand, not all of them are lifestylers. Others live and work on self-sufficient or commercial organic farms, or in intentional communities and eco-villages, where they pursue various schemes in organic farming, self-sufficiency and sustainability, often alongside other political or spiritual aims. There is, however, often a gap between an ecotopian vision of self-sufficiency and the reality of subsistence farming. In reference to the Anglo- and North American context Bunce states: “Perhaps, too, the only successful back-to-the-landers have been those with means of support other than farming. Writers, artists, potters, weavers – the arts and crafts culture in general – have long dominated the movement” (1994:110). This also applies to many WWOOF-hosts in New Zealand, many of whom are artists and artisans.⁴⁰

³⁹ Interview with WWOOF-NZ directors, New Zealand: 2010.

⁴⁰ Some members have written practical guides on WWOOFing and hosting WWOOFers (Greenman 2009, Roberts and Roberts, no year), and accounts of their own experiences as WWOOFers (Jamieson 2007).

The majority of hosts in New Zealand, according to the WWOOF-NZ directors, are Pākeha⁴¹ and immigrants, while Maori hosts are in the minority among WWOOF-hosts in New Zealand.⁴² The directors described WWOOFing as a European phenomenon:

Anna: One [Maori] wrote she wanted to be part [of WWOOF] but then she had to ask all the other members of her [wider family] whether they were happy with that; obviously they weren't. But also, a lot of the families may be part Maori but they just haven't said it. In New Zealand...you wouldn't necessarily know by looking at their listing, if they just have Maori grandparents or whatever they are not necessarily going to say, unless they are particularly farming in a certain way.

Will: And Maori people would already have their own WWOOF-like networks, with their extended whānau⁴³ or family, would come and stay on the farm and do that. That's already happening with them, so they don't need WWOOF.⁴⁴

Some of the hosts had different interpretations; Emere was a WWOOF-host of Maori descent who had lived in London for 17 years before returning to New Zealand, where she now lived in a remote rural area. She believed that potential Maori WWOOF-hosts are reluctant to join a Pākeha scheme because they feel they are being “educated” by, and converted to, Pākeha ideas such as ‘organic’. Emere felt that what she called the “Maori procedure” – the incorporation of Maori custom and the face-to-face communication and informal arrangements – is missing in WWOOF. She could, however, envision a parallel scheme operated by Maori, which Emere termed ‘Marae⁴⁵ exchange’. Daisy, a Pākeha host who lived among her partner’s whānau for more than twenty years, voiced a similar opinion. She believed that Maori are “tired of being told what to do”⁴⁶ by Pākeha. Anaru was a Maori WWOOF-host who had returned to his family land. He suggested that “there is probably not enough awareness”⁴⁷ about WWOOF among Maori in the country. He had a similar vision of a ‘Maori exchange scheme’ that could lead to land development, alternative energy and housing, and conservation projects among Maori in New Zealand.

⁴¹ New Zealander of European descent.

⁴² However, this is only estimation as WWOOF-NZ does not systematically collect information about their members.

⁴³ Extended family, family group.

⁴⁴ Interview with WWOOF-NZ directors, New Zealand: 2010.

⁴⁵ Courtyard; the open area in front of the *whareniui*, (meeting house) where formal greetings and discussions take place. The term is often also used to include the complex of buildings around the *marae*.

⁴⁶ Conversation with WWOOF-host, field notes, New Zealand: 2011.

⁴⁷ Conversation with WWOOF-host, field notes, New Zealand: 2011.

WWOOF-hosts in Austria

The organic movement in Austria gained momentum in the 1960s, with the first organic associations established in 1959,⁴⁸ increasing over the next three decades, influenced by environmental social movements and growing concerns about conventional farming methods (Obojes 2007). In her ethnographic study of organic farming in Austria, Obojes states that the considerable growth of organic farms in the 1990s was a direct result of Austria joining the EU, and EU agro-policies financially supporting organic agriculture. WWOOF-Austria was established in the mid-1990s, responding to the new trend in organic farming, as Doris, the founder of WWOOF-Austria, was certain:

*Mitte der 90er Jahre, da ist es so richtig der Aufbruch kommen. Da waren die 'Körndlfresser', wie sie sie genannt haben, nicht mehr die Spinner, sondern da ist es alles ein bißl anders worden, schön langsam. Weil da hast in noch keinem Geschäft biologische Lebensmittel gekriegt, des hats nix geben.*⁴⁹

Mid-1990s, that's when it started to change. That's when the 'muesli-freaks', that's what they used to call them, were no longer the weirdoes, that's when everything slowly changed a little bit. Because back then you couldn't get any organic food in a store, it was impossible.

Doris was a pensioner living by herself in her house with a garden in a small town in Austria. After she retired from her office job she contacted WWOOF-Germany for information on WWOOFing in Austria and was encouraged to establish WWOOF-Austria herself. She was surprised to find that many people were keen to help as volunteers on organic farms: *"I thought, well there you go, they were just waiting for this."*⁵⁰ Today, organic farming in Austria is no longer a niche market but has become mainstream, with a large share of organic produce sold in supermarkets (Darnhofer 2005:311).

Organic farmers in Austria are generally family farm households with a number of family members working full- or part-time on the farm to secure the family income (Darnhofer 2005). Many WWOOF-hosts in Austria are among these small-scale (not necessarily certified organic) inherited family farms. Many of my host-participants from Austria did

⁴⁸ http://www.bio-austria.at/biobauern/beratung/grundlagen_1/geschichte_bio_landbau/der_biologische_landbau_in_oesterreich [1/11/2012].

⁴⁹ Interview with WWOOF-Austria founder, Austria: 2009.

⁵⁰ Interview with WWOOF-Austria founder, Austria: 2009.

not so much convert to organic farming practices than remain what they called “traditional” (therefore not becoming what is known as “conventional” farmers). Sometimes the parent-generation had converted to conventional methods during the post-war period in the 1950s, while their children returned to previous (organic) farming methods in the 1990s. This happened also for economic reasons since organic farming meant government subsidies. In her study of organic farming in Austria, Ika Darnhofer (2005) states, that such farmers are typically engaging in a diverse range of food production and other activities, such as nature conservation and landscape management, agri-tourism, direct marketing, energy production, communal services, off-farm work, “as well as engagement in the rural community” (2005:318). Isobel Tomlinson (2008) observes that since the 1990s, European ideas about organic began to incorporate concepts of conservationism, funded by the EU, emphasising the environmental benefit of organic farming. Organic farmers, and WWOOF-hosts among them, took up management of landscape, alternative energy production, and projects in biodiversity (Darnhofer 2005).

WWOOF-Austria also has a number of intentional communities among their hosts, and Agnieszka Komoch, Silke Hagmaier, and Martin Kirchner (2003) report that eco-villages and farm communities in Austria stay in contact through the WWOOF network. Many also try it on their own, alternative eco-lifestyle oriented urbanites (Halfacree 2001) moving to the country to try their hands at farming. Full time organic farmers often rely on state subsidies for their survival, but many have other sources of income, as Braun (2012) demonstrates. Braun, who studies the representation of country life in the media in German-speaking Europe, finds that it is often the privileged classes who enjoy country living, while not depending on their lifestyle farm for their income, such as authors and journalists, self-employed people and others who work from home. Many commute between country and city, but for eco-conscious environmentalists this is often not an option (Isenhour 2011). As Braun mentions, work opportunities in the country are limited, but working, for example, at the nearest industrial park, does not comply with the romantic back-to-the-land notion of living in the country.

This section has demonstrated how WWOOF originated within the back-to-the-land movement, reconnecting with the soil, and establishing close relationships not only with people, but also with the country itself. I illustrated how the concept of ‘organic’ became part of the WWOOF movement and introduced the WWOOF-hosts in my two case studies

of New Zealand and Austria, and the range of ways in which they engage with the back-to-the-land movement and organic farming as part of their alternative lifestyle. I now turn to the question of how this lifestyle is enacted by the members of the WWOOF movement, the “green philosophy” as morality and spirituality, and the symbolic meaning of ‘organic’ and ‘sustainability’.

“The wish for a better world” – Organic philosophy and the ideal of sustainability

Drawing on Anthony Cohen’s (2000 [1985]) discussion of symbols, I argue that terms such as ‘sustainability’, like ‘organic’ and ‘green’, are ambiguous metaphors for the alternative lifestyle and back-to-the-land movement, and therefore for the members of the WWOOF movement. A green philosophy, green values, and the green movement, green politics and “green democracy” (Dryzek 1995), and “the “greens” (Martell 1994) are common terms in contemporary Western societies. ‘Green’ is a summary of a whole range of ideas concerning environment and social issues alike. Attempts to define ‘green’ can never encompass all its meanings. As Cohen points out about such social categories as ‘love’ or ‘peace’, “their range of meanings can be glossed over in a commonly accepted symbol – precisely because it allows its adherents to attach their own meanings to it. They share the symbol, but do not necessarily share its meanings” (2000 [1985]:15, emphasis removed). The members of the green and alternative movements share a common set of symbols, and while the precise interpretation of these symbols remains subjective, they serve as a ‘common language’ (Cohen 2000 [1985]:21).

Like with ‘green’, there is no general understanding within the organic movement of what ‘organic’ means, but a “multitude of ‘organics’ being constructed by an increasing range of actors who are actively engaged with contemporary organic food and farming” (Tomlinson 2008:137). WWOOF faces the same challenge trying to define ‘organic’. One of the directors of WWOOF-UK published his definition of organic in the WWOOF-UK newsletter:

‘Organic’ should imply a way of life that constantly renews itself by replacing what is used and exploited in the process without harming the well being of the environment in which it exists. ‘Organic’ cannot be compromised and yet, in my opinion, it very often is! A registered organic farm, certified by the Soil Association [sic], can hugely rely on finite fossil fuels and minerals to operate all its machinery. Is this actually fulfilling the true, holistic spirit of its organic label status? (Acland 2008:6)

The WWOOF-NZ directors referred to an article in OrganicNZ⁵¹ for their definition of ‘organic’:

For those in the know, organics is profoundly simple: garden (at any scale); recycle; compost; produce and buy organic, locally, and ensure it is carried out in a fair trade way with respect and care for all living things; watch your diet; and live frugally. The organic way of living is uncomplicated. It is based on principles and a living culture, not standards. It is an evolving complex of universal cultural intelligence, attitude and practices. ‘Organic’ is not a noun...it is a verb, a conscious action of thinking and living. (Hoare 2009:22)

Nadine, the current director of WWOOF-Austria, expressed a similar understanding of organic and organic farming:

*Die Biobauern verkörpern für mich daher auch diese grundsätzliche Lebenseinstellung im Sinne von Nachhaltigkeit, Lebensqualität, Rücksichtnahme, Respekt, Entschleunigung, Naturverbundenheit, Reduktion...die Verantwortung für unser Tun übernehmen und auch die Konsequenzen unseres Handelns bedenken – jeder einzelne, auch wir Konsumenten und Nichtbauern. ...nicht nur dem klassischen Komerz- und Konsumdenken folgen.*⁵²

Organic farmers, for me, embody a certain mind-set in the sense of sustainability, quality of life, consideration, respect, slower pace, connection with nature, simplicity and so on...to take responsibility for our actions and think about the consequences – everyone, including us, the consumers and non-farmers. ...not just capitalism and consumerism.

While these three statements illustrate the range of interpretations of what ‘organic’ can mean to the individual and in the context of WWOOF, they incorporate the dominant themes of the current discourse within the organic movement, using the rhetoric of sustainability and holism. They refer to a mind-set, implying a moral conduct of sharing resources, and caring for the environment and other beings. What is expressed by the members is a “right way” of living and thinking that is different to the set of standards for

⁵¹ The magazine of the Soil and Health Association of New Zealand.

⁵² E-mail conversation with the WWOOF-Austria director, 2012.

farming practices provided by organisations like the Soil Association. These organic farming standards, as the UK-director pointed out, do not necessarily comply with the mind-set of the alternative lifestyle of organic farmers and organic consumers. To distinguish themselves and their lifestyle, moral standards are applied that reach beyond national certification standards of organic farming.

At the first international WWOOF conference WWOOF-UK suggested all groups adopt the International Federation of Organic Agricultural Movements' (IFOAM)⁵³ definition of organic, reasoning that "[t]he name of our organisation implies that hosts are organic. In deciding whether a host fulfils this requirement we suggest the adoption of the IFOAM...definition of the objectives of organic farming" (Conference Paper 1: UK, 2000, emphasis removed). IFOAM is the current international authority for the organic movement, engaging with the United Nations and other multilateral institutions. Since the mid-2000s WWOOF has been affiliated with this organisation. 'WWOOF Volunteers' is promoted as a training programme under IFOAM's 'Organic Agriculture Training Opportunities'.⁵⁴ The third international WWOOF conference was held in co-operation with IFOAM in 2011. Discussions within the WWOOF network are currently under way to make this a recurring event (Conference Report 2011). IFOAM defines 'organic' as follows:

Organic agriculture is a production system that sustains the health of soils, ecosystems and people. It relies on ecological processes, biodiversity and cycles adapted to local conditions, rather than the use of inputs with adverse effects. Organic agriculture combines tradition, innovation and science to benefit the shared environment and promote fair relationships and a good quality of life for all involved.⁵⁵

This attempt of a broad definition also refers to notions of fairness and social justice, sharing resources among humankind in a way that will sustain them for the future. It is not only concerned with farming methods, but contains far reaching ideas of a holistic ecosystem that includes humanity at large.

⁵³ Established in 1972 by five organisations (including the Soil Association) from France, South Africa, Sweden, UK, and USA. Today headquarters are in Germany. Among the members are: BioGrow New Zealand Ltd. and OrganicNZ – The Soil and Health Association of NZ; Austria Bio Garantie and Bio Austria; and several national WWOOF groups. See the IFOAM homepage <http://www.ifoam.org> [9/2/2012].

⁵⁴ http://www.ifoam.org/growing_organic/7_training/t_opportunities/worldwide/IWA_WWOOF.html, [9/2/2012].

⁵⁵ http://www.ifoam.org/growing_organic/definitions/doi/index.html, [9/2/2012].

Sustainability has become part of the symbolic repertoire and common language of the organic movement over the last few years (Tomlinson 2008), and has been adapted by the WWOOF movement. According to Cindy Isenhour (2011), definitions of ‘sustainability’, like ‘organic’, are diverse. In her study on concepts of sustainable living in urban Sweden, she finds that “sustainable living constituted an effort to use a ‘fair share of environmental space’ so that people in developing nations and future generations could have a fair share as well” (2011:118). Environmental protection, healthy living, and social justice form a moral universe of what Isenhour calls the “fair share movement”. Sustainability refers not only to environmental, but also to economic and social concerns. This is a consumerist perspective of sustainability that envisions sharing resources with the less fortunate and reserving some for the future.

The symbolic meaning of ‘organic’ and ‘sustainability’ include ideas about preserving resources and the morally right way of treating environment and animals, as well as specific ideas on fair economic practices and social justice, communal living and equality (as will be discussed in the following chapters). This is the shared value system of the WWOOF members. Ingrid, an Austrian WWOOF-host, expressed: *“This is one big family... You just get along with them, you get together and you think you have known them forever.”*⁵⁶ Communitas, Cohen (2000 [1985]) states, does not depend on the uniformity of shared symbols; there is room for individualism and subjectivity. Similarity is not an objective assessment, but “a matter of feeling, a matter which resides in the minds of the members themselves” (2000 [1985]:21). They might be similar in preferring organic food, live in or visit rural areas, belong to bartering schemes, and home-school their children, while at the same time have very different ideas about if or how this is essential for living a green alternative lifestyle.

Such subjectivity also leads to conflicts among the members of this community. Since key terms like ‘organic’, ‘sustainability’, and alternative lifestyle are open to interpretation, boundaries as to who is entitled to join WWOOF are negotiable. The autonomous WWOOF groups are free to set up their own standards, and it is usually left to the individual member to decide whether they embody the “spirit” of WWOOF. Anna, the WWOOF-NZ director, pointed out:

⁵⁶ Interview with WWOOF-host, Austria: 2009.

*I think WWOOF is not just about gardening, I think, I feel organics is also about sustainable and local organic businesses, that's what I feel like, like a health food shop and... that's about organics, you know, the farmer has to have somewhere to sell his produce and, you know, mud brick building and solar energy and wind power, that's what I think.*⁵⁷

Members put different emphasis on different aspects of the organic philosophy of WWOOF, practical farming experience, social and economic ideals, political activism, and the connection to the wider organic community. Through the WWOOF exchange the members share their opinions and knowledge, thereby learning from each other and negotiating differing perspectives. However, sometimes differences are not reconcilable.

As mentioned above, organic farming standards are not necessarily consistent with an “organic mind-set”. Anna, the WWOOF-NZ director reflected on this: *“The really 100 per cent organic people say, the bio-grow certified people are not really organic because they don't really live sustainable.”*⁵⁸ From participant observation in Portugal Stateva (2010) discovered that some WWOOFers preferred local food over organic imports, WWOOFers with permaculture backgrounds dismissed “standard” organic practices as not organic enough, and vegetarians criticised the caging of animals on organic farms. Dana, an Austrian WWOOF-host with a herbal garden, had a WWOOFer who was a strict vegan and felt unable to harm plants. The WWOOFer left after three days; Dana was left wondering what this WWOOFer had expected to be doing in her garden. These examples illustrate the multitude of meanings constructed and continuously negotiated by the members of the movement.

The rhetoric of sustainability invokes the broader concepts of the organic philosophy. Organic philosophy and sustainable lifestyle movements are the shared ideological basis of the alternative lifestyle of many members of the WWOOF movement, what Klaus Eder (1996:215) calls “the symbolic package of environmentalism”. The founder of WWOOF described it as a philosophy: *“The ‘organic philosophy’ is what I call it; that sounds more forward looking. It's an ethos, isn't it, what motivates you in your life, the wish for a better world.”*⁵⁹ It is, however, not identical to standards of organic farming. Formalised, impersonal standards are not what WWOOF and the organic movement are about, but

⁵⁷ Interview with WWOOF-NZ directors, New Zealand: 2010.

⁵⁸ Interview with WWOOF-NZ directors, New Zealand: 2010.

⁵⁹ Interview with the founder of WWOOF, England: 2011.

rather, close relationships with the environment and people. For this reason, commercial farmers are under suspicion of farming organically only for personal profit. This challenges the ideals of the alternative lifestyle, as McMahon (2005) states regarding biodynamic farmers' opinions about commercial organic farming: "They believe people who farm organically for purely economic reasons do not have the right mind-set, and do not understand what true ecological farming is about" (2005:104). In the next chapter, I will return to ideals of sharing in the context of the non-monetary nature of the WWOOF exchange.

Notions of 'organic' and 'sustainability' derive value from their opposition to urban industrialism. The vocabulary of holistic, sustainable, organic, local, home-made, hand-made, fair, slow, real, whole, fresh, traditional, pure, original, ethnic, and ethic refers to the "authentic" rural experience as opposed to the impersonal, industrialised, commercial urban world. Giovanni Orlando (2011) demonstrates how producers and consumers understand organic food as 'natural' as opposed to the "polluting, excessively technology-intensive, and thus un-natural" (2011:174) conventional food production. The same concept applies to 'sustainability'; while the rural is envisioned as a site of sustainable production and consumption, the city and its food system are "one of the foremost examples of capitalist society's unsustainability" (2011:175). However, while these concepts are imagined as the opposition to urban industrialism, capitalism and consumerism, Halfacree (2006) points out that even the back-to-the-land movement recognises this as an oversimplified dichotomy. As the members of WWOOF have realised, the lived experience of the alternative lifestyle is usually somewhere in between.

The ideal of the alternative lifestyle is rarely achieved in reality. Halfacree (2006) states, in his study on the British back-to-the-land movement, that while back-to-the-landers reject mainstream lifestyle and its key features such as consumerism, capitalism, and careerism, "many only superficially enter into an embedded rural existence. While there can be many reasons for this, such unevenness also speaks of the varying degrees of commitment, motivation and capabilities of those involved" (2006:314). On the other hand, the complete achievement of the self-sufficient sustainable lifestyle project puts some WWOOFers out of their comfort zone. Anna, the WWOOF-NZ director, reflected: "*One WWOOFer might complain that there is no electricity and a drop-toilet, the next one says how wonderful it*

was they were living in the bush.”⁶⁰ There is no agreement over what is true and right. To accept only certified organic farms is not regarded as an option by any national WWOOF group, since this would exclude all non-commercial small holders and self-sufficient growers.

Many members of WWOOF promote holistic lifestyle practices that go far beyond the production of food and resources. An article on the homepage of WWOOF-Japan, *‘Organic: Taking as much as possible into account’*, reflects on the variety of lifestyles among their hosts:

Another host comes to mind; a retired public servant living alone with a passion for books and learning. There was no organic growing at his place. But many WWOOFers loved the experiences that could be had at the host. The man loved sharing his English and Japanese reference library with WWOOFers, and some WWOOFers could not get enough of it.⁶¹

From this perspective, an extensive library is as valuable for the support of the organic movement as an organic farm. However, not all WWOOF groups embrace this broad notion of the “organic mind-set” and there is no cohesiveness among the members in regard to the “right” kind of alternative lifestyle that is needed in order to participate in WWOOF.⁶²

Nonetheless, despite the diversity of interpretations, there are shared ideals that constitute a framework of values for an alternative lifestyle that influences all aspects of everyday life. Tomlinson (2008) states how the notion of ‘organic’ “promotes a holistic discourse with a potential to create an alternative everyday life and to construct new values and interests in agriculture” (2008:134, drawing on Pederson and Kjaergard 2004). For WWOOF-hosts, the holistic lifestyle includes not only ecological, but also political ideals, alternative health (anti-vaccination movement), alternative education (home-schooling), and alternative economy (LETS, bartering, and of course the WWOOF exchange⁶³). Eder (1996) states in regard to environmentalism and ecological discourse: “The connection between ecology and identity has been established in recent theoretical discussions on

⁶⁰ Interview with WWOOF-NZ directors, New Zealand: 2010.

⁶¹ WWOOF-Japan homepage:

http://www.WWOOFjapan.com/main/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=782%3Aorganic-lifestyle-grass-roots-experience&catid=7&Itemid=224&lang=en [12/09/2012].

⁶² See Chapter Four and Five on the conflicts among directors.

⁶³ See Chapter Two.

modernity and the idea of the modern self, where ecology appears as a strategy for the reorganisation of self and identity in modern society” (1996:213).

People might identify with the sustainable alternative lifestyle as more “natural” and “authentic”. Authenticity, as Robert Paine (2000:80) discusses, is an imaginary construct that is not unchanging. This search for the authentic outside the (as artificial and alienating experienced) mainstream has been the focus of other studies. Sharon Zukin (2008) analyses the artists’ search for the “authentic” urban space, found in the quarters of the marginalised and lower classes. I see parallels between the ‘new Bohemias’ of the city and the alternative lifestyle in the country, as “willed marginalization from mainstream consumer culture” and a “distance from material necessity” (Zukin 2008:729). “Opting out” of mainstream society, careerism, and consumerism, by going back to the land (or deciding to stay in the country) and making a living as self-sufficient farmers, artists, and artisans often means less income, less choice in education, less access to health care, services, and entertainment. It is part of the simple life movement (Marsh 1982) and ‘voluntary simplicity’ (Elgin and Mitchell 1978, cited in Cloke 1985).

This lifestyle challenges mainstream attitudes and questions contemporary social structures, although not necessarily as direct political action. Sue reflected on the fact that WWOOF does not pursue a clearly expressed single goal in the sense of collective activism of a social movement. For Sue, WWOOF represents a range of aims for the members, reflecting the broad context of the back-to-the-land movement, but primarily focusing on “getting back to nature”:

*I think WWOOF got several things that it cares about. I mean, it's not nothing, but some people need to get into the country and [that] makes them very happy, that's a perfectly good reason for WWOOF to exist; let alone any other things, like the ecology of the world, animal happiness... Yes it's very diverse.*⁶⁴

Regarding political activism, McMahon (2005) similarly finds about biodynamic farmers in Ireland: “Most of the farmers did not believe their role was to change the rural community through direct campaigning, but by example, by justifying their activity through showing the successes of farming alternatively” (2005:108). Farmers hope their practical example will lead others to consider alternative farming and lifestyles and

⁶⁴ Interview with the founder of WWOOF, England: 2011.

therefore change society's engagement with the environment. Similarly, the WWOOF movement does not try to bring about social change by direct action or political involvement; this is left to the private individual. WWOOF groups expect that hosts "lead by example", farming organically or living self-sustainably with the help of volunteers, while WWOOFers experience the alternative lifestyle "hands-on", and learn the practical skills.

Above, I have discussed the moral universe of the alternative lifestyle of the WWOOF members, focusing on conceptualisations of 'sustainability' by the organic consumers, the WWOOFers, and the organic farmers and alternative lifestyleers among the WWOOF-hosts. The "green philosophy", or ecotopian thinking, is a set of ideals and values from sustainability and social justice, sharing and caring equally for ecology and humanity, in the present and the future. I will now turn to a final aspect, which I have mentioned above – the spiritual side of green. While by no means all members of the green movement, or the WWOOF movement, share a spirituality, for many members, religious and spiritual values are significant aspects of their alternative green lifestyle.

The spiritual side of green

In its early stage the organic movement was a marginal movement referred to by some as 'muck and magic' (Tomlinson 2008, Reed 2010). Reed states: "Those outside the movement, viewed them as an almost religious group" (2001:139). This spiritual aspect of the organic philosophy remained in various forms such as biodynamic farming and "deep ecology".⁶⁵ Nicole, a self-sufficient Australian host in New Zealand and a strong supporter of the organic idea, reflected: "*most of these people who live that sort of life have a deeper philosophy*"⁶⁶, bringing together ideas about ecology, sustainability, social justice, and spirituality. There are a number of WWOOF-hosts who engage in permaculture and biodynamics; several participants referred to these practices as 'organic-plus' within WWOOF. McMahon (2005) studies biodynamic farming as a social movement, stating

⁶⁵ Deep ecology, a term by Arne Naess, is a philosophy that pursues the spiritual aspects of environmentalism (Sargisson and Sargent 2004:136).

⁶⁶ Conversation with WWOOF-host, field notes, New Zealand: 2010.

that it “resembles a form of religious life, defined by asceticism, repetition, sacrifice, and an emphasis on spiritualism and purity” (2005:99). This is not to say that all members (within the organic movement or within WWOOF) engage or agree with this aspect of organic.

Sue, the founder, said: “*My real feeling is that I was 'picked' by WWOOF to channel it into existence as I had the right qualities: secretary, 'alternative' thinking, city living [and] wanting to get out into the countryside.*”⁶⁷ She brought together her concepts of a holistic ecosystem with spiritual aspects, like in her ‘green prayer’:

Great spirit of life
Who has given us such a beautiful world
Fill our hearts with love for our fellow beings throughout the planet
And help us to serve the well-being of all

May the Light always shine through WWOOF
(Conference Report 2006: no page number)

Sue expressed her thoughts on her ‘green prayer’: “*I felt there should be a tiny prayer, acceptable to all faiths and none, which could indicate something of this and act as a kind of guide at the beginning of 'green' meetings. (Not that it ever has been!)*”.⁶⁸ Sue’s initial contact with organic farming was during her first WWOOF weekend at a biodynamic college farm. It might be that this experience had a particular influence on her holistic understanding of an organic lifestyle.

This approach to the organic philosophy as a “spiritual path”, however, receives some criticism from within the movement as not all members share this view. Simon, an Austrian goat farmer, was offended that the application form for WWOOF membership included a question regarding his spirituality. He felt that Doris, the former WWOOF-Austria director, was implying a connection between her own conservative Christian beliefs, organic farming, and country life. The application form indeed asks: “What are the general aims you are trying to achieve on your farm? (Religious, political, self-sustainability ...)?”⁶⁹ Simon, like some WWOOF members, was predominantly interested in organic as a set standard of farming practices. Organic as spiritual identity is often

⁶⁷ Interview with founder of WWOOF, England: 2011.

⁶⁸ Pier 2011, interview.

⁶⁹ Questionnaire for new WWOOF-hosts (translated); document provided by WWOOF-Austria.

associated with a romantic view of the past, holding on to conservative customs, or “reviving” ancient and exotic traditions. A connection between environmentalism and the New Age movement is not uncommon, as Reed demonstrates in his discussion of “radical greens who follow the hill routes and ley lines, the cycles of the seasons and frequently post-Christian gods” (2001:142; see also McMahon 2005). However, based on my own observations, I argue that there is no straightforward connection between an orientation towards the past and a “green spirituality”. In fact, there is a great diversity of spiritual and religious beliefs among WWOOF-hosts.

Members of various religious and spiritual backgrounds, institutionalised or not, see a connection between organic philosophies and their spiritual beliefs. In Austria and New Zealand, I observed that Buddhism, Christianity, and Neo-Paganism/New Age are common religious orientations among members of WWOOF. For example, in Austria Catholicism is the predominant religion and has many followers among WWOOF-hosts. But there are also others, like Dana, an Austrian WWOOF-host who was a self-identified neo-pagan witch. She was not a back-to-the-lander, but inherited her family farm and converted it into a biodynamic herbal garden. In New Zealand, an intentional commune began their communal meals with a ‘Mother Earth’ prayer and a Pākehā family with a commercially operated biodynamic vineyard frequently visited the nearby Buddhist meditation centre, which itself also accepted WWOOFers.

The list of WWOOF-hosts around the world include a number of Buddhist centres, Catholic monasteries, and other communities of faith and spiritual retreats that offer a diverse range of self-therapies and personal development, Yoga, and meditation. The merging of spiritual beliefs with environmental practices is part of many WWOOF members’ holistic lifestyles. Eder (1996) discusses ecological discourse and its effects on personal identity in the light of religion:

Life histories of environmental movement activists clearly show that religious motivations have in fact played a major role in the engagement of caring for ‘nature’...Attitudes and everyday practices show the strong influence of ecological argumentation which goes beyond the effects of other ‘new’ social movements...in shaping identity patterns in large groups of the population (especially middle-class groups). (1996:213)

Eder believes that the concept of sustainability within the ecology discourse has developed

“a new quasi-religious basis” (1996:214). Eder calls it “green religiosity” that includes meditation and personal growth, New Age and deep ecology movements. For many members of the WWOOF movement, their narratives of self-identity incorporate various religious, spiritual, and self-improving practices as part of the alternative lifestyle.

In this section I have discussed how the green philosophy of WWOOF informs the members’ identity and moral and spiritual lifeworlds. However, as I have demonstrated, the concept of green philosophy is not universally shared, leading to tensions among the members. In the following final section, I turn to the question of how the members deal with the lack of cohesiveness and boundaries, and how conflicting world views are negotiated.

The boundaries of WWOOF: Selective homogeneity as social control

Relationships within the WWOOF movement are meant to be built on trust.⁷⁰ This is true for the WWOOF exchange as much as for operating a national WWOOF group. Trust is important for social movement organisations in general, and has a particular history within the organic movement. In their study on organic standards in New Zealand, Campbell and Liepins (2001) discuss the ‘on trust’ system within the organic agricultural movement in New Zealand. Before official certification of organic produce became available in the 1980s, consumers relied on trust. They “bought produce on the basis that the grower was personally known to them or in some way incorporated into the organic agricultural movement. What constituted legitimate ‘organic’ produce was, therefore, defined by the social characteristics of the grower, not the production system itself” (2001:27). The same system is applied to (rarely certified and mostly self-identified) organic WWOOF-hosts. With the institutionalisation of organic certification a change took place within the organic movement. The inspections, however, still relied on the ‘on trust’ system, as Campbell and Liepins (2001) have found. Instead of checking whether the organic standards were followed, the volunteer inspector would “interact with the ‘person’ and ensure they were

⁷⁰ See Conference Report 2011:6.

committed to organic principles (thus replicating the basis of the prior ‘on trust’ system)” (2001:30). While organic produce has grown into an industry nowadays, the ‘on trust’ system, the authors state, is still active on the small scale.

The WWOOF movement relies on the moral commitment of its members to the organisational ethos, negating the necessity of any regulative standards of ‘organic-ness’ to govern and check members. Joyce Rothschild states, “where personal and moral appeals are the chief means of social control, it is important, perhaps necessary, that the group select members who share their basic values and world view” (1995 [1979]:449). A shared understanding of the organisational aims and ethos, as well as the norms of participation, provide the common moral base for the movement and enable the WWOOF exchange.⁷¹ Rothschild (1995 [1979]) calls this process the ‘selection of homogeneity’. Selective homogeneity ensures a degree of cohesiveness that allows members to trust each other on the basis of belonging to the same movement, assuming that they share the same ideology (Sullivan 2003).

Despite its international scope, WWOOF attracts a fairly homogenous group of people as members. Internationally, the majority of WWOOFers seem to be of European descent, a significant number are East Asian, and some North American. Most of them are financially privileged and highly educated. The majority of WWOOFers seem to be young; many are students or interns (agriculture and horticulture students, landscape artists, and nutritionists, for example). Others are in a “phase of re-orientation”, like a gap-year or sabbatical, out of work, or pensioners. Other studies support my own observations that there are more female members in WWOOF (Campbell 2000, McIntosh and Bonnemann 2006, McIntosh 2009, Melin 2012).⁷² Statistic data supplied by WWOOF-Australia confirms this, stating that 60% of all WWOOFers are female.⁷³ In his consultancy report for WWOOF-UK, Chris Smaje portrays the stereotypical WWOOFer: “the ‘typical’ WWOOFer is white, female, middle-class, not disabled, aged 30-50, without dependent children and geographically mobile” (2003:52). Smaje’s age demographic differs from findings analysing Australia/New Zealand, where WWOOFers are found to be mostly in their twenties (McIntosh and Bonnemann 2006, Cronauer 2011, Lipman and Murphy

⁷¹ See Chapter Two and Three.

⁷² As an exception, Stateva (2010) states that in Portugal there are equal numbers of male and female WWOOFers.

⁷³ Statistical data provided by WWOOF-Australia office, ‘WWOOFers by Gender’ 2011.

2012). These WWOOF groups attract large numbers of young budget tourists as members, many on working-holiday visas which are tied to an age limit. In regard to WWOOFing in Australia, Lipman and Murphy (2012) state, that about half of their participants come from “a medium to very large city (100.000+ inhabitants)” (2012:12). This indicates that WWOOFers are not necessarily of a metropolitan background but equally come from small-town, suburban, and semi-rural areas.

Not only are the WWOOFers a rather homogenous group, the WWOOF-hosts too share many characteristics. The majority of hosts seem to be middle aged and with a family or an “empty nest”, and intentional communities; they are land and property owners (co-owners in the case of intentional communities or family-owned land). The farm is not necessarily the main source of income and frequently one or more adult members of the farm household have off-farm employment (McIntosh and Campbell 2001, McIntosh and Bonnemann 2006) or other sources of income like artisan work, artistic skills, providing services (e.g. child care, operating agricultural machinery), and teaching (child- and adult-education programmes). For some WWOOF-hosts the motivation to live off the land derives from the practical intention to subsidise their small income or benefit money in this way. The hosts in my study have a diverse range of professional training and higher education (including, but not only, in agriculture and environment related studies). Others have educated themselves further through adult education programmes or practising their artisan and artistic skills. Many are able to communicate in several languages, English most often, as it is the international communication language of WWOOF.⁷⁴ Hosts are often well-travelled (although rarely as WWOOFers) and/or immigrants,⁷⁵ and politically active (e.g. in the GE-Free movement or as members of the Green Party).

Therefore, despite the WWOOF ethos of welcoming diversity, the movement is largely homogenous. While there is no active selection process to ensure homogeneity, and indeed the WWOOF ethos states that it is open to all people, there are certain mechanisms that perpetuate a degree of commonality among the members. WWOOF groups, for example, advertise in eco-magazines like the founder did in the beginning in order to find likeminded people. Most of the time, however, hosts as well as WWOOFers learn about

⁷⁴ This, I suggest, explains the popularity of Anglo-American and Pacific WWOOF groups.

⁷⁵ Stateva (2010) states, that the majority of WWOOF-hosts in Portugal are immigrants; on demographics on hosts in New Zealand see Campbell (2000) and McIntosh and Campbell (2001).

WWOOF by word-of-mouth. Who the “right sort of people” are is debated by the members, without a general agreement on strategies of recruitment. National WWOOF groups “target” different groups. In Austria, youth and job centres had become agents for WWOOF. In New Zealand, several organic stores around the country sold the host-list. The WWOOF-NZ directors also used backpacker hostels as agents to sell the WWOOF-book; they were however conflicted about this as it was “*not giving the right signal*”.⁷⁶ WWOOF-Australia employed the same technique to recruit new members, not without reflecting on the ambiguity of this situation:

When we noticed [the] number [of backpackers] growing and surveyed hosts to ask what they thought (in 1992), the overwhelming response was ‘they are terrific – send us more’. As a result we placed brochures and adverts in front of backpackers and they continued to join in increasing numbers. Many of them have no background in the organic movement, and little or no skill in the areas of growing plants and minding animals. However they have a willingness to learn, a willingness to work and a desire to meet people, which is, at one level, what WWOOF is all about. (Conference Paper 2: Australia, 2000)

WWOOF-Australia also distributed brochures at the country’s major airports in order to promote WWOOF to arriving tourists.⁷⁷ In her book about her personal experience as a WWOOFer in New Zealand, Philippa Jamieson reflects critically on this development of increasing numbers of backpackers joining WWOOF:

Some hosts lamented the fact that the learning aspect of the scheme has diminished, especially when they got WWOOFers who were patently not interested in organics at all. They say that the type of WWOOFer has changed over the years, with more environmentally conscious, organic types previously, but now there are more backpackers who are just using the scheme to travel around New Zealand cheaply. Many are not interested in organics or even farming necessarily. (2007:236)

WWOOF groups are not independent from external factors influencing development in different ways. For Australia and New Zealand in particular, new trends in tourism, with high numbers of budget travellers making use of the WWOOF-scheme, had a significant impact on the operation of their WWOOF groups.

⁷⁶ Conversation with WWOOF-NZ directors, field notes, New Zealand: 2010.

⁷⁷ The recruitment of budget travellers as well as the practice of advertising, targeting WWOOFers as customers, is internationally contested by members of the WWOOF community; see Chapters Four and Five.

While some members of WWOOF call for new standards, policies, and regulations to ensure cohesiveness among members, most trust that only likeminded people join WWOOF, as the former WWOOF-Austria director explained:

*Wir kontrollieren nicht, das hab' ich dir eh da mitgebracht, den Fragebogen, da sind die Voraussetzungen drinnen, also die Sachen drinnen, die wir wissen wollen vom Bauern. Und da steht: "Seit wann wird Ihr Betrieb vollständig biologisch bewirtschaftet?" Und das muss er unterschreiben; das ist unsere Kontrolle. Und zweimal ist mir passiert, dass es nicht gestimmt hat und da haben mir die Nachbarn des sofort gesagt, also hab ich des sofort gewusst. Oder wenn die WWOOFer kommen... Also, es kontrolliert sich von selber, wir wollen nicht kontrollieren.*⁷⁸

We do not check; that's what I brought you here, the questionnaire with the requirements, all the things that we want to know from the farmer. And there it says: 'Since when has your farm been completely organic?' And that's what they have to sign; that's how we check. And twice it happened that it wasn't true but the neighbours told me immediately, so I knew about it immediately. Or when WWOOFers go there... So, checking works automatically, we don't want to check-up on them.

Trust is a multifaceted concept (Yamagishi 2005). Social trust, as a social mechanism, can be a substitute for formalised and regulated relationships, reducing complexity and enhancing communication (Haggerty 2008:894). However, the WWOOF network is also based on “auditing”, assessing and evaluating each other (Strathern 2000). Violations of trust are reported through the network of members and punished, in extreme or repeated cases with expulsion from the group. Reputation is important in a system based on trust and shared values, where opportunism, or even the allegation of opportunistic behaviour, can break the trust relationship (Harriss 2003).

This concept of trust relies on mechanisms of social control. Christopher Hood observes this as ‘control by mutuality’ in egalitarian organisations – co-operation as control strategy. Rothschild analyses the collectivist organisation in similar terms: “One person appeals to another, ‘do X for me,’ ‘do X in the interest of equality,’ and so forth. The more homogeneous the group, the more such appeals can hold sway” (Rothschild 1995 [1979]:449, emphasis removed). Members who join the WWOOF movement trust that others share the same ideas of mutual help and an interest in organics. The director of

⁷⁸ Interview with WWOOF-Austria founder, Austria: 2009.

WWOOF-Australia emphasised this connection between trust, the organic movement, and the WWOOF network:

Without a means of vetting hosts when they join (and in the early days this was not considered because we were ALL coming from within the Organic Movement and we built WWOOF on trust) we cannot rule out the possibility of a cheater getting into it. However there is a good networking of information between travellers now, and we find that such “cheaters” are quickly discovered (Conference Paper 2: Australia, 2000).

The discovery of “cheaters” by other members and their expulsion from the organisation is a form of control within the movement. Directors trust the members of their WWOOF group to comply with the ethos of the organisation and the accepted norms of participation, and to commit to the organic philosophy. Mutual surveillance and reporting “cheaters” to the directors enforces a certain degree of compliance. However, there are members who, while following the rules of participation, do not share the same values of the WWOOF philosophy, but participate for other reasons. This can cause tension among the members, which I will investigate further in the final section of this chapter.

Discontent, contradictions, and exclusion

Much of the discourse of the organic philosophy of WWOOF between the members involves the “pure” and “original” ethos of the WWOOF movement, and whether these ideals have been diluted over time, or even lost completely. A number of studies on WWOOF reflect this sentiment, stating that the “true spirit” of WWOOF has changed (McIntosh and Bonnemann 2006, Jamieson 2007, Bernkopf 2009), and the concept of organics has become a “relic from the past” that no longer has any meaning for the members of the WWOOF movement (McIntosh 2009). Some suspect that WWOOF has “gone mainstream”, therefore “selling out” to market-economy and consumerism (Mosedale 2009, Stateva 2010).

Significant growth of the WWOOF movement, particularly over the last decade, has led to fears of “becoming mainstream”, and of growing numbers of “free-riders” indifferent to the organisational ethos. Hood makes the relevant observation that when the core of like-

minded members in an alternative organisation is expanded to incorporate a more diverse membership base, “it becomes extremely vulnerable to opportunistic free-riding tactics” (2000:143). Such tactics go beyond pragmatism and exploit the voluntary effort of the other members. There are no enforced standards that would create homogeneity among members, and no barriers to joining WWOOF. Some members believe WWOOFing has become a cheap holiday scheme for backpackers. Others accuse commercial farmers of taking advantage of a cheap labour force. Indeed, it seems that there is a contradiction between the ‘organic’ label of WWOOF and the reality of WWOOFing. However, while some want clear boundaries of access to the WWOOF movement, others promote openness and inclusiveness.⁷⁹

“400-hectare conventional sheep and beef farm, one transitional pot of parsley.” This quote is taken from Jamieson’s (2007:236) book where she reflects on her personal experience as a WWOOFer. In this quote, a New Zealand WWOOF-host expresses his disappointment about the lack of commitment towards the principles of organic among other WWOOF-hosts. I encountered such “borderline” WWOOF-hosts while doing fieldwork. In New Zealand I helped on a conventionally operated commercial apple orchard with three rows of spray-free seedlings. This, the host thought, entitled him to what he called “the service of WWOOF”. The WWOOFers were asked to clean and renovate his house which was on the market for sale. For those who hope to learn about a sustainable lifestyle and organic farming methods this host would certainly be a disappointing experience. The host fully disclosed his situation to potential WWOOFers before they arrived, which led him to believe that his volunteers did not care what kind of work the WWOOF exchange would entail. However, he also reported that he did not receive many applications from WWOOFers, and that those who came left earlier than they initially intended, which suggests that WWOOFers avoided this host, making it in fact difficult for him to participate in the WWOOF exchange.

Bernkopf’s (2009) analysis of an Austrian expat WWOOF-host in Portugal confirms that this is not just a New Zealand phenomenon. Bernkopf documents how this host used WWOOFers to build exclusive accommodation for tourists. In Austria I encountered an eco-village where WWOOFers were required to work in the office because they had not

⁷⁹ See also Chapter Four.

actually begun to plant their garden yet. The accusation against the host who is “looking for cheap labour”, is based on the lack of growing (in general and organically in particular), therefore requiring the volunteers to do unrelated work that is outside the learning and sharing experience of the WWOOF exchange and might even be contributing to the personal (monetary) gain of the host. This is seen by many members as a violation of the organic philosophy and its moral values. WWOOFers too are sometimes accused of such a violation of the WWOOF philosophy.

“They mostly want a free bed for the night or to cuddle lambs.” This quote from a New Zealand WWOOF-host, taken from Campbell (2000:56), reflects the common criticism of the WWOOFers’ lack of ambition to work and learn, and their romantic view of farm life (also Nimmo 2001, Stateva 2010). According to several studies on WWOOFers’ motivation, members have various reasons to join the organisation – an interest in organic farming is not necessarily one of them. A consultation report for WWOOF-UK states: “Not all WWOOFers have a serious interest in organic horticulture – many may do it for a congenial activity or even for a break from their normal life circumstances” (Mercer 2000:20). Nicole, a self-sufficient grower in New Zealand, said: *“You really can never tell, some people turn up and say they have a really bad backache and can’t do any bending.”*⁸⁰ Anaru, a New Zealand host, remembered a young WWOOFer from England: *“She didn’t know what a spade was; she couldn’t even boil an egg”*.⁸¹

Stateva (2010) comments on WWOOFers’ expectations to be doing “real” farm work as in planting or harvesting and how they are disappointed when they were asked to weed and prune, tasks that did not match their romantic idea of farm life. Stateva reaches the conclusion that WWOOFers only want to “play farm” for a while, always able to withdraw from the reality of farming as a livelihood.⁸² This statement echoes the founder’s experience in the beginning of WWOOF, when the first volunteers were seen as “townies playing about in the countryside”. Jamieson (2007) states that many hosts are frustrated with WWOOFers who are looking for cheap lodging, instead of being interested in organic farming and improving the environment. Lesley, a US-American host in New Zealand,

⁸⁰ Conversation with WWOOF-host, field notes, New Zealand: 2010.

⁸¹ Conversation with WWOOF-host, field notes, New Zealand: 2011.

⁸² Stateva (2010) also states that in her case study of WWOOF in Portugal the same accusation was made by WWOOFers against hosts who were immigrants and whose “farms” were perceived by the WWOOFers as holiday homes.

stated: *“It has a fair number of people who join because they are on holiday and it’s cheap, so they only...wanna stay for a couple of days and are off to the next place and that makes us feel like a hotel.”*⁸³

Bernkopf (2009) too observes how WWOOFers in Portugal use WWOOFing for a cost-free holiday. The WWOOFer who is “out for a cheap holiday” is accused of “free riding”; this is interpreted by the members as a disinterest in the reality of (organic) farming and therefore in the organic philosophy. Both these attitudes, cheap labour and cheap travel, are part of the reality of WWOOF, but not of the ideology of the WWOOF movement. Research in both social movement and alternative organisations has noted the free-rider problem as an issue for egalitarian groups (Douglas and Wildavsky 1982, Schwartzman 1989, Sargisson and Sargent 2004, Staggenborg 2008). In these organisations, members can benefit from the achievements of the movement, or the services of an alternative organisation, without contributing.

WWOOF remains an open movement; members prefer relationships based on trust over regulated access to the group. Formal regulations in place of trust would contradict the WWOOF philosophy of personal close relationships. However, the WWOOF exchange does not happen in a vacuum and the members are held accountable for their actions. Members trust that they will encounter likeminded people through WWOOF who adhere to the WWOOF philosophy, as well as to the norms of conduct of the WWOOF exchange. Yet this does not provide a solution to the free-rider problem which remains a dilemma for WWOOF, and can lead to discontent among the participants in the WWOOF exchange. This discussion of the problems within the WWOOF movement has illustrated what members expect from WWOOF and how they engage with the ideals of the WWOOF movement. It should not, however, obscure the fact that, in the vast majority of cases, WWOOF successfully arranges the exchange between hosts and volunteers, thereby spreading the philosophy of WWOOF and the wider organic movement.

⁸³ Conversation with WWOOF-host, field notes, New Zealand: 2010.

Concluding remarks

This chapter reflects on the members' diverse and subjective concepts of 'green' and 'organic', and their attempts to turn their vision of a better lifestyle into practice. There are tensions between ideal and reality, as well as differing opinions among the members of the movement about what constitutes alternative environmental practices and a green lifestyle, which need to constantly be negotiated. There is a simplistic rhetoric dichotomy in the discourse of the members, describing the "absolute character" (Cohen 2000:1) of their identity as opposed to "the other". However, this dichotomy of urban-rural, sustainability-exploitation, sharing-profit, and the values attributed to these categories by the members, does not represent their lived reality. This is not necessarily experienced as a contradiction by the members, as they ascribe subjective meaning to their own alternative lifestyles.

"Dropping out" and cutting all ties with civilisation is generally not what alternative lifestyleers have in mind (Halfacree 2007). The WWOOF-hosts engage in alternative sustainable lifestyle projects, from the suburban "backyard farm" to voluntary simplicity living in the remote wilderness. They pass on and exchange their knowledge with their volunteers who help make this lifestyle possible. The WWOOFers engage in a temporary country escape before returning to their "ordinary" urban lives, maybe trying to incorporate what they have learned into their everyday practices. In doing so they establish little "pockets of alternative-ness", such as buying organic food at the local farmers market and observing what they consider to be sustainable practices in their everyday lives. In this way, I argue, the members of the WWOOF movement feel that they have realised their ecotopian dreams, at least to some extent, and are actively fulfilling the aims of WWOOF, spreading the organic philosophy.

Beginning with the founder's narrative, this chapter has traced the origin of WWOOF and the values that constitute the WWOOF movement. WWOOFing was originally conceptualised as a way of being involved in country life, a recreational activity for the (British at first) middle-class urban population.⁸⁴ As I have demonstrated, WWOOF remained a fairly homogenous movement since its beginning, representative for the green

⁸⁴ Also 'white' and 'heterosexual', as Smaje (2003) states about WWOOFers in the UK, which is in accordance with the conservative imagining of the "rural idyll" as white and heterosexual (Valentine 2001, also Halfacree 1996, 2001).

movement at large. This analysis identifies the “perspective” of WWOOF as that of the eco-conscious urbanite wishing to reconnect with nature. WWOOF offered the opportunity to engage with the back-to-the-land movement, to try out counter-cultural and communal living, and to enjoy being involved in production and consumption of the alternative lifestyle without actually having to commit to a life in the country. It offered a ‘working weekend retreat’ instead of a more permanent place in the country (by choice no doubt for some, and for others an affordable alternative to their own country seat), thereby answering the needs of many people to reconnect with the land.

WWOOF receives its influences from the back-to-the-land and counter-urbanisation trends, from conservative environmentalist and conservation movements, counter-cultural ideology, and the organic and sustainable lifestyle movement (or what Isenhour (2011) calls the ‘fair share movement’) shaping the members’ ideas of the country as a desirable and preferable space. From these influences developed the WWOOF philosophy, the “green utopianism” (Sargisson 2012) of WWOOF, of reconnecting with the land, being part of the eco-system instead of extracting resources for personal profit, and sharing the benefits with the community. These core values of organic and sustainability, sharing and equality will be mentioned again throughout the following chapters.

Hosts and WWOOFers are expected to share this WWOOF philosophy to some extent and learn from each other through the encounter. WWOOF-hosts are among the counter-cultural back-to-the-landers, individually or in rural communes and eco-villages, as well as from a more bourgeois counter-urbanisation trend of moving to the suburbs, “backyard farming”, and lifestyle blocks. Hosts are also farmers and growers who have never left the country, who farm in pre-industrial, non-conventional ways or have converted to organic and other “radical” alternative farming methods, such as biodynamics or permaculture (Bunce 1994, Halfacree 2006). WWOOFers come from among the eco-conscious urbanites (Isenhour 2011), who recycle, buy organic, local, fair trade, and practise sustainable resource management. For some WWOOFers, the WWOOF exchange is an alternative, hands-on learning experience, an internship or preparation for their own endeavours in “returning to the land”. For others, it is an alternative way of traveling. For many WWOOFers it is a temporary green utopia on weekends and holidays, fulfilling desires of contact with nature, producing one’s own food, and wholesome rural community life; the “simple life” away from the city and its estranged relationships. Going back to the

land is the dream of reconnecting with the land, as well as living an imagined rural community life.

The main focus of this chapter is the belief system of the members, their shared symbols, and the boundaries of the WWOOF movement. The rhetoric of sustainability has become a fundamental concept not just for the members of WWOOF but within the discourse of the organic movement in general, emphasising caring for and sharing with environment and humankind as part of a holistic ecosystem. It is the vision of a better society, constituting a self-identity based on the morality of the green movement that extends to religious practices and spirituality (Eder 1996). For the members of WWOOF the shared metaphors of ‘organic’ and ‘sustainability’ incorporate a range of ideas included in their ecotopian thinking, of social justice and equality, sharing benefits and profits instead of exploiting for personal gain, and fostering close relationships. The ambiguity of these shared symbols (Cohen 2000 [1985]) transcends the rules and regulations of ‘organic’ as a standard of food production. However, this ambiguity is not a generally accepted positive attribute. Rather, it involves a discourse over boundaries that also excludes and limits the social group.

Whatever the level of commitment and success, the identification with the alternative, rural, sustainable, and organic lifestyle and “green utopian thinking” of WWOOF entitles the members to participate in the WWOOF exchange. With such a broad spectrum of what this green philosophy entails, from practical farming to green spirituality, there is much the members have to negotiate when participating in the WWOOF exchange. The WWOOF exchange between hosts and helpers as a form of alternative economy will be the focus of the next chapter.

2

The moral economy of the WWOOF exchange

For a week I stayed with Nicole, a New Zealand WWOOF-host, working together with four other WWOOFers. We lived almost self-sustainably off what we harvested. The workload seemed fair, six hours a day working in the garden for a week, and one day off. The food was 100% organic and mostly home grown, and we were accommodated in our own modern, eco-friendly house. A WWOOFer's dream and still, after only a few days, conflict arose between the host and the WWOOFers. River, a young man from the US, and two young men from France, soon complained about the food they received from our host: Three vegetarian meals a day did not make up for six hours of rooting out blackberry bushes, so they thought. Nicole was reluctant to change her diet for the WWOOFers. She argued that many WWOOFers had a "detox experience" while staying with her and living only on organic food harvested from the garden. This would irritate WWOOFers who were not used to such a diet. Nicole was convinced that quantity and quality of her food was sufficient for the young men and told them so. I realised I was experiencing the detox too – having to live without caffeine for a week the notes in my research diary became increasingly bad-tempered. The French WWOOFers disappeared soon; their lack of language skills made it very difficult for them to communicate with our host. Megan, River's partner, expressed what I experienced too: we all felt unwelcome. We could not move freely around the house, were not allowed to help ourselves in the kitchen, but had to wait for Nicole to cook and hand out the food to us. "*I am tired of asking for food*" Megan told me frustrated while we were collecting seeds in the garden. I too felt that something was missing in this place; while other hosts had always shown interest in their WWOOFers' lives and backgrounds, Nicole's interaction was mostly limited to giving out instructions. The general mood among the WWOOFers was very low when we finally had our day off. River offered to drive us all into town; when Megan asked "*What do you want to do in town?*" he answered sarcastically "*Buy salad!*" The perfect 100% organic WWOOF-host turned out to be a disappointment because no friendly relationship was established between host and WWOOFers.

Introduction

The above narrative is not a unique case; sometimes the WWOOF exchange between host and WWOOFer fails. In this chapter, I examine why this happens, thereby investigating what is of importance to the participants in the WWOOF exchange. I ask what the WWOOF exchange should entail according to the members, and what it is that turns it into a successful encounter for the participants in the exchange. The analysis focuses on the rules of the exchange, the official and the hidden ones, which involve barter, gift-exchange, and mutual sharing. Central to this study are the members' understanding, ideas, and engagement with exchange and economy. This will illustrate the ambiguous relationship of the members of the green lifestyle movement with the mainstream market economy, and their utopian ideals of non-monetary exchange and a self-sufficient household economy.

For the members the small organic family farm is the conceptual opposite to capitalism. Profit, as the members of WWOOF understood it, must be made at the expense of others (people or environment), while economies based on sharing will bring widespread prosperity to everyone. The ideal of the WWOOF members is to live more independently from the market: to farm and live off the land, or travel and learn, without having to adhere to the market principles of buying and selling, but instead to barter and share, so that everyone gains at no one's expense. Some of this critique of profit-oriented market economy has been mentioned in the previous chapter as an aspect of the "green utopianism" (Sargisson 2012) of the members and their shared ideal of sustainability. This guiding morality, shared by most WWOOFers, WWOOF-hosts, and directors of WWOOF groups, however, does not necessarily fully translate into lived reality.⁸⁵ Hosts and WWOOFers, who attempt to live sustainably off the land while adhering to the ideals of sharing, engage in a set of socio-economic practices that merge non-monetary exchanges, gift-relationships, and mainstream market practices. Despite the tension between ideal and reality, the compromises and necessary adjustments in order to survive within mainstream economy, and the resulting contradictions, I argue that engaging with these socio-economic practices led participants to feel that they were indeed actively enacting their

⁸⁵ This chapter will focus on the WWOOF exchange between hosts and WWOOFers while Chapter Four will analyse the non-profit nature of WWOOF groups.

vision of an alternative economy, thereby realising their visions of an alternative society as well as the aims of WWOOF.

This chapter is informed by classic literature in economic anthropology of the gift-exchange relationship and reciprocity (Mauss 1974 [1925], Polanyi 1957 [1944], Thompson 1971, Sahlins 1972). In recent literature, gift and commodity are no longer considered to be mutually exclusive. Different economic practices exist simultaneously in the same society, and elements of gift and commodity-relations may even be part of the same exchange (Herrmann 1997, Gibson-Graham 2006, Okura-Gagné 2011). The following analysis is a contribution to this field of research, by demonstrating how the members of WWOOF are simultaneously part of numerous economies, and how the WWOOF exchange is variously interpreted by the participants as gift and commodity exchange. Despite the “official” rules of the WWOOF exchange, they are perceived as secondary to the close relationships between the participants. The work of the WWOOFer contributes to a commercial farming enterprise, or a lifestyle aimed at self-sufficiency. The WWOOF exchange is interpreted variously by hosts and WWOOFers as barter with elements of social relationships, as gift-relationship and reciprocity, or as sharing (and occasionally as exploitation) within the intimate sphere of the household.

This chapter uncovers the layers of the exchange relationship, extending the analysis from the general to the specific. First, I will discuss the ideal of the non-monetary exchange and how it became the moral basis of the WWOOF exchange. This analysis will thereby reveal the ethnocentric assumptions on which the WWOOF movement is based. Next, I will turn to the practical exchange relationship between WWOOF-host and WWOOFer in three sections by following Sahlins’ (1972) theory of balanced, generalised, and negative reciprocity, respectively. I begin with the observation of the WWOOF exchange as barter (or balanced reciprocity). However, as my analysis reveals, barter does not necessarily describe the complex relationships involved in the WWOOF exchange. For the participants, the WWOOF exchange more closely resembles an economy of householding (Polanyi 1957 [1944]), or generalised reciprocity. In the final section of this chapter I will investigate forms of negative reciprocity within the WWOOF exchange, of exploitation, taking advantage, and the existing gender inequality prevalent within this alternative economy of householding.

I begin my argument by asking how the WWOOF exchange is conceptualised as a non-monetary arrangement between hosts and WWOOFers. In the first section I illustrate where the economic ideals of WWOOF originate, and how they are expressed by the members, debating the value of the non-monetary nature of WWOOF. The WWOOF exchange can be understood as volunteering and non-monetary exchange (Gibson-Graham 2006), as well as a commodity product for tourists. I illustrate how the members engage with this contradiction, conceptualising their involvement in ideal terms while having to engage with a capitalist society. I then turn to the question of how the members of WWOOF understand the WWOOF exchange in terms of economic exchange in the following three sections.

Some of the literature on WWOOF (McIntosh and Bonnemann 2006, Lipman and Murphy 2012, Mosedale 2012), as well as some members, understand the WWOOF exchange as a barter arrangement, trading commodities of equal value in a non-monetary exchange. I discuss this concept of the WWOOF exchange in the second section. ‘The economy’ is commonly understood as formal, profit-oriented, capitalist market exchange, while barter, sharing, and informal economic practices belong to a separate sphere of the “exotic other”, the “to-be-developed”, the (historic) “peasant societies”, and the urban poor and marginalised. “The general, nonanthropological view of exchange is that it is essentially market-like and is always rational and profit-motivated. The simplifications which result from such narrowly economic models of exchange are clear to see, and relate to an inability to theorize the richness and messiness of the exchange process” (Crewe 2000:283). This opposition of formal and informal economy has increasingly been criticised in economic anthropology and cultural studies (Hann and Hart 2011) as well as in economic theory (Gibson-Graham 2006). A discussion of WWOOF as barter illustrates the range of economies people engage with inside and outside the market economy, and how close relationships are understood as an essential part of the exchange.

From the observation of WWOOF as barter I move on to a closer investigation of the complex relationships involved in the WWOOF exchange, by discussing WWOOF as what Karl Polanyi (1957 [1944]) refers to as householding. The household of the organic farm of WWOOF-hosts is a sphere of production (on any scale) as well as consumption. The WWOOFer becomes a temporary member of the household, sharing in production and consumption. The WWOOF household as a site of consumption and production (for use as

well as for exchange), and production based on “informal” economy, blurs the boundaries between private and public, formal and informal. Discussing Polanyi’s concept of householding, Chris Gregory (2009) states:

Its rise was tied to the development of capitalist agriculture, and so was its demise, because production for use in an economy geared to production for exchange was an anomaly. Whatever merit the concept has for understanding the past, it is clearly of little or no use in today’s world, where even agriculture has gone beyond the Green Revolution. (2009:157)

On the contrary, I argue that the concept of householding is central for the (ex)urban middle-class members of the WWOOF movement, who aim for sustainability and self-sufficiency in their alternative ‘green utopian’ lifestyle. It is an economic model for the alternative lifestylers who practice the “anomaly” of production for use that emphasises the gift-relationships between the participants.

Yunxiang Yan (2012:287-288) argues that there is still a dominant focus in anthropological concepts of the gift in the West that overemphasises the emotional and spontaneous nature of the gift in these societies. However, some studies have demonstrated that there are indeed calculations in the gift-relationship (Carrier 1990, Trundle 2012), just as there are social aspects to the commodity exchange (Herrmann 1997, Okura-Gagné 2011). In this chapter I ask why the rhetoric of sharing in the WWOOF exchange demands the concealment of calculations, leading to an inability to negotiate the terms of the exchange. The exchange can create tension, dissatisfaction, and even exploitation in the WWOOF exchange. The ‘moral economy’ of the WWOOF exchange is based on an understanding between the members that both sides benefit equally from the exchange without gaining profit at the expense of the other. In the following section I briefly discuss the origins of the term ‘moral economy’ before turning to the analysis of the moral economy of the WWOOF exchange.

Moral economy

The concept of a ‘moral economy of provision’ was developed by E.P. Thompson (1971) in regard to the food riots of 18th century England. Thompson analyses the consumers’

idea of a “just price” for corn, flour, and bread; consumers occasionally enforced a lower price and generally resented the profit making middlemen: “marketing should be, so far as possible, direct, from the farmer to the consumer” (1971:83). The urban consumers expected that their subsistence needs were met without others profiting; profiteering was seen as suspect behaviour, as private gain was created at the expense of the common wealth. Thompson states that “Millers and – to a greater degree – bakers were considered as servants of the community, working not for a profit but for a fair allowance” (1971:83). Deriving from subsistence-economy thinking, Thompson states these moral imperatives constituted the moral economy of the urban workers who continued to oppose the new political economy of the free market.

For Thompson the new political economy of the free market drove out the old moral economy of provision. Katherine Browne (2009) highlights the dualism of this concept: “With both Scott and Thompson’s description of subsistence-based peasant systems as “moral economies,” the rhetorical inference of moral superiority was reinforced. Morality in economics for some has thus become synonymous with the particular set of principles inscribed in reciprocity-based, noncapitalist societies” (2009:7). The concept of moral economy as *the* moral economy of subsistence-based non-capitalist society implies that capitalist society, as its conceptual opposite, has no morals. “[F]rom concern for the social good to a concern for individual choices” (2009:7), the economy has lost its moral base. Browne contests the dualistic notion of a moral and a market economy, stating that “all economies possess a moral centre” (2009:5). Thompson also emphasises in *‘Moral Economy Reviewed’* (1991) that his concept of a moral economy was based on a specific historic example and never “proposed an absolute segregation between a moral and a market economy” (1991:272). Considering that diverse economies can exist side by side and people can be part of different economies at the same time, like the members of WWOOF who participate in an alternative economy while still being members of a free market economy, different morals apply at different times and in different spheres, and people have to negotiate between them.

Still, as Browne illustrates, this binary regard of urban life, industrialisation, and the morality of economy prevails. In her study of Victorian England, Marsh (1982) observes that the development of free trade and industrial development were understood as interlinked. The cause of the misery of city life, Marsh states, was seen as “the urban

industrial system itself...the solution was clear: the city must go, industry must be dismantled, the people must be resettled in villages and the economy return to craft workshops and guilds” (1982:3). As mentioned in Chapter One, there are ideological similarities between the Romantic era of 19th century Europe and counter-cultural movements of the 1960s. Mary Douglas and Aaron Wildavsky (1982) investigate what predisposed people to this social criticism in the 1960s in the US. They illustrate how the economic boom, which led to rising levels of education, resulted in a population that was highly educated and economically independent. This segment of society were never employed in the production sector and “produced a cohort of articulate, critical people with no commitment to commerce and industry” (1982:159), resulting in what Douglas and Wildavsky call a “contemporary movement of social concern” (1982:159).

What resonates with the moral economy of the WWOOF movement is the suspicion against profit-orientated individuals⁸⁶ who gain at the expense of others by using common wealth as private wealth (Sykes 2005) and through others’ subsistence needs (Thompson 1971, Scott 1976). At the second international WWOOF conference it was stated that ‘the people’ and ‘the organic principles’ must take priority over any financial considerations (Conference Report 2006). The “moral centre” of the WWOOF ethos includes an inherent criticism of capitalism, while the self-sufficient rural and communal lifestyle is the ecotopian ideal of this alternative economy. In the following section I will further explore the moral economy of WWOOF.

“Money corrupts” – Between pure gift and commodity

Seymour, a former WWOOF-UK director, quotes a WWOOF-UK member in her study who commented on his WWOOF membership renewal form: “WWOOF is an instrument of social change and no less. The spirit of WWOOF is mateship, learning, teaching and

⁸⁶ This is the reason why commercial organic farmers are under suspicion of not being committed to the organic philosophy (Chapter One). It equally applies to commercially operated WWOOF groups (Chapter Four).

growing together. Its non-financial basis is essential: because money corrupts, WWOOF regenerates. WWOOF should be expanded as government!” (2007b:16). This opinion is common among WWOOF members who share a critical view of the formal, capitalist, profit-oriented market economy. Paying for a stay at a WWOOF-farm, or paying a WWOOFer for her/his help is excluded by the general aims of WWOOF. When I asked the founder of WWOOF whether she ever considered paying for a farm stay, she said: *“No! I would be working for it [pause]; likewise, I never expected to be paid.”*⁸⁷ The possibility of gaining personal profit at the expense of others through the WWOOF exchange is treated with great suspicion by most members.

In some developing countries WWOOFers pay their hosts some money for their stay, following the logic that the host might need to buy extra supplies like bottled water for their foreign WWOOFers. The fact that there are particular differences to WWOOFing in developing countries was brought to the attention of the international network of WWOOF directors by a group of West African WWOOF directors. The director of WWOOF-Ghana sent a statement to the first international WWOOF conference: “In Ghana we ask volunteers to supplement cost of feeding at the farms. The farmers do not have enough income to completely feed volunteers. Also, many volunteers are vegan, vegetarians and a few cannot eat some of our foods” (Conference Paper 3: Ghana, 2000). Likewise, the director of WWOOF-Togo is quoted in the minutes of the conference, saying “[t]here are some fundamental differences between WWOOFing in developing countries and in the West. You must appreciate the problems of everyday life in Togo...If a visitor comes to Togo it is necessary to buy bottled water for them” (Conference Report 2000:8). For many members, supporting the WWOOF-host with some cash money therefore follows the logic of the WWOOF ethos of sustainability, equality, and the ideals of “sharing and caring”, not only for the environment, but also for people.

Some members, however, do not accept the practice of WWOOFers paying hosts for their stay under any circumstances. Nancy, a former WWOOF-UK director, remembered a discussion between the directors at the international WWOOF conference, emphasising that WWOOFers should enable a self-sufficient lifestyle for the host, not compromise it:

⁸⁷ Conversation with the founder of WWOOF, field notes, England: 2011.

We had lots of discussions about whether it was okay to charge in developing countries. They are saying, they maybe have to buy special food or they have to buy water because the people from Europe can't drink the local water; so then they wanted to charge people who were going WWOOFing, or if they had to pick somebody up from the station, that went on and on and on. I mean, I am very clear and I think the UK was clear that you shouldn't charge. And maybe then it isn't appropriate, if it isn't self-sufficient farming, maybe somebody from Europe going there doesn't contribute enough to cover the cost of their food and board and lodging, well then maybe WWOOFing isn't appropriate in that situation [laughs]. In India or Africa wanting to have WWOOFers is a kind of tourism enterprise, so yes, maybe you can't have WWOOFing in every situation, in every country in the world. But other people were saying, well it helps struggling organic farmers and it was a good experience for the WWOOFer; even if they had to pay five dollars a day it was much cheaper than any other kind of holiday and it was nothing to them.⁸⁸

For Nancy the concept of allowing hosts to charge WWOOFers for their stay means risking that WWOOF becomes a tourist scheme. Therefore, charging WWOOFers remains outside the WWOOF ethos for her. With the same argument, WWOOF groups from Africa or WWOOF-India, in Nancy's words, should therefore be excluded from the WWOOF movement. As the quote demonstrates, not all members share this opinion. Still, with members from industrialised Western countries dominating the WWOOF movement,⁸⁹ the fundamental assumption of "money corrupts" has remained central to the WWOOF ethos.

This rhetoric of the alienating forces of capitalism is the reason why any connotation with tourism is such a dilemma for members of WWOOF. Ord reports from her difficulties trying to research WWOOF in relation to tourism: "Because of the non-commercial, values-based nature of the WWOOF exchange, examining it from a tourism perspective is met with hostility in some cases" (2010:5; see also Dana 2012:45 who received a similar response from the WWOOF-Austria director). Tourism is understood by the members as an expression of consumerism, which is why WWOOFers distinguished themselves from tourists (see also Nimmo 2001, Stateva 2010), and WWOOF directors distanced their national organisations from tourism providers (see also Ord 2010, Dana 2012). Many WWOOF-hosts emphasised that they are not farm stays (see also McIntosh and Campbell 2001), although this is also a strategy of hosts to avoid "free-riding" WWOOFers looking for a cheap holiday.

⁸⁸ Interview with WWOOF-Italy director and former WWOOF-UK director, England: 2011.

⁸⁹ See Chapter Five.

Those researchers who have studied WWOOF in the context of tourism most often describe WWOOF in terms of alternative tourism, eco- and sustainable tourism, and volunteer tourism. This reflects the alternative sustainable lifestyle choice and alternative consumption practices of the members (Wearing 2001, Wearing and Neil 2009). Nimmo describes WWOOFing in New Zealand as “a model of decommodified ecotourism” (2001:180) and Ord defines the WWOOF exchange in Canada as “volunteer farm tourism that is non-commercial” (2010:12). Alternative tourism as alternative consumption, like organic or fair trade (Fisher 2007, Dolan 2009), is part of an alternative lifestyle that blurs the distinction between what is considered market and non-market. Sue, the founder of WWOOF, had strong objections to the very idea that WWOOF might be a touristic venture. She stated about her initial intention: *“No, it wasn’t tourism; it was to get into the countryside. I wanted to get into the country; I wanted to stay on farms again, because I did that when I was a kid.”*⁹⁰ Tourism is understood as a commodity in the context of market economy and therefore outside the moral universe of the WWOOF ethos. The WWOOF-Spain director, however, pointed out the inherent contradiction: In response to my question of whether WWOOF was a tourism venture he answered: *“Not at all! It’s even probably against excessive travelling, but obviously if you go WWOOFing usually you will travel, hopefully with a different attitude, not simply ‘touristic’.”*⁹¹

The moral economy of WWOOF, the members largely agree, is a non-monetary alternative form of economy. This perspective demonstrates an ethnocentric perspective that excludes other possible ways of engaging with money as part of a social relationship. Chris Hann and Keith Hart (2011) illustrate this clash of ideals with an ethnographic example:

Hart recalls a conversation long ago with a Ghanaian student about money and sex in cross-cultural perspective. The student met a young American woman at a party in his country and they spent the night together afterwards at her place. When he was leaving in the morning, he put some money on the dressing table as a token of his affection, quite unprepared for the explosion this gesture provoked: ‘Do you think I am a prostitute?!’ As far as he was concerned, cash was no different from a gift in kind and much more useful. He did not know that the payment of money is supposed to transform a relationship into something impersonal. Money in capitalist societies stands for alienation, detachment, impersonal society, the outside; its origins lie beyond our control (the *market*). Relations marked by the

⁹⁰ Interview with the founder of WWOOF, England: 2011.

⁹¹ E-mail interview with WWOOF-Spain director, 2010.

absence of money are the model of personal integration and free association, of what we take to be familiar, the inside (*home*). (2011:82)

Free association is only possible when there is no money involved, so the perspective of most WWOOF members. For the WWOOF exchange the same distinction applies between market as impersonal and the home as the sphere of non-monetary “meaningful” gift relations. I will return to the home as a space of close relationships in the next chapter.

Therefore, most WWOOF directors share the perspective that WWOOFers should not pay for their stay. Referring to a New Zealand context, Anna, the WWOOF-NZ director, pointed out:

*[W]hen people start expecting money from WWOOFers, then there are a whole lot of other issues, like I mean it's not about the exchange it becomes about money; it would change the whole [pause] sort of spirit of it? You know what I mean? The whole feeling of it would change. It is quite a delicate balance really.*⁹²

Likewise, the practice of paying WWOOFers for their help is not thought to be compatible with the WWOOF ethos. Emere, a New Zealand WWOOF-host, observed: “*Money makes people count pennies and seconds, on both sides. It changes the whole setup, because then I would be employing [the WWOOFer].*”⁹³ For most members from Western societies it is an either/or question; money and close relationships exclude each other in exchange relationships.

The WWOOF-Togo director also suggested to provide WWOOFers from African countries with “pocket money” to enable them to travel to Europe or North America (Conference Paper 6: Togo, 2000). Both practices, money for WWOOFers (as compensation for work or in form of travel grants) and paying hosts for the stay, are debated and largely opposed among the (predominantly Western) directors (Conference Report 2000; see also Jamieson 2007). Anna said: “*it just takes the balance out of the whole sharing and giving kind of nature of WWOOF, really.*”⁹⁴ However, money as an expression of affection is not uncommon in capitalist societies either, as gifts or as compensation (Lyon 2010). For example, au-pairs are expected to be treated as household

⁹² Interview with the WWOOF-NZ directors, New Zealand: 2010.

⁹³ Conversation with WWOOF-host, field notes, New Zealand: 2011.

⁹⁴ Interview with WWOOF-NZ directors, New Zealand: 2010.

and family members,⁹⁵ not diminished by the fact that they receive monetary payment (Yodanis and Lauer 2005, Mellini et al 2007). Equally, WWOOF-hosts report how paid interns can become part of the household just like WWOOFers (also Trauger 2007). In neither of these cases the involvement of money prevents the establishing of intimate relationships; even the WWOOF exchange occasionally involves money.

The non-monetary nature of the WWOOF exchange is sometimes blurred. Where WWOOFers cater for themselves the host might give them some money to buy goods that the farm does not supply. In some cases hosts pay long term WWOOFers “pocket money”. Emily, a New Zealand host, had two German WWOOFers who completed an internship on her biodynamic vineyard. The interns insisted on working eight hours a day for three months, in order to fulfil the obligations for their internship. Emily could not pay for their skilled labour, but instead gave them long weekends off and paid for their bus fares. Nicole, the host mentioned in the narrative at the beginning of this chapter, used to work as a professional photographer. She had a WWOOFer who got up at four in the morning and worked all day. To express her gratitude for the additional help that went beyond the norms of the WWOOF exchange, Nicole gave her a camera. These forms of reimbursements are framed by the participants as part of their social relationship, not payment in place of wages. Occasionally, the ‘no money’ rule is completely dropped. Some hosts pay their WWOOFers money if they are able to do qualified skilled work, like craftwork, operating heavy machinery, or during fruit picking season.⁹⁶ As these examples illustrate, the moral economy of the WWOOF exchange as essentially non-monetary is an illusion based on the ethnocentric position of Western WWOOF groups. It is a perspective that does not reflect critically on its own practices, while judging different attitudes towards money (where money can be just another form of a gift) as outside the WWOOF ethos.

The ideal of the non-monetary economy also remains oblivious to the commercial context of farm life. WWOOF-hosts are engaged with market and non-market spheres. In her study on WWOOF in Canada, Ord (2010) finds that over a third of all hosts were dependent on the help provided by WWOOF volunteers in order to operate their farms successfully. This

⁹⁵ I will return to this aspect in the next chapter.

⁹⁶ Bernkopf (2009) reports of a WWOOF-host who “rented out” his WWOOFers’ labour for money. These private arrangements between host and WWOOFer are, however, outside the norms of the WWOOF exchange.

illustrates how WWOOF “addresses the additional labor burden on the farming family” (2010:11, also Engelsted 2011). The voluntary work of WWOOFers often supports the commercial farms of hosts who engage with the market economy by selling their produce. In need of extra work they make the strategic economic decision to take WWOOFers. Hosts often insist on a minimum length of stay so they do not have to constantly invest time in training new WWOOFers. This is also a strategy to avoid volunteers with a “tourist attitude”. Emily, a New Zealand host with a biodynamic vineyard, did not accept volunteers for less than a week, because otherwise “*they are tourists and I am no hostel!*”⁹⁷ This was indeed a common requirement. An Austrian host family refused to accommodate a family from Spain because they intended to stay only for three days, commenting: “*They were just looking for a farm stay holiday.*”⁹⁸ Many hosts are reluctant to take young WWOOFers in their teens and early twenties who, they believe, are not used to a daily work-routine and “*don't get out of bed in the morning*”, as Nicole, a self-sufficient grower in New Zealand, stated.⁹⁹ WWOOFers calculate too; volunteering is no “pure gift” but usually involves an expectation to benefit from the exchange, for example, acquiring new skills, personal growth, or experiencing family life in a new country. That hosts and WWOOFers have personal motives why they participate in the WWOOF exchange does not, however, compromise the ideals of the WWOOF exchange. The WWOOF exchange does not claim to be altruistic, only to be mutually beneficial.

There is also a pragmatic reason for framing the WWOOF exchange as non-monetary exchange and volunteering. Many WWOOF groups, it seems, are occasionally questioned by their governments whether they might be acting as travel agencies or job centres.¹⁰⁰ This would change the legal and tax status of WWOOF organisations. The director of WWOOF-NZ explained: “*We had to try and keep [pause] to not do things that would upset the government; try and be very clear that WWOOF is about education and learning and experiencing.*”¹⁰¹ Therefore, for legal as much as for ideological reasons, the terminology of the WWOOF movement stays away from market economy by describing WWOOF in terms of ‘volunteerism’. In this first section I have discussed the controversial issue of money and the ideal of the moral economy of the WWOOF exchange as a non-

⁹⁷ Conversation with WWOOF-host, field notes, New Zealand: 2010.

⁹⁸ Conversation with WWOOF-host, field notes, Austria: 2009.

⁹⁹ Conversation with WWOOF-host, field notes, New Zealand: 2010.

¹⁰⁰ See Chapter Four on the story of the acronym.

¹⁰¹ Interview with the WWOOF-NZ directors, New Zealand: 2010.

monetary exchange. I will now turn to the analysis of the exchange relationship between hosts and helpers, and how they interpret the exchange in terms of an alternative economy.

The WWOOF exchange as barter

There is a particular ‘norm of participation’ generally agreed upon by the members of the WWOOF movement, a framework for hosts and WWOOFers for how to engage in the WWOOF exchange, how to behave, and what to expect. These norms are reproduced in host-lists and on homepages, explaining the basics of the WWOOF exchange: four to six hours of work on the farm or in the garden, alongside or under guidance of the grower, compensated with enough food, preferably organic, and warm, dry, and safe accommodation for the helper, preferably sharing the same living conditions as the host; with no money exchanging hands. The benefits for the WWOOFers are promoted as a learning opportunity and experiencing the alternative lifestyle on an organic farm.¹⁰² It is an alternative economy within a capitalist market system. Mosedale points out: “Social exchange between participants is the most significant aspect in a successful WWOOFing experience. WWOOFing creates spaces in which the principles of conventional labour exchanges (the commodification of labour) are transformed into alternative exchange relationships” (2009:27). The exchange is termed alternative because it does not involve monetary payments and is therefore understood, in the literature as well as by the members, as not profit-oriented. The social aspect is paramount and is thought to only be possible when there is no money involved in the exchange.

A new member generally has to officially agree with these norms of participation by signing the membership form. In reality, there are numerous variations of this basic exchange depending on the policies of the group and personal arrangements between host and helper. Some hosts have a set time schedule, others do not, so that the hours of labour are not measured or measurable if they overlap with the helpers’ free time (for example when cooking, minding the host’s children, running errands, fixing the computer, walking

¹⁰² See the opening paragraphs of the homepages of WWOOF-Austria <http://www.woof.at/> [16/05/2012], WWOOF-NZ <http://www.woof.co.nz/> [16/05/2012], and WWOOF-UK <http://www.woof.org.uk/> [16/05/2012].

the dog, etc.). It is common for helpers to have a day or two off per week, but not as a rule. Some hosts find it unacceptable (or impossible) to feed and accommodate a volunteer for no help in return. The non-monetary relationship only refers to the exchange relationship between host and helper; membership with most national WWOOF groups is subject to a fee. This fee, it is informally agreed among directors, should be as low as possible covering not more than the administrative expenses of operating a WWOOF group. In reality there are great variations between national groups.¹⁰³ A number of national groups waive membership fees for hosts, for all certified organic hosts, for domestic volunteers WWOOFing in their own country, or have concession rates. The general agreement that no money should be exchanged between host and helper implies that WWOOFers will cover their travel costs to reach the host themselves and not be reimbursed for these expenses.

The basic principle of the WWOOF exchange can be stripped down to a bartering arrangement: labour in exchange for food and accommodation. Mosedale (2012) draws on Gibson-Graham's (2006) concept of 'diverse economies' in his study of WWOOF and alternative economic practices in tourism. The feminist economic geographers Gibson and Graham divide the economic sector into three spheres: the capitalist market system, alternative markets, and the non-capitalist nonmarket sphere (2006). Mosedale places the WWOOF exchange in the category of the alternative market exchange, where exchange is socially negotiated and payment made 'in-kind', rather than dictated by the logics of the capitalist market system. 'HomeExchange',¹⁰⁴ local trading schemes and alternative currencies (LETS) are other examples for this category. In this respect the WWOOF exchange is conceptualised as alternative economy, a two-way transfer of goods or services (Hunt 2002).

Gibson-Graham (2006) describe alternative market transactions as, for example, barter, where payment is made in-kind and as reciprocal labour. A transfer "in which goods and services are exchanged and commensurability is socially negotiated and agreed upon" (2006:62). This concept has similarities with Sahlins' (1972) theory of 'balanced reciprocity'. According to Sahlins, balanced reciprocity refers to the direct exchange of same value, comparable to the WWOOF exchange of labour for food and accommodation.

¹⁰³ For example, to join as a WWOOFer the UK charges 24€, Austria 25€, New Zealand 31€, and Australia 51€.

¹⁰⁴ International home exchange and home swap service: <http://www.homeexchange.com/>

“In precise balance, the reciprocity is the customary equivalent of the thing received and is without delay” (1972:194). Sahlins notes the economic and calculable, as well as the social aspect of balanced reciprocity:

Balanced reciprocity is less “personal” than generalized reciprocity. From our own vantage-point it is ‘more economic.’ The parties confront each other as distinct economic and social interests. The material side of the transaction is at least as critical as the social: there is more or less precise reckoning, as the things given must be covered within some short term. (1972:195)

Other research has also situated WWOOF within this economic sphere. McIntosh and Bonnemann (2006) define the WWOOF exchange as a ‘non-commercial barter system’. Lipman and Murphy (2012) categorise WWOOF as a ‘work exchange programme’. As a category, this seems to apply to the WWOOF exchange. The phrase “win-win situation” is sometimes used by WWOOF members to describe the relationship between host and WWOOFer, where both parties benefit equally from the exchange. However, as I will demonstrate, the same exchange can in fact be interpreted in different ways.

Many WWOOF-hosts participated in a variety of economies, what Gibson-Graham (2006) call alternative, market, and non-market transactions, selling their produce for profit, participating in LETS, bartering produce and services with neighbours, and participating in a variety of exchange-schemes. There are a number of schemes similar to WWOOF, such as ‘Se7en’,¹⁰⁵ ‘GrowFood’,¹⁰⁶ and ‘HelpX’,¹⁰⁷ ‘FHiNZ’,¹⁰⁸ in New Zealand and ‘Freiwillig am Bauernhof’¹⁰⁹ in Austria. Two of my New Zealand WWOOF-host participants were also members of ‘HelpX’. WWOOFers likewise can participate in several schemes at the same time. These are all similar programmes facilitating what Susana Narotzky (1997) calls the “means of livelihood”: “Social scientists have been increasingly aware that provision of the means of livelihood occurred not only in the connected realms of market production and consumption, but also in the realms of reproduction, leisure and non-market exchanges of goods and services” (1997:39). Private networks of family and friends, local communities, voluntary organisations, local trading schemes, and work exchange

¹⁰⁵ Social and Environmental Volunteer Exchange Network: <http://www.the7interchange.com/>

¹⁰⁶ Connecting small-scale organic farmers interested in teaching with people interested in farming: <http://www.growfood.org/>

¹⁰⁷ Help Exchange, volunteer work in exchange for free accommodation and food; <http://www.helpx.net/>

¹⁰⁸ Farm Helpers in New Zealand: <http://www.fhinz.co.nz/>

¹⁰⁹ Volunteering on Alpine Farms: http://www.maschinenring.at/default.asp?medium=MR_TIR_13

programmes are informal ways of generating income (Hart 1973), providing services, or facilitating self-sufficiency.

The informal economy is the preferred economy of many alternative lifestylers. However, most hosts and WWOOFers cannot live fully self-sufficient, only engaging in alternative forms of exchange, and completely avoiding the market economy. As discussed in Chapter One, many back-to-the-landers have other sources of income to supplement their endeavours in self-sufficient living, organic farmers sell their produce for profit, and even the professional long-term WWOOFer¹¹⁰ has to occasionally engage in paid employment, or has other sources of income, as a freelance journalist for example.

However, I argue that the WWOOF exchange is not an arrangement equal to LETS or even a home or work exchange, where each party can barter with what they give and what they receive in return. With WWOOF, the arrangement is kept far more general, as Seymour, a former WWOOF-UK director, points out in her study in human ecology: “Having agreed to help in a host’s garden the WWOOF volunteer doesn’t ask what is on the dinner menu and what quantity he [sic] will be given before agreeing to work for a certain number of hours” (2007b:7). Indeed, a WWOOFer who displays such an attitude might be treated with suspicion by hosts concerned that the WWOOFer is not interested in a social exchange, but trying for personal gain (a cheap holiday, for example) at their expense. Emily, a New Zealand host, did not appreciate a potential WWOOFer asking too many questions about the food and accommodation, *“because that doesn’t matter”*,¹¹¹ which left the WWOOFer with little to barter with. That this attitude can lead to tensions is demonstrated by a statement from the Australian WWOOF-book: “Inadequate and dirty accommodation, bedding and food are WWOOFers’ main complaints” (2012:10). The official rules of the WWOOF exchange define that work is to be compensated with bed and board, but what actually is exchanged cannot be openly negotiated. Therefore, ‘WWOOF as barter’ does not comply, as the goods and services which are exchanged cannot be negotiated. The WWOOFer must accept what he or she receives from the host, and the host must accept the limitations in skills, energy, and passion the WWOOFer has for her/his work. Both are free to end the exchange at any time.

¹¹⁰ See Chapter Three.

¹¹¹ Conversation with WWOOF-host, field notes, New Zealand: 2010.

This “rejection of money as the mediator of economic activity and the market as the determinant of value” (Seymour 2007a:5) supports WWOOF-hosts who state that they could or would not afford to pay for help on their farms in market terms. Amy Trauger (2007), in her analysis of the “agrarian dream” of the back-to-the-land movement, states:

Caught up in their own agrarian visions of a better and healthier lifestyle, ‘back-to-the-landers’ seek the agrarian ideal, through rural lifestyles supported by family-scale sustainable agriculture in spite of, or without awareness of, its social and economic problems. Most ‘back-to-the-landers’, however, quickly find that ideals do not pay the rent and making a living and making a profit necessitates strategic economic decision-making. (2007:11)

Within the frame of the alternative lifestyle and green utopianism, profit-making and employment for wages is viewed as succumbing to the capitalist market. However, those who try to live off the land, commercial farmers as well as lifestylers, are faced with the reality of having to survive within a capitalist system. Strategic economic decisions can include the employment of interns, some employ immigrant workers for minimum pay and less, and others accommodate large numbers of volunteers as a cheap workforce, contradicting the WWOOF philosophy of sharing and social justice. However, as discussed in Chapter One, there are mechanisms of auditing and social control. Where other members of WWOOF become aware of such practices this is often reported to the WWOOF directors as a violation of the WWOOF ethos.¹¹²

‘WWOOF as barter’ is not a universally accepted interpretation of the WWOOF exchange. Sue’s intention, when she founded WWOOF, was not to find cheap farm stay accommodation: *“My goal when I first thought up WWOOF was to get myself into the countryside in a ‘meaningful’, affordable way with good company. A pub stay would not have done the trick.”*¹¹³ As described in Chapter One, it was the involvement in the country lifestyle that appealed to her, “taking part” in farm life together with the farming family. Helping on the farm was the essential aspect of the experience and not considered payment for food and accommodation. The idea of work as an unpleasant requirement for procuring the necessities of life belongs to a mainstream Western attitude where work is considered part of the impersonal public sphere, while consumption and pleasure is gained in the private home (Hart 2005). For the alternative lifestylers, however, who move to the

¹¹² Depending on the groups’ policies and misconduct procedures, the directors investigate the incident further and decide if the host should be excluded.

¹¹³ Pier 2011, interview.

country to live off the land, or engage in projects of “backyard farming” in their suburban homes, work is part of the “good life” to which the WWOOFer is introduced through the WWOOF exchange.

Likewise, hospitality and meals provided by the WWOOF-hosts are not considered payment for work. To regard a meal as a commodity is unusual in most social contexts, as Sahlins (1972) points out: “Direct and equivalent returns for food are unseemly in most social settings: they impugn the motives both of the giver and of the recipient” (1972:215). Mutual support, shared meals, and hospitality are not considered tradable commodities within the WWOOF exchange. On the contrary, it is these interactions that allow the members to “perform” their opposition to a mainstream lifestyle of consumerism (Zukin 2008). The concept of barter, as Hart (2005) states, is not really an alternative to mainstream market mechanisms; except for the exclusion of money, it follows the same principles. For many WWOOF members the simple exclusion of money, the WWOOF exchange as barter, is not enough; their vision of an alternative economy goes further.

During my research, I never experienced the WWOOF exchange as barter. Where I felt comfortable in a surrounding of friendliness, support, appreciation, familiarity, a like-mindedness of thoughts, I wanted to do more for my hosts than what the rules of the WWOOF exchange entailed. Where I did not feel comfortable, lacking a positive emotional connection with the host, I felt exploited. The narrative at the beginning of this chapter illustrates what would have been a WWOOF exchange as balanced reciprocity. It was a disappointing experience for all involved. The aims of WWOOF go beyond this kind of balanced reciprocity, promising sharing and learning experiences of a personal and emotional dimension. In a radio interview the WWOOF-Australia director stated: *“If someone is just looking for free food and accommodation they are not going to get the most out of the programme; if someone is just looking for cheap labour on the host side, they are not going to get the most out of the programme.”*¹¹⁴ Likewise, Mosedale (2012) points out: “Although the simplified exchange is labour for food and accommodation, the success of the exchange relationship depends on the social interaction between host and WWOOFer” (2012:203; see also Stateva 2010, who reaches a similar conclusion).

¹¹⁴ Wilson 2001, interview.

As Mosedale observes, social interactions are at the heart of the WWOOF exchange. It is not enough to focus on what is measurable and quantitative: the hours of labour, food, and lodging. In their study on the role of the au-pair in Switzerland and France, Laura Mellini, Carrie Yodanis, and Alberto Godenzi (2007) reach a similar conclusion:

[O]bjective aspects of the au pair arrangement, such as working hours, pay, and living arrangements, are not sufficient for shaping an au pair's perception of her experience and role. Rather subjective aspects of the relationship between the au pair and members of host, such as reciprocity in doing favors, sharing information, and engaging in family activities, matter for the au pair's role. (2007:61)

The non-economic, immeasurable practices cannot be side-lined, trivialised, devalued (Gibson-Graham 2006), and treated as something separate to the “real” work of the WWOOF exchange, as some studies have tried to do (Cronauer 2011). This perspective also fails to recognise work as a social activity, establishing relationships between participants. Lynn, a New Zealand host from Ireland, described how these supposedly separate spheres belong together. While we were sitting together in her suburban garden, drinking morning tea, she reflected: “*With WWOOF it's more than the exchange. You get your bed and board, but it's also more than that [pause] the fact that we are sitting here, that's also part of the exchange.*”

In this section I have analysed WWOOF as barter, concluding that the concept of barter does not incorporate all aspects of the complex relationships between host and helper. In the next section I will take a closer look at how the participants interpret the exchange by discussing WWOOF as a form of household economy. I ask how the WWOOF members conceptualise the social relationships involved in the WWOOF exchange, and how they negotiate the no-money ideal of the WWOOF ethos as part of their alternative green lifestyle. It is necessary to look beyond the exchange of work for food and accommodation as the exclusive or even primal aspect of WWOOFing, in order to understand the members' interpretation of the WWOOF exchange.

Householding and the ideal of sharing

During the first international WWOOF conference it was emphasised that all WWOOF-hosts must be producing something: “[I]n general it was felt that a host should be involved in growing and/or farming. So conservation projects, parks and gardens would be acceptable as hosts but no one thought that an organic cafe could be a host – unless they grew some veggies themselves” (Conference Report 2000:9). It is significant that the WWOOF-host is meant to be a sustainable producer, ecologically, socially, and economically sustainable as appropriate to their circumstances. The WWOOFer is there to help with the production processes on the farm, while not taking away any of its profits. This economic ideal resembles what Polanyi (1957 [1944]) refers to as householding – a self-sufficient economic unit.

In Polanyi’s original economic theory he separates the market sphere from the non-market sphere. Reciprocity, redistribution, and householding¹¹⁵ constitute the non-market economy, where wage-labour and the motive of gain is expected to be absent. Gregory (2009) however refines this theory, arguing that the economy of householding can be “autarkic” or “non-autarkic”. Therefore, householding is not always a self-sufficient form of economy but embedded in market relations. WWOOF-hosts are not self-sufficient either, in the sense of complete independence from the market economy. In fact, they engage with modern market economy in many ways: Commercial farmers have to produce a profit; some are employed for wages, or employ workers themselves. Even those among the hosts who tried to achieve complete self-sufficiency found that they occasionally had to buy products they could not grow themselves or barter (for example coffee, sugar, or petrol). Nonetheless, for many back-to-the-landers and alternative lifestyleers self-sufficiency is the economic ideal, aspiring to become independent from market forces, the need to make a profit, wage-labour, and consumerism.

The household as a site of production *and* consumption has historic roots in the pre-industrial agricultural economy of Europe. It is probably this aspect that appeals to many in the back-to-the-land movement. Claudia Opitz (1994) criticises that this model was

¹¹⁵ Stephen Gudeman points out about Polanyi’s theory of economy: “Because Polanyi’s typology is formed around modes of exchange, the self-sufficient economy has no place in it, as Polanyi uncomfortably recognized” (2001:85), which is why Polanyi later dropped the concept of householding (Gregory 2009).

already in decline during pre-modern times. She considers the completely self-sufficient household a myth of a romanticised past, as they too were involved in market transactions. Traditional family farms are both home and workplace, unlike modern urban living and agro-businesses. “Before the development of industrial capitalism in Europe commodity production (e.g. weaving, baking, farming) and reproduction (child rearing) took place in the same sphere. There was not the same level of separation of activities into different spaces – home and work – as there is today” (Valentine 2001:65). During the 17th and 18th century a conceptual division took place in industrialised Europe, of public and private space, divided along emotional, moral, economic, and gender lines (Cieraad 1999). The maintenance of this conceptual division, Hart (2005) states, requires an immense cultural effort. Hann and Hart (2011) point out: “This institutional dualism, forcing individuals to divide themselves every day between production outside and consumption inside, asks too much of us” (2011:171). This division of public and private, of production as separate from reproduction and consumption, is opposed by the holistic philosophy of a sustainable lifestyle. The WWOOF household as a social group is concerned with economic activities of production, reproduction, and consumption, centred on self-sufficiency and sustainability. Ideally, it is a sphere of sharing and mutual support. Robert Hunt (2002) argues that sharing is indeed not a form of exchange at all, but “an extension of the domestic group transfer morality” (2002:111).

Farm work simultaneously belongs to various economic spheres. Some work might be reciprocated in market terms as paid labour, although many small-scale farmers and growers cannot afford to employ staff. Some work is based on alternative arrangements of reciprocal labour, for example during hay-making or picking season. But most commonly, especially for small-scale family farms and growers, work remains unpaid and outside the market sphere. In their discussion of agricultural economy, Hann and Hart (2011) state that “unpaid family labour continues to play a pivotal role in the agricultural sectors of the most advanced capitalist economies” (2011:134). In the WWOOF household the unpaid labour is done by a group of related and unrelated household members. This describes householding, as Gregory (1994) illustrates:

[H]ouseholding or production-for-use, is based on the closed, self-sufficient and territorial household group. The internal organization and size of the group is a matter of indifference – Polanyi lists the European peasant farming household and

the Carolingian magnates¹¹⁶ as examples – because the principle is always the same, namely ‘that of producing and storing for the satisfaction of the wants of the members of the group’ (Polanyi 1944:53). (Gregory 1994:921)

The WWOOFers temporarily share this sphere of unpaid family labour of the household economy of their hosts, including rights and obligations. Thompson (1991) reconsiders his concept of a moral economy in the classical sense, “an economy in its original meaning (*oeconomy*) as the due organisation of a household, in which each part is related to the whole and each member acknowledges her/his several duties and obligations” (1991:271).

Rights and obligations within the WWOOF household do not generally extend beyond this temporary and spatial arrangement.¹¹⁷ The WWOOF-hosts, not only farms but also intentional communes, lifestyle blocks, and suburban middle-class family homes, bring the spheres of production and consumption together by farming and growing, creating artwork, offering training and services from their homes. This reflects the ethos of WWOOF and the members’ critique of capitalism as an “unnatural” separation of production from their living space and sphere of reproduction and consumption. I will explore the WWOOF exchange as householding in two steps: the sharing of living conditions and the sharing of food and resources.

Sharing living conditions

Seymour (2007b), a former WWOOF-UK director, conducted a study on WWOOFing as a modality of economic production. Drawing on the theory of gift exchange (Mauss 1967 [1925]), she argues that because WWOOFers and hosts live together they enter a form of social sharing and mutual obligations. Sahlins (1972:196) argues that reciprocity is linked to physical distance between people and groups. He draws on ethnographic studies to demonstrate how spatial proximity creates closeness. While this theory corresponds with WWOOF-hosts and WWOOFers sharing living conditions, it does not always apply, as I will illustrate in the last section of this chapter.

¹¹⁶ The Carolingian dynasty (c. 750-919 CE) was a Frankish noble family (Banner 2010).

¹¹⁷ See the next chapter on sharing a household.

For Sahlins, the household group is the sphere of ‘generalised reciprocity’, where no account of what is exchanged is kept and the return is gradual and implicit, such as sharing, hospitality, help, generosity, and kinship dues. “‘Generalized reciprocity’ refers to transactions that are putatively altruistic, transactions on the line of assistance given and, if possible and necessary, assistance returned” (1972:194). It refers to a social context of mutual sharing within the lineage group residing in close proximity, as Narotzky (1997) states, “where people are all more or less in debt with each other. In fact the ambiguity and indeterminacy of transfers strengthens the social obligation and subsumes material interest to it” (1997:46). Sahlins’ theory was of course not meant to apply to volunteers on organic farms; nonetheless, it is analytically useful for a discussion of volunteering based on shared living conditions.¹¹⁸

Usually the WWOOFer is accommodated in a private room within the family home, in a separate house or shed on the same property, or a caravan. In New Zealand I found, it was common for travellers to bring their own van or tent to sleep in. In Austria this was highly unusual and WWOOFers were more likely to be accommodated in the farmhouse. Historically the farmhouse was built to provide accommodation for a great number of household members (depending on the wealth of the farm), of related as well as unrelated inhabitants (Mitterauer 1986). The shared living arrangement is the ideal for WWOOF, as the Australian WWOOF-book describes: “Most Hosts provide accommodation in a spare room in their home, and the WWOOFers eat with the family and take a share in the chores” (2012:10). This would be expected, and WWOOF-Australia instructs their hosts to point it out in their profile if their situation differs from the standard.

Many WWOOF households expect the WWOOFer to help with household tasks and to behave like a responsible member of the household. Lynn and Nolan, New Zealand hosts who emigrated from Ireland, gave their WWOOFers a ‘Welcome Letter’,¹¹⁹ greeting them on arrival: “*Kia-ora and a warm welcome to the household of Lynn, Nolan, [and our son, dog, and cat]*”. They required their WWOOFer to help in the garden for four hours a day. The text continued: “*You are also invited to join us in preparing food, cooking as well as*

¹¹⁸ Gregory (1982:42) argues that Sahlins referred to ‘classificatory kinship distance’ rather than physical distance. I suggest, Sahlins assumed both to occur at the same time, which, I argue, is not necessarily so. In the next chapter I will discuss the shared household of hosts and WWOOFers in the context of fictive kinship.

¹¹⁹ Field notes, New Zealand 2010.

help out with the regular tasks of the day like cleaning up after meals". It finished with *"Above all you are an important part of our household – we want to get to know you and for this brief time share our lives together."* This formal welcome in written form is somewhat unusual among hosts, but the intent is common.

Socialising is often considered part of the exchange, by WWOOFers as well as hosts, including spending time together, showing interest in each other's personal life and background, attending social events and joining in family occasions. Even though many hosts need help with the workload on their farms and gardens, some largely depending on it, it is not the only benefit. Serge was a New Zealand host who emigrated from France and lived in an eco-village in a remote area with few neighbours. Having WWOOFers, he pointed out, has a number of benefits: *"Workwise, yes, you do get more work done, but also in terms of social contact [pause]. We are out here, we don't meet people."*¹²⁰ Nana Okura-Gagné (2011) observes social relationships between sellers and customers in urban US-American farmers markets, stating that "the phenomenological experience of walking, talking, and exchanging" (2011:282) adds the social values of a gift relation to a commodity exchange. The same "phenomenological experience" transforms the WWOOF exchange. It takes place within the private household sphere, where the inhabitants almost inevitably become familiar with each other, temporarily sharing rights and obligations within the same household economy.

The sharing aspect of the WWOOF exchange constitutes what is often referred to as the 'cultural exchange',¹²¹ by the members: not only the sharing of workload and living conditions, but also the sharing of company, meals, and knowledge. I spent my time WWOOFing not only working alongside my hosts, but also cooking and eating together, drinking together, and generally spending time together, playing games and watching TV, attending local events and joining my hosts on trips. Unlike a paying guest on vacation, even on a farm stay holiday, the socialising is not only expected but actively encouraged by the host. *"I like the sharing of ideas"* said Daisy, a New Zealand host, *"you always learn something."*¹²² Because she liked to hear about her WWOOFers' experiences, journeys, and cultures, Daisy disapproved of unsocial behaviour. She had strong views

¹²⁰ Conversation with WWOOF-host, field notes, New Zealand: 2011.

¹²¹ See Chapter Three.

¹²² Conversation with WWOOF-host, field notes, New Zealand: 2011.

particularly against young women who would rather Skype with their boyfriends back home than socialise with her and her family. Despite their valuable help in the garden Daisy considered such an attitude a negative experience. Laura, an Austrian herbal gardener, felt, that hosting a US-American WWOOFer was a negative experience because even though he worked hard, he did not speak German and made no attempt to engage with them. They compared this experience with hosting a couple from Canada who neither spoke German but still tried to communicate with them. *“It has to be fun as well”*,¹²³ Laura explained.

Lynn, an Irish host in New Zealand, expressed these feelings in even clearer terms; since she only had a small vegetable garden by her suburban family home, she was not dependent on the WWOOFer’s help. She said about the work: *“it doesn’t matter as long as you connect”*. For her, the social aspect was more important than the help she got: *“It’s nice to get some work done in the garden but really it’s about meeting someone. I rather have a weak worker but great personal relationship than someone who works six hours instead of four but who doesn’t connect.”*¹²⁴ Lynn always made an effort to have a morning tea break together with me; talking, eating, working, and cooking together establishes the relationship. Emily, a New Zealand host, emphasised that she needed the help of volunteers on her biodynamic vineyard. Her family joined WWOOF-NZ when Emily was pregnant with their third child and the family could no longer cope with the workload. But Emily said what she enjoyed most was the ‘cultural exchange’, referring to the gifts WWOOFers brought, and how she encouraged them to cook a traditional meal. That it is “not just about the work” is a commonly used phrase among hosts, but about working, eating, and living together.

Sharing food and resources

Many of the narratives of my participants concerned food, like the story at the beginning of this chapter illustrates. Food is an important aspect of negotiating the relationship between host and helper. In their survey about WWOOFers in Australia, Lipman and

¹²³ Conversation with WWOOF-host, field notes, Austria: 2011.

¹²⁴ Conversation with WWOOF-host, field notes, New Zealand: 2011.

Murphy state: “Food is a wonderful way to get to know a culture and region, and eating with their hosts is (very) important to 82% of those surveyed” (2012:92). For many members, the sharing of food is essential for establishing a social relationship between host and helper. The daily meals are sometimes prepared together by members of the host family and the WWOOFers, and meals are usually consumed together. In some cases (often coinciding with separate living arrangements), WWOOFers cater for themselves but are supplied with all the necessities by their hosts. This was the situation at one of my WWOOF places in New Zealand:

While staying at the eco-village with Serge and Lesley, a French and US-American host-couple in New Zealand, our group of three WWOOFers was joined by a French family with much WWOOF experience: Ines and Olivier and their two children. We used to cater for ourselves in the “WWOOF-house” in the back of the family home, but when Ines and Olivier arrived they made it their aim to include not only all the WWOOFers in their shared meals but also our hosts. Suddenly our daily routine changed and the host family would join us in the “WWOOF-house” for meals. The invitation was returned the next day, when the hosts invited all their WWOOFers to their house for a meal. For Ines, the shared meal was the most important aspect of the WWOOF experience: “*est social*” she said. She was proud that their cooking had become the social centre of the household. She believed that the shared meals would bring people together much more than working together in the garden. Olivier assumed that it was because of cultural differences that the sharing of meals was more important to his family than to our hosts. For him, receiving good meals from the WWOOF-host was a sign that the host appreciated the WWOOFer’s help; eating separately or having to cook for oneself meant the host was not satisfied with ones work or did not appreciate the help.

The rhetoric of the WWOOF ethos does not allow for “payment”, but it is based on the idea of a fair exchange. However, as Olivier observed, there are cultural differences regarding expectations of a reciprocal relationship that can lead to misunderstandings. Their gift of labour, effort, and time had to be accepted by the host and returned, not only with food stuff, but with meals and sociality. This was how Olivier and Ines interpreted the situation; the other WWOOFers, me included, did not feel this lack of appreciation because we were “only” compensated with food stuffs. The opposite is equally possible, as illustrated in the narrative at the beginning of this chapter, where there were shared meals but the WWOOFers still felt treated unfairly. It is not a simple equation that can guarantee a successful exchange for the participants, but depends on the subjective perceptions of a myriad of interactions and emotions involved in the encounter.

Ines and Olivier's offer to turn what they considered a work exchange into a social relationship was eagerly accepted and returned by our hosts. "Just as a courtesy has to be returned, so must an invitation" writes Marcel Mauss (1974 [1925]:63). Not to do so is a "refusal of friendship and intercourse" (1974 [1925]:11). Yan (2012) reflects on the ambiguous nature of the gift: "gifts are at once free and constraining, self-interested and disinterested, and are motivated by both generosity and calculation or expectation of return" (2012:287). Our hosts were apologetic for the fact that they had not initiated this exchange. They explained how it was sometimes just "too much" to cook for everyone and socialise with all their WWOOFers. I believe, our hosts felt "caught out" not having upheld their part of the exchange that goes beyond the exchange of commodities and labour but provides a sphere where hosts and WWOOFers can get to know each other on a personal level. The WWOOFers offer their voluntary labour but the host regulates food and hospitality and therefore the setting that facilitates the relationship. The ideal of householding obscures the rules that regulate the exchange between the members of the household. Negotiations, as I have demonstrated in the previous section, are usually not possible. However, participants in the exchange closely observe the nuances of what is given, when, and how their contributions are received.

Drawing on various ethnographic data Sahlin observes how "[f]ood offered in a generalized way, notably as hospitality, is good relations...a complementary negative principle is implied, that food not offered on the suitable occasion or not taken is bad relations" (1972:216). This principle does apply to WWOOF to some extent. Tashia, a New Zealand host who emigrated from Australia, was upset that her Japanese WWOOFer did not enjoy her cooking: *"He used a lot of sauces and things [pause]; I like to please with my cooking but here I felt [pause], I thought I won't be able to cater for him [pause]; I couldn't be bothered, I wouldn't start cooking Japanese."*¹²⁵ For Tashia this was a negative experience because she could not establish a relationship with her WWOOFer and reciprocate in the exchange. The WWOOFer has to acknowledge the host's efforts to cook a good meal and share it as a token of appreciation. Emere, a New Zealand WWOOF-host, found it bewildering that a group of French WWOOFers would cook for her and her visiting whānau, but then take their meals to their own quarters and not eat

¹²⁵ Conversation with WWOOF-host, field notes, New Zealand: 2011.

together with the rest of the household. She considered her WWOOFers as household members who share their meals.

Sahlins observes about reciprocity and food: “Food dealings are a delicate barometer, a ritual statement as it were, of social relations, and food is thus employed instrumentally as a starting, a sustaining, or a destroying mechanism of sociability” (1972:215). He states that generosity and food dealings are associated. The narrative at the beginning of this chapter illustrates this, as the stinginess of the host ended the relationship with her WWOOFers prematurely. *“I am tired of asking for food”* Megan, the WWOOFer, said before leaving. To foster a personal relationship between host and helper, food has to be shared freely by the host and what is offered cannot be refused by the WWOOFer. As Mauss observes about the employee who expects to be compensated for his (or her) loyalty; he “is giving something of himself, his time and his life. Thus he wants recompense, however modest, for his gift. And to refuse him this recompense is to incite him to laziness and lower production” (1974 [1925]:75). This observation is true for volunteers as well, maybe even more so, since generosity (resources) and hospitality (socialising) are the forms of compensation in line with the ethos of the WWOOF exchange, reciprocating the WWOOFer’s “willingness” to work and “voluntary involvement” in family life.

It is the WWOOFers’ efforts in producing household resources that entitles them to a share of the household resources. In an afterthought on his chapter on reciprocity and food (1972:215-219), Sahlins makes a general observation on the association between food and labour:

Foodstuffs, incidentally, are not ordinarily divorced from the circuit of labor assistance. On the contrary, a meal is in the host of primitive societies the customary return for labor solicited for gardening, housebuilding, and other domestic tasks. “Wages” in the usual sense is not at issue. The feeding amounts to an extraordinary extension to other relatives and to friends of the household economy. Rather than a tentative move toward capitalism, it is perhaps better understood by a principle something to the opposite: that those who participate in a productive effort have some claim on its outcome. (1972:219)

Reciprocation of ‘foodstuffs’ for assistance (Lyon 2010) is certainly not unique to “primitive” society, but home-made produce or invitations to a shared meal are common practices in capitalist societies to reciprocate assistance and express gratitude. Several of

my participant WWOOF-hosts customarily reciprocated informal help with foodstuffs. Also, upon leaving my WWOOF-hosts, I would often receive a gift that was part of the farm's produce, like herbal teas and ointments, syrups, ice cream, and a container of free-range eggs.¹²⁶

In this section, I have argued that the WWOOF exchange is a form of householding, the sharing of work and living conditions, food and resources within the WWOOF household aiming for self-sufficiency. I have discussed how the WWOOF members frame their social relationships with each other in regard to sharing a household. In the final section I ask how the participants experience the household as blurring the boundaries between work and non-work, leading to insecurities and even experiences of exploitation (negative reciprocity). Exploitation within the WWOOF exchange might be felt in two ways: profit at the expense of others and the blurring of work and non-work.

(Im)personal relationships and negative reciprocity

Bernkopf (2009), who describes a single WWOOF-host in Portugal, observes how WWOOFers felt exploited when they realised their voluntary labour was used to build exclusive accommodations for paying guests. The WWOOFers used to be accommodated in the main house which they renovated. A few years later the renovated rooms were made available to tourists and the WWOOFers had to live in tents and caravans. Bernkopf, who was herself a returning WWOOFer to this place, interprets this as a symbolic change, from an alternative community-building project where the likeminded participants shared living conditions, to a commercialised enterprise where the workers were removed from the space of the paying guests.¹²⁷ Exploiting volunteers for profit is a clear breach of the norms of participation for all WWOOF groups and hosts can be removed from the host-list.¹²⁸ In my observation exploitation of the helper within the WWOOF exchange is more likely to occur where the farmers and growers depend on the produce of their land for their

¹²⁶ See also Chapter Three on gift exchange.

¹²⁷ See Chapter Three on the spatial element to social relations between host and WWOOFers.

¹²⁸ To my knowledge this particular host is no longer a member of WWOOF. Other reasons for removal from the list (illustrating the gravity of this breach with the WWOOF ethos) are abusive language, violent behaviour, sexual harassment, and engagement in unlawful activities.

livelihood. Where the livelihood of the host is at stake, the basic concept of the WWOOF exchange is prone to be abused; the work the volunteer is asked to do is more likely to move “off-limits” and heavy labour and work hours become an issue. However, what might appear from the outside as an exploitative relationship might not be perceived as such by the participants themselves (Hann and Hart 2011).

On the other hand, some WWOOFers abuse the hospitality and goodwill of their hosts, or even steal from them. A host in Austria had lent money to her WWOOFer who promised to repay her, which she never did. She discovered later that the same WWOOFer had done this to several hosts. A host in New Zealand reported that some of her belongings had been stolen by a WWOOFer. Both, the exploitation of WWOOFers for profit and theft, can be interpreted as what Sahlins calls negative reciprocity (1972; although in this case it is illegitimate stealing and not a form of institutionalised theft). It is the attempt to get something for nothing: “Negative reciprocity is the most impersonal sort of exchange. In guises such as ‘barter’ it is from our own point of view the ‘most economic’. The participants confront each other as opposed interests, each looking to maximize utility at the other’s expense” (Sahlins 1972:195). The back-to-the-land and green movement concurs with this negative perspective of capitalist market: profit at the expense of others as the end of community life and close relationships. However, negative reciprocity does not only occur as an impersonal exchange, as Sahlins’ theory suggests, but also in personal relationships. I will return to this aspect later.

Regarding the morality of the alternative lifestyle, accumulation is a moral dilemma – not accumulation but redistribution benefits the community (for example LETS, buying local).¹²⁹ The self-sufficient growers and small-scale family farmers among the WWOOF-hosts conceptualise themselves as the very opposite of the agro-business. The agro-business is seen as capitalist, profit-oriented, and selfish, extracting resources from land and livestock in order to maximise profit with no concern for environment and community. Marc Edelman (2005) discusses moral economy and modern peasant movements,¹³⁰ pointing out how modern agro-business is threatening the very basis of the economy of peasants. Edelman focuses on the small scale family farmers, of which there are many

¹²⁹ See Chapter One.

¹³⁰ Edelman studies networks of peasant and small farmer organizations such as *Vía Campesina*. The Austrian Alpine Farmers Association (to which many WWOOF-hosts belong) is a member of *Vía Campesina*.

among the WWOOF members. The notion of the agro-business threatening the rural subsistence lifestyle is common among many members, who aim for more self-sufficiency and less dependence on the capitalist market system and consumerism.

For the WWOOF members self-sufficiency is gained through sharing and redistribution among the residential group. For Sahlins, the residential group and close kinship is tending towards generalised reciprocity, while negative reciprocity is directed at strangers, “perfectly applicable to our own society” (1972:196). Therefore, Sahlins defines negative reciprocity as the negation of kinship reciprocities, the other extreme of his scale, and links this to a sense of spatial proximity: “it is in regard to people of the household, the camp, hamlet, or village that compassion is required, inasmuch as interaction is intense and peaceable solidarity essential. But the quality of mercy is strained in peripheral sectors, strained by kinship distance” (1972:198). This, I argue, is an idealisation and does not apply in reality, as there is always a possibility of exploitation among the close group of kin and within the domestic sphere (Ingold 1986, Baldwin 2009). As Jon Baldwin remarks on “the potentially dark side of the family” (2009:388) negative reciprocity also occurs between people who live in close spatial proximity and share resources. Baldwin (2009) questions the positive value that is generally attributed to family, community, and reciprocity: “This is an idealized model of the family gift and does not allow for the possibility that the bonds of paternity and reciprocity of the family may be suffocating, or need loosening. The bonds of community, likewise, can be drawn too tight” (2009:388). Kinship and close spatial proximity, I therefore argue, do not inevitably lead to generalised reciprocity but can be experienced as exploitative. The moral economy of WWOOF – based on the ideals of sharing, non-monetary exchange, and self-sufficiency – obscures the possibly negative aspects of a household economy. I will explore this further in the following final section of this chapter.

Non-work and gendered labour

Sharing living conditions does not only entail the sharing of farm work and resources (production and consumption); reproductive activities are also part of the WWOOF exchange when sharing a household. Gibson-Graham (2006) define reproduction as

housework and family care, and regard it as part of the unpaid non-market sphere. It is the ‘unpaid family sphere’ of housework, family care, neighbourhood work, and self-provisioning labour (Gibson-Graham 2006:71) where the WWOOF exchange occurs.

In some host-places the volunteer is expected to help for a set amount of hours each day, in others the WWOOFers are to be “available” at all times. In contrast to a work relationship, where the employee is not generally expected to socialise with the employer in their time after work, the WWOOFer is often expected to spend a considerable amount of their “free time” within the household and with the family of the host. Emily shared this attitude; in addition to five hours help on the vineyard WWOOFers were expected to involve themselves in her family life, cooking, helping with housework, and especially spending time with her three young children. She considered this an essential aspect of the ‘cultural exchange’ between host and helper. However, while phrasing it as a benefit for the WWOOFer, it was also an essential aspect of the help Emily received from her volunteers.

The ‘cultural exchange’ argument is used in other similar contexts. In their analysis of au-pair policies, Carrie Yodanis and Sean Lauer (2005) find that in the UK au-pairs are not eligible for minimum wage based on the argument that they live as family members. Living as a member of a family and formal employment in the household are therefore seen as mutually exclusive. Yodanis and Lauer argue that the reasoning behind this decision was to make child care affordable for middle-class families. The au-pair receives reimbursement in the form of the ‘cultural exchange’, the experience of living in a foreign country, and pocket money. Similarly, the inclusion of WWOOFers into the household economy renders their labour not employment but “fulfilling a ‘responsibility to their host family’” (2005:55), making agricultural as well as household help affordable to the hosts. Some hosts emphasised that they depend on the voluntary help to manage the workload and would be unable to afford help in conventional market terms. Daisy, a New Zealand host, said: “*We take anyone we can get; we need the help [pause] as long as we can feed them.*”¹³¹ Small farmers are economically marginalised in today’s economy (Edelman 2005, Trauger 2007). Many of my participants were indeed struggling to make a living – not only the farmers, but also artisans and artists.

¹³¹ Conversation with WWOOF-host, field notes, New Zealand: 2011.

What this responsibility towards the host-household entails is not necessarily clear to the participants in the exchange. In her study on elderly care, Dawn Lyon (2010) points out that activities such as caring, listening, company, or conversation are part of the exchange relationship between care worker and recipient. Like in the WWOOF exchange, volunteers often do so freely as a fundamental and enjoyable aspect of the relationship. But it is considered 'non-work', unpaid tasks outside the "real" work of the employed care-giver. With live-in domestic help, the boundaries become even more blurred, as Lyon's example of informally employed carers in Italy demonstrates: "The activity of these carers is sometimes described as 'minding', for instance if they are on call within the domicile (especially at night) but may not be continuously actively engaged in caring activities. This labelling undermines their activity as labour and is used to justify low wages" (2010:175). Historically, women's care labour had been unpaid. The domestic labour debate (Narotzky 1997) focused on this question, trying to determine the "value" of domestic labour in market terms, questioning "whether the activities of providing goods and services by and for the household members can be considered 'productive' or not" (1997:148).

The line between what is considered work and non-work within the WWOOF exchange is indistinct. If the categories are drawn along the lines of paid and unpaid activities, unpaid activities are often regarded as voluntary. In the case of the WWOOF exchange the distinction is occasionally drawn between farm-related work and family and household care. WWOOFers are frequently unclear of what constitutes their work. Narotzky states how the domestic labour debate centred on the same question:

First, in Marxian terms, is the question whether the production of use values – goods and services – is 'productive' or 'unproductive' work (that is, whether it is 'social' or 'private' work), whether domestic work should be thought of as producing 'exchange' value' (that is, the commodity labour power) instead of just 'use value'. (1997:148-149)

For the WWOOFer the line is not necessarily clear and they have to wait for clues from their hosts as to what counts towards their work hours. There is much insecurity regarding this question, but asking for clarification is often an embarrassment as it undermines the idea of the gift-relationship by laying bare the terms and conditions of the exchange.

Mellini et al (2007) argue that how au-pairs feel in regard to their work, as equal members of the host-family or as employees, is defined through the work and non-work interaction

with their host-parents. Au-pairs might be asked to do housework in addition to child care; this is similar to the situation of the WWOOFers. When the exchange of favours is reciprocal and not one-sided, like the WWOOFer doing housework on top of the farm work but being compensated for their additional help with trips to tourist sights, or receiving gifts, they are unlikely to feel exploited. Instead, they see this as fulfilling their role as a responsible member of the household by doing their share. Signs of appreciation, being thanked for their efforts and additional help, also play a role in the relationship. However, it is not an equal relationship between host and WWOOFer because it is the host who, to a large extent, controls the setting of the exchange: the working hours and break times, allocation of tasks and methods of working, and not least, the meals and accommodation (Yodanis and Lauer 2005).

A distinct gendered division of labour appears where family related activities are often seen as not counting towards the work hours of the WWOOF exchange but as “voluntary involvement” in the host’s family life. While WWOOFing in Austria and New Zealand I wondered if work was appointed according to gender. Whenever I asked my hosts they almost always gave the answer that tasks were assigned according to the WWOOFers’ skills, abilities, and preferences. However, observation often proved otherwise. For example, where work was gendered between the farming couple, this would usually also apply to their WWOOFers – female WWOOFers working with the woman, male WWOOFers with the man. Other hosts also assigned tasks to their WWOOFers according to gender; several (herbal) gardeners in Austria and New Zealand preferred female WWOOFers to do the weeding and harvesting, while their male WWOOFers (often only accepted as partners of female WWOOFers) were assigned to “rough” work, like rooting out plants, chopping wood, and repairing fences. In Nicole’s garden, the self-sufficient grower in New Zealand mentioned in the narrative in the beginning of this chapter, Megan was put to work with the seedlings while the male WWOOFers were rooting out blackberry bushes. Megan asked to be allowed to “work with the boys”, because the repetitive task of careful weeding in the garden was not to her taste. But Nicole would not allow it; considering men as “naturally” incapable of delicate garden work, she needed female WWOOFers to complete these (for her more important) tasks.

However, many hosts did not make a distinction between male and female when assigning tasks to their WWOOFers. The more significant difference, I argue, occurred regarding the

so-called “voluntary involvement” in family life. It should be noted first that hosts frequently do household tasks for their WWOOFers, such as cooking and laundering; some WWOOFers might very well even expect these “services” from their hosts. Some hosts, in return, expect their WWOOFers to contribute to housework. As a WWOOFer I was regularly asked to do household chores in the home of my hosts, as well as minding my hosts’ children. I questioned whether this was because I am a woman, and whether male WWOOFers were equally often encouraged to participate in household chores. Hosts like Lynn and Nolan, who put out a ‘Welcome Letter’ for their WWOOFers, made it clear that they expect all WWOOFers to help in their home. However, other hosts “confessed” their bias when asked directly, including Tashia, a New Zealand host who emigrated from Australia, who said: *“It feels easier to ask girls to do housework [pause] when I’m really honest [pause]. Now I said it I’m ashamed of myself”*.¹³²

While ‘WWOOF-work’ on the farm and in the garden, or related tasks like processing produce, are often assigned according to skills, experience, or preference of the WWOOFers, it is the ‘non-work’ that is more likely to be expected from female WWOOFers. The situation of the WWOOFer could be considered similar to the informally employed live-in domestic help (Lyon 2010). Their status as a household member means that the “voluntary involvement” in family life can be extended to include any amount of assistance, housework, and family care. Since power is distributed unequally between host and WWOOFer, the helper being in a more vulnerable position, it can be taken to the extreme of exploiting the volunteer.¹³³ In all likelihood, this is not an intentional move and often remains an unnoticed aspect of the relationship. Nonetheless, some WWOOFers are aware of this possibility and take precautions. Nimmo (2001) reports about one of her participants: “Despite being a skilled cook, Joyce chose not to reveal these skills to her hosts, as she did not want them to be abused” (2001:161).

Taking advantage of the WWOOFer in this respect in the domestic sphere, I argue, is more likely to occur with female WWOOFers who are more readily expected to willingly spend their free time undertaking domestic tasks. Alma, an Austrian host with a small-scale dairy farm producing organic ice-cream, had three small children. She found out about WWOOF when she was looking for affordable help. Initially, she considered an au-pair but found

¹³² Conversation with WWOOF-host, field notes, New Zealand: 2010.

¹³³ See also Chapter Three.

them too expensive, “*and then they don't do anything in the household or help around the house*”. She then considered an intern for the farm “*but they are more likely to be male*”¹³⁴ and would therefore be helping her husband with farm related tasks. Alma thought a female WWOOFer would be the ideal solution because she would help in all areas of farm and family life. Whether work is gendered depends on the attitudes of the participants in the WWOOF exchange, but it seems it is not uncommon. However, this is not to say that it is only female WWOOFers who are asked to do care work in their free time. Emily, for example, expected all her WWOOFers, male and female, to donate their free time to the entertainment of her children.

Increasingly, it seems, this becomes a concern for national WWOOF groups, who have to deal with WWOOFers’ complaints. The Australian WWOOF-book now instructs hosts that “Housekeeping must not be the primary work given to WWOOFers. Hospitality work, waiting tables, cleaning rooms in a B&B and childcare are not appropriate types of work for WWOOFers” (2012:10). It is possible that this situation has been recognised because of the increasing awareness among WWOOFers, especially those who are skilled workers, for example in agriculture and landscaping, who reflect critically on their WWOOF-experience, questioning why they are expected to spend their free time doing housework and minding children. WWOOFers, the majority being young, educated urbanites without children, might see tasks such as cooking and childcare as counting towards their work hours; a supposition that occasionally clashes with hosts’ perception of what is considered work and what is understood as being involved in family life. Narotzky (1997) observes in regard to domestic labour and gendered work that “notions of ‘sacrifice’ or ‘taking advantage of the situation’ reveal that use value transfers are prone to conflicting evaluation” (1997:153). On the other hand, some hosts feel their – occasionally very young – WWOOFers need some “extra encouragement” to do their share in the household. Work on the farm and in the family home is also recognised as sociable by the participants in the WWOOF exchange, and considered part of the ‘cultural exchange’ experience of WWOOF, which I will discuss further in the following chapter.

¹³⁴ Conversation with WWOOF-host, field notes, Austria: 2009.

Concluding remarks

The WWOOF exchange is a form of alternative economic practice; its non-monetary nature is part of the ecotopian world view of the members. The ideals of the WWOOF philosophy demand the WWOOF exchange to be non-monetary. Some members go so far to apply this in situations even where this would have serious consequences for the participants in the WWOOF exchange, for example in developing countries. Many members interpret their participation in the WWOOF exchange as a pragmatic solution to “survive” in modern capitalist society through alternative forms of economies outside the mainstream. The volunteers, urbanites and travellers, see the WWOOF exchange as a way to experience the back-to-the-land trend and/or the ‘cultural exchange’. This experience cannot be bought as this would contradict the very idea of the economic ideal of the alternative lifestyle avoiding capitalist exchange. For the alternative lifestyles of green utopianism, money and the capitalist market are at the centre of urban dystopia, causing the alienation of relationships, where profit must be made at the expense of others. Their moral economy based on non-monetary exchange, as I have illustrated in this chapter, is, however, an ethnocentric Western view of money and gift relations.

Despite the clear rules of the WWOOF exchange (work for food and accommodation), there is much insecurity involved in regard to what the actual exchange should entail and on what kind of relationship it should be based. In the beginning of this chapter, I asked why the exchange described in the narrative had failed even though the “official” rules of the exchange had been observed. These rules are sometimes conceptualised as barter (Mosedale 2009, 2012), labour for food and accommodation. In Sahlins’ (1972) theory of reciprocity, this is equal to ‘balanced reciprocity’, similar to what Gibson-Graham (2006) call alternative market economy. However, as I have illustrated, this is not how Sue, the founder, conceptualised WWOOF. Working on the farm is the *aim* of WWOOF, not a kind of repayment for bed and board. Likewise, bed and board are not a form of payment for the work-effort of the WWOOFer, but rather, a way to facilitate the WWOOF exchange, the sharing of a lifestyle. While barter entails an element of social relationships, it does not give credit to the importance of the social connections that participants generally wish to establish in the WWOOF exchange. As the narrative in the beginning of this chapter has illustrated, such forms of balanced reciprocity did not necessarily satisfy the WWOOFers.

For many members, the exchange-relationship is equally or more important than the goods and services which are exchanged.

The WWOOF exchange as alternative market exchange focuses on the non-monetary nature of the exchange, but overlooks the non-quantifiable aspects which are a vital part of the experience for the WWOOF members. Rather than trying to define the WWOOF exchange in terms of the alternative market it can be considered what Sahlins' has termed 'generalised reciprocity' (1972), where return is implied and not explicit. These are the "hidden" rules of the WWOOF exchange that entail gift-exchange, sharing (especially of food), and company. Cultural differences and different intentions in the exchange can lead to tensions. Both conceptualisations of the exchange, as barter or as gift-relationship, exist among members, and host and WWOOFer involved in the same exchange might have a different understanding of what is expected. Therefore, the WWOOF exchange is regulated by rules that negotiate as much as they can cause insecurities in the exchange relationship.

The WWOOF exchange, as I have argued in this chapter, is best described as householding (Polanyi 1957 [1944], Gregory 1994, 2009), illustrating an alternative economic practice in contemporary, urbanised, industrialised societies. This concept of householding thereby challenges typically taken-for-granted ideas about economy, deliberately blurring social and economic aspects of the exchange. Householding is the economic ideal of ecotopia; a fundamental critique of market economy and a lived alternative existing within mainstream society. However, it is not a self-sufficient household completely independent of the market economy as Polanyi suggests, but householding in the sense of production inside the home, for the consumption by the household members. As an ideal, no one takes away a private profit, but works towards the benefit of the shared household, pooling skills and resources. The alternative lifestyle aims to keep the sphere of production (production for the household and local community, as well as the market) together with the spheres of consumption (home-grown, local, organic) and reproduction (child rearing, home schooling) – the vision of a "holistic" system, economically and ecologically sustainable. The alternative lifestyle is shared with the WWOOFer, who participates in, facilitates, and learns about the alternative lifestyle.

Yet this ideal obscures relationships within the household of exploitation, power inequality, and the gendered framework of work within the WWOOF exchange. Sharing rights and obligations of a household economy can lead to what Sahlins (1972) terms 'negative reciprocity'. The household economy of the WWOOF exchange blurs the boundaries between work and non-work (Lyon 2010). The ideals of sharing and gift-relationships also disguise the rules that regulate the WWOOF exchange, like the unequal status between host and WWOOFer within the domestic sphere. However, while an analysis of the tension between ideals of non-monetary exchange and householding and the reality of this moral economy illustrate the underlying rules of the WWOOF exchange, I should point out that the majority of WWOOF exchanges are positive experiences for the participants. Indeed, the system of the WWOOF exchange seems to be successful, as all my participants stated that they genuinely enjoyed almost all encounters. Both hosts and helpers make observations as to what they give and what to expect from the exchange. Yet this does not mean that the relationships among the participants are dishonest or less emotional. Conversely, the relationships are frequently understood as 'fictive kinship', as I will discuss in the following chapter, focusing in more depth on hosts and WWOOFers sharing a household.

3

The extended household

For a week I stayed with a host-family in Austria who has owned their small-scale dairy farm for many generations. I lived in the old farmhouse together with Tina, who was divorced and had a grown-up son who no longer lived on the farm, her brother who was also the farmer, and their elderly parents. I spent all my time helping Tina; her brother was a shy and quiet person, keeping to himself. Tina told me that when she first joined WWOOF, her father was very upset, feeling that he was being replaced by younger, more energetic workers. But when they had their first WWOOFer staying with them he enjoyed the experience, especially the company, and having someone with whom he could talk. Although they needed the help of volunteers on the farm, Tina had a different reason for joining WWOOF. It was all for her and her brother's sake, she told me: *"We too want to meet people from somewhere else; we never get away from the farm."* Her mother initially had doubts about letting strangers come into their home, but she accepted me quickly. It was just after a day, while we were sitting around the kitchen table, drinking coffee with a neighbour, when she said to her friend with a nod in my direction: *"Oh, I have already told her she can stay for good; we can use her around here."* It was meant as a compliment, acknowledging that she considered me to be a positive addition to the farm household, helping Tina with her daily tasks in the garden, with the cows and bees, collecting wild herbs, mushrooms, and picking berries. Every evening, Tina and I sat in her small flat in the attic of the farmhouse, chatting. Tina used to travel when she was young, but with the responsibilities for the farm and her family, and being unwell herself, she felt it was impossible for her to leave. For her, WWOOF was much more than having help around the farm. Even though she was busy with farm work, housework, and caring for her ailing parents, for her, WWOOF was about meeting people. *"It is like a window to the world"* she said. Having WWOOFers in the house distracted her from her everyday routine, from boredom and stress, and from arguing with her parents. She noticed the different conversations she could have with WWOOFers, and enjoyed trying out new recipes for and with them; something the rest of the family did not appreciate as much. Finally, Tina leaned over to me and, giving me a meaningful look, said: *"I have to confess something to you [pause]; I thought it would be an opportunity for my brother to find a wife."*

Introduction

This narrative illustrates the essential aspect of how the WWOOF exchange can go far beyond an economic exchange as discussed in the previous chapter. It is about company, spending time together, having a confidant and likeminded person in the house. It is also about living in a different surrounding, meeting new people, and interrupting mundane everyday life. Welcoming a stranger into one's home and trying to adapt to someone else's household is an intense, often emotional, and for many WWOOF members a memorable experience. In this chapter I focus on the relationships between host and helper, the utopian ideal of the shared household, and its reality. I illustrate how WWOOFers become members of the host family, how relationships are expressed and negotiated, what these relationships are expected to entail, hopes and dreams, and what happens when expectations clash.

For many members, the sharing of the household and the private everyday life is at the heart of the WWOOF exchange. "Being part of the family" is promoted by the WWOOF organisations as an essential aspect of the WWOOF exchange. Hosts might have high expectations of the WWOOFer becoming a new household member (even a permanent one, as Tina was hoping); WWOOFers might share this expectation of being treated like, and to a certain extent to feel like, a part of their host-family. Even for the members who primarily join WWOOF because they need additional labour, want to teach and learn about organic farming, or have an alternative travel experience, many consider the emotional bonds as what they call an "added bonus".

In this chapter I argue that the ideal of the extended household is part of the members' imagining of the alternative lifestyle, a social strategy and practice against the perceived alienation of urban life and the isolation of the nuclear family. For the (temporary) back-to-the-lander it is "the escape to a rural yet communal existence" (Bunce 1994:107). In the previous chapter I analysed the WWOOF exchange as household economy. In this chapter I discuss how the shared household of hosts and WWOOFers is experienced by the members as 'fictive kinship'. From a contemporary Western perspective the WWOOF household is somewhat unusual in the sense that it is home and workplace at the same time for the inhabitants. In discussing processes of how relatedness is established between the

inhabitants, I draw on two bodies of anthropological literature of kinship. I engage with studies on fictive kinship, in particular of fictive kinship in the workplace (Maddy 2001, Fischer 2010), discussing this in connection with theories of how everyday practices, such as living and eating as well as working together, establish what Carsten refers to as “relatedness” (1995, 2000).

In this chapter, I discuss questions of ‘fictive kinship’, whether the distinction between ‘real’ and ‘fictive’ kinship is appropriate at all. ‘Real’ as in scientifically verifiable genetic relation, and ‘fictive’ as in imagined and second-best imply a hierarchy of values that is not necessarily reflected in the emic view of the observed (Modell 2001, Fischer 2010). In her study on relatedness among Iñupiat in Alaska, Barbara Bodenhorn (2000) questions the Euro-American conception of fictive kin as fragile, challenging the assumption “that ‘real’ must be either biological or permanent. Permanence lies in the ever present potential for revivifying dormant relations, but these must be enacted by individuals with intent. What is real is acted on and mutually recognised” (2000:143). Bodenhorn makes the significant observation that kinship bonds must be constantly reconstructed and renewed through everyday practices, reciprocities, sharing, and company. In the introduction to *Cultures of Relatedness*, Carsten (2000) similarly states that “relatedness may be composed of various components – substance, feeding, living together, procreation, emotion – elements which are themselves not necessarily bounded entities but many overflow or contain parts of each other” (2000:34). These elements will be the focus of the following discussion.

In the first chapter I have demonstrated how WWOOF is ideologically based not only within the organic, but also the back-to-the-land movement. This present chapter builds on these findings. I first examine the historic and ideological context of the extended household, demonstrating how counter-culture values and a nostalgia for the peasant farm household influence the WWOOF members’ ideal of an extended family, or ‘family of choice’, challenging mainstream ideas of relatedness, to use Carsten’s (2000) term, of the household and nuclear family.

After laying out the foundational ideology behind the WWOOF ideal of sharing a household, I explore how bonds of fictive kinship develop within a specific frame of time and place. In discussing the processes involved in becoming a member of the host family, I analyse experiences of socialisation and rituals, mutual support and tensions, involvement

in ordinary and extraordinary family events, substance sharing and gift exchange. The analysis focuses on the question how “being part of the family” is experienced and negotiated, constructed and rejected by the members. It is the “myriad of reciprocities” (Bodenhorn 2000:143) that contribute to the creation of the intimate relationships between the members of the extended household.

The harmonious, and sometimes not so harmonious, sharing of a household leads to the final question in this chapter about privacy and boundaries of the physical living space, as well as personal boundaries. The Western concept of privacy is closely connected with the norms of the nuclear family (Narotzky 1997). A communal lifestyle demands some flexibility and tolerance in regard to personal boundaries. Because of the realities of shared living, the communal living ideal of the alternative lifestyle is not necessarily one of egalitarian relationships. I observe where the barriers within the shared household are, and how they illustrate relationships and unequal power dynamics between the household members. In doing so I ask how boundaries are negotiated, and what happens when they are overstepped.

A short overview of the inhabitants of the WWOOF household

The WWOOF household as a social group includes the host or host family and their WWOOF volunteers. More generally, Christopher Harris (1990) describes the household as a social group, not necessarily defined through kinship ties, but as “persons residing in the same dwelling and sharing housekeeping and facilities” (1990:70). Harris (1990) defines three forms of reproduction performed by the household: daily reproduction providing food and shelter, cultural reproduction through socialisation, and biological reproduction. While many WWOOF households do include children, I argue that biological reproduction is not a necessary characteristic of a household. Janet Carsten and Stephen Hugh-Jones describe the house as “an ordinary group of people concerned with their day-to-day affairs, sharing consumption and living in the shared space of a domestic dwelling” (1995:45). This describes the WWOOF household of the host or host-family, other household members, and WWOOFers. In the previous chapter I have introduced the diverse range of WWOOF-hosts. Here, I give a short overview of the various ways

volunteers participate in the WWOOF exchange, which is significant for how the shared household is experienced. Previous research on WWOOFing seems to imply that *serial short-term stays* are most common, or even the only way of WWOOFing: I find that there are different ways of participating.

There are *domestic WWOOFers* WWOOFing in their own country. Some choose hosts who live close by, visiting the same place as a *returning WWOOFer* many times, sometimes for years, establishing close relationships with the hosts. International WWOOFers too can be returning WWOOFers, sometimes just staying for a short while “to say hello”. Lynn, a New Zealand host from Ireland, remembered how her Japanese WWOOFer returned for a third visit only to introduce his spouse to his former hosts. An Australian host reported in the newsletter: “So far we had 8 WWOOFers and most have returned for a 2nd visit – one who will come for Thanksgiving for the 4th time (I think it's the food)! Some even mention it's a home away from home which is very sweet” (WWOOF-Australia newsletter 82, 2012:2). When a WWOOFer returns to visit their former hosts they are usually no longer signed-up members of a WWOOF organisation. Often they are no longer referred to, or think of themselves as WWOOFers, but as friends. On the other hand, there are *armchair WWOOFers* who no longer go WWOOFing but remain members of WWOOF, supporting their group with membership fees and staying in contact with the WWOOF movement through regular newsletters and social gatherings.

There are *long-term WWOOFers* who visit a specific host, sometimes their only host, for a longer stay for many weeks or months. Sometimes this is intentional, for example as part of an internship, while sometimes it happens by chance. Daisy, a New Zealand host, had a family stay with her; when the family could not find anywhere else to WWOOF, but Daisy had to leave, the family became house-sitters for three months. A Japanese woman WWOOFing at a commune in New Zealand planned to stay there for a week. When I met her she had been there for 15 months and planned to stay in New Zealand for good. The WWOOF-Canada director wrote to me: “Since we took over WWOOF Canada [in] January 2010, we have had 2 WWOOFers. One Canadian fellow arrived late March, WWOOFed with us until he found work in the area and is now staying with us indefinitely.”¹³⁵ Cronauer's (2012) findings, in her study on the host-WWOOFer

¹³⁵ E-mail interview with WWOOF-Canada director, 2010.

relationship, support my observation that relationships between long-term WWOOFers and hosts are usually significantly different and more intimate compared to short encounters.

There are also *professional WWOOFers*,¹³⁶ people who continuously live as WWOOFers for a long period of time, in some cases for years. When one of my hosts in New Zealand introduced me to her neighbour, saying I was doing my PhD on WWOOF, the neighbour replied: “*Oh yes, my WWOOFer is doing her PhD in WWOOFing too!*” When she saw our surprised faces and realised her mistake, she laughed: “*I thought you were joking! I just meant she has been WWOOFing for years.*”¹³⁷ Jamieson (2007), who herself WWOOFed continuously in her own country for two-and-a-half years, met other professional WWOOFers during this time. She gives a colourful description of an example for this “romantic figure” of the WWOOF movement:

One evening shortly before the festival, Mark the Kiwi WWOOFer arrived. He was tanned, with rugged good looks and a teasing manner, and had been WWOOFing for about four years at that stage, hitching around with his backpack and his dog Dody, camping occasionally along the way. (2007:117)

Some professional WWOOFers remain with the same host for a long time, making the most of their stay. When travelling on they would often make use of an existing informal host-network,¹³⁸ gradually building up their own network of hosts, other work-exchange and WWOOF-like arrangements, and occasionally engaging in (formal and informal) paid work.¹³⁹ Hart (1973) termed this ‘informal economic activity’, the “grassroots economy” outside what most governments and national bureaucracies would consider “regular” employment (Hann and Hart 2011:115). This adds to the image of the “vagabonding” professional WWOOFer as leading a successful alternative lifestyle outside the wage system of market economy.

¹³⁶ A term used in the Conference Report 2000:9.

¹³⁷ Field notes, New Zealand: 2011.

¹³⁸ Intentional communities and religious centres, for example, but also ordinary hosts often have such networks where they “pass on” WWOOFers to other hosts, even though they might not all be official WWOOF-hosts.

¹³⁹ Like returning WWOOFers, professional WWOOFers often drop out of the official WWOOF-register, having established a network of contacts themselves. This might be a reason why other studies on WWOOF tend to overlook these WWOOFers.

I draw on my personal experience as a female WWOOFer in my twenties, travelling alone. As I have described in Chapter One, this is representative for many of the participants in the WWOOF exchange, but there are others: male WWOOFers, pensioners, WWOOFers with mental or physical impairments, couples and groups travelling together, (single) parents who bring their children, and WWOOFers bringing their pets. Each experience is unique, depending on the WWOOFer, the host, the environmental, social, and economic situation, the work, the season,¹⁴⁰ the weather. Some hosts stated that WWOOFers travelling by themselves are generally more social, seeking more contact and integration with the host family. Cronauer (2011) reports that hosts who do not have much time for their WWOOFers sometimes deliberately host couples or groups of friends, so that the WWOOFers have company. In places with high numbers of WWOOFers at the same time,¹⁴¹ there seems to be less socialising between hosts and WWOOFers, and more solidarity between the WWOOFers. WWOOF groups proclaim that everyone can participate in the WWOOF exchange, and that everyone is welcome. I now turn to the question of where this ideal of communal living originated, challenging the norm of the nuclear family in favour of the ‘family of choice’.

Contesting the nuclear family: The ideal of the ‘open house’

Communal living was an essential aspect of the counter-culture movement of the 1960s in North America and Europe, but was already practiced in 19th century experiments in alternative living, as Bunce (1994:103) reports for the USA and England. Many of these intentional communes were situated in the countryside, trying to realise their utopian dreams away from mainstream society. Sargisson and Sargent (2004) demonstrate that cooperative lifestyles were preferred within the counter-culture scene, criticising the “alienating forces” of the nuclear family, isolating the caregiver of children (historically the woman) from the outside world, and separating the sphere of production from the

¹⁴⁰ Most WWOOF exchanges take place during the summer months; farms tend to have less work for WWOOFers in the winter.

¹⁴¹ Depending on the circumstances, maybe up to a dozen e.g. in intentional communities; Bernkopf (2009) reports of up to 40 WWOOFers at the same time at her place of study in Portugal.

sphere of reproduction and consumption. “Intentional communities often seek to widen the structure of the family” (Sargisson and Sargent 2004:79), disrupting the compartmentalisation of public and private sphere.¹⁴² This view has influenced the back-to-the-land movement with the establishment of rural communes and eco-villages. Bunce goes so far as to say the movement “has been dominated by the history of alternative communities” (1994:103).

There were considerable numbers of intentional communities among the WWOOF-hosts in my case studies. However, more often it was a temporary extension of the single family household. The members expressed a preference for the extended household for pragmatic reasons (more labour) and ideological reasons (rejection of the nuclear family as an ideal lifestyle). Laura, a herbal gardener in Austria in her sixties who had grown up on and inherited her family farm, compared the WWOOF exchange to the historic household model of the extended family:

*Das hat's ja schon früher gegeben...Die [Dienstboten] haben auch so mitgelebt, als Teil der Familie...Gegessen haben immer alle gemeinsam...Es hat's ja alles schon einmal gegeben, heut ist das halt moderner.*¹⁴³

The same thing used to exist back then...They [the servants] also lived like that, as part of the family...They always ate together...It used to be the same thing, it's just more modern now.

Historically, the central European farm household contained a larger number of related and non-related household members who depended on each other, working and living together, sharing meals, workloads, responsibilities and benefits of the shared household economy (Mitterauer 1986). While there were historically many exceptions to this model, it developed into a romanticised, idealised, and ideologically loaded idea of a past lifestyle.

In the 19th century Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl (1856 [1854]) already lamented the decline of what he described as the extended household (*Das ganze Haus*) in Europe, containing three generations of family members, as well as non-related people who are considered part of the family, in favour of the bourgeois nuclear family.¹⁴⁴ What led to this change according to Riehl was an increasing market economy and individualisation. A

¹⁴² See Chapter Two.

¹⁴³ Field notes, Austria: 2011.

¹⁴⁴ For Riehl this ideal lifestyle also included strict patriarchal hierarchies of the household.

formalisation of labour (employment for wages) replaced the incorporation of the dependent domestic servant into the family and undermined the authority of the patriarch. Both concepts, the conservative nostalgia for the large pastoral household of the past as well as the counter-cultural ideas of extending the household, inform the ideal of the extended household as part of the alternative rural lifestyle that argues against market economy and nuclear family.

Extending the household through participating in the WWOOF exchange usually means incorporating complete strangers into the home of the hosts. There is an assumption among the members of the WWOOF movement that everyone is welcome, regardless of their origin or background, gender, age,¹⁴⁵ sexual orientation, spiritual or political opinions, family situation, physical and mental fitness. The founder of WWOOF writes in her essay on *'Reasons to be Organic'*: "The Organic Movement transcends nationality, age, sex, religion and social group, and unites those individuals who care for the earth as if they were members of one large family" (Coppard 2008). The ideal of openness is encouraged by the national WWOOF groups; Doris, the former WWOOF-Austria director, said: "*WWOOF is open, which is why my own house was always open for everyone too.*"¹⁴⁶ Even though she was not a WWOOF-host, Doris made a point of frequently welcoming WWOOFers into her suburban home, before they would travel on to their hosts. Likewise, the WWOOF-NZ directors have hosted many WWOOFers in their home, without being official WWOOF-hosts. WWOOF as open and inclusive is a fundamental principal for the members.

However, the ideal is not necessarily reality, and the hosts decide who they will or will not welcome into their homes. I have come across several cases where hosts did not accept, for example, WWOOFers with children, smokers or physically unfit WWOOFers, non-vegetarians, or vegetarians. Some hosts with strong political and religious convictions will not, for example, accept unmarried couples; and a look into the misconduct records of national groups (concerning hosts and WWOOFers) reveals incidences of homophobia and anti-Semitism, to name just a few examples of exclusion and discrimination. What does this reveal about fictive kin? The choice is not at random, as other scholars have also

¹⁴⁵ The minimum age for participation is between 15 years (e.g. Austria) and 18 years (e.g. Australia), unless accompanied by an adult.

¹⁴⁶ Conversation with WWOOF-Austria director, field notes, Austria: 2009.

found. The medical co-workers in Richard Maddy's study (2001:291-292) form ties of fictive kinship based on shared interests and congruent personalities. Mellini et al (2007) also demonstrate that au-pairs are class-peers of their host-families, "are often well educated and come from other middle class families and other highly developed, wealthy countries in western Europe or North America" (2007:46). Similarly, WWOOF-hosts might in reality be more likely to open their home to their peers, likeminded people of a green utopianism, but with whom they also share other characteristics. In the next section I will return to the question of chosen kinship.

WWOOF members believed that in a successful WWOOF exchange, the WWOOFer should be understood as a member of the host family. Ryan, the WWOOF-Australia director, pointed out: *"The hosts who are most successful are those who work with their WWOOFers, they realise that their WWOOFers aren't paid employees and treat them as a member of the family."*¹⁴⁷ A bright yellow leaflet in the Australian WWOOF-book (2012) announces 'A message to all new WWOOFers from a WWOOF-host': "WWOOF has given us the opportunity to get to know many young (and not so young) people from many different cultures (even our own). Some of these have become extended members of our family, for us it has been all about people – a great learning experience!" The terms 'family', 'extended family', and 'whānau' in New Zealand were often used to describe the WWOOFers' involvement in the hosts' life. WWOOFers were referred to by hosts in terms of "new" or "additional" and "temporary" members of the host family.

This concept of fluid membership of the household, and an extended family based on co-residence, challenges mainstream notions of family. Western middle-class society imagines 'family' in a distinct way, as David Jacobson, Joan Liem, and Robert Weiss (2001) find in their study on middle-class US-American families:

In this model, the family is nuclear, neolocal, and coresidential. That is, upon marriage, a husband and wife are expected to establish a household of their own and that household will contain only nuclear family members. Others may reside in a household, but that situation is seen as exceptional and one that is to be avoided when possible. (2001:230)

What is to be avoided within the closed private sphere of the nuclear family is an ideal for WWOOF – the inclusion of "additional" people. Emily and her husband, WWOOF-hosts

¹⁴⁷ Wilson 2001, interview.

in New Zealand, exemplified this rejection of the nuclear family ideal. They had three small children and a biodynamic vineyard. They used to live in the city before moving to the country, as Emily pointed out, deliberately to avoid a “child-centred” family life. She believed with a rural property the children would experience outdoor freedom, while she could continue to work in the garden and vineyard. The addition of WWOOFers as “extra people” adds to her ideal of the non-child-centred family life, giving Emily more time for herself and her work. Emily’s experience reflects the counter-cultural critique of the social isolation of the caregiver. Like many WWOOF-hosts, she opted for a larger household.

I argue that the ideal of communal living is part of the alternative lifestyle for many hosts, even before they join WWOOF. Cronauer (2011) makes a similar observation in her study on the host-WWOOFer relationship, pointing out that accommodating strangers in their homes is part of the WWOOF-hosts’ lifestyle. Ingrid, an Austrian host who grew up on a farm with many siblings, married a farmer in the same region and had three school aged children. She explained:

Das hab ich glaub ich von meiner Mutter, weil eben bei uns auch immer viel los war, [Leute] von überall her, das war immer interessant. Meiner Mutter hat das ja voll getaugt, wenn da was los war. Und das hab ich schon von klein auf, wahrscheinlich, weil ich so aufgewachsen bin, so, eine große Familie. Ich hab auch keine Probleme wenn [ein WWOOFer] kommt, ich hab auch dem Daniel geschrieben, er kann sich da wie ein Familienmitglied [fühlen].¹⁴⁸

I think I got that from my mother, because at home it was always busy [with people] from everywhere, that was always interesting. My mother loved it when it was bustling. And I have that since I was a child, I think, because I grew up that way; a big family. I don't mind when [a WWOOFer] comes; I wrote to Daniel [the WWOOFer], he should think of himself as a family member.

This is what the members refer to as the ‘open house’. Ingrid liked to welcome new people into her home; she trained as a day care professional and foster mother and ran forest education workshops for children: “I am simply used to that, an open house; everyone was welcome with us.”¹⁴⁹ Similarly, Rosa, an Austrian WWOOF-host with a free range chicken farm, stated: “I always wanted an open house”,¹⁵⁰ which is why she decided to have a foreign au-pair for her children before taking WWOOFers. Dana, an Austrian WWOOF-

¹⁴⁸ Interview with WWOOF-host, Austria: 2009.

¹⁴⁹ Interview with WWOOF-host, Austria: 2009.

¹⁵⁰ Conversation with WWOOF-host, field notes, Austria: 2009.

host with a herbal garden, said: *“I think WWOOF is great. It is peaceful and everyone gets a benefit out of it [pause] if you have an open heart [pause] and an open house.”*¹⁵¹

The ‘open house’ (*offenes Haus*) refers to the hosts’ wish and ability to include additional people into their household structure. These additions are not just WWOOFers, but also au-pairs, interns, and other volunteers. Doris, the former WWOOF-Austria director, observed that farmers who took interns from agricultural schools often also joined WWOOF.¹⁵² There is a variety of people living in hosts’ households at different times or together, some paid, some paying, and some participating in non-monetary engagements: interns and au-pairs, work-exchange and volunteer programmes (like the European Voluntary Service), home-stay accommodation for students, and boarders. In many ways they are all similarly considered to be a part of the family.¹⁵³

The concept of ‘family’ is fluid, as is membership of the household. The additional members contribute to the household economy without taking away a personal profit. This illustrates the economic reasoning of the ‘open household’. However, the inclusion of “additional people” in the household, enjoying the company of likeminded people, also has social aspects. It can be a coping strategy for hosts who deal with rural and social isolation, a lack of family networks of immigrants or ex-urbanites, and alienation of the newcomers and organic farmers from the rural population and conventional farmers. I will turn to the question of how the participants express their understandings of the benefits of the ‘open house’ in the following section.

In the company of likeminded people: The ‘family of choice’

Rural isolation, the longing for more social contacts and a larger personal network are concerns for many WWOOF-hosts. Anna, the WWOOF-NZ director, stated that for many members meeting new people through WWOOF was, if not the main reason to join the

¹⁵¹ Conversation with WWOOF-host, field notes, Austria: 2009.

¹⁵² In Austria, where it is common for agricultural schools to have compulsory internships as part of their curriculum, the students, who receive wage-payment, are between 15 and 18 years old and stay between four and 16 weeks on the farm.

¹⁵³ Other researchers have frequently associated the WWOOFer with guests in farm- and homestay tourism; this comparison was entirely absent among my participants.

organisation, an ‘added bonus’: “[I]t makes you feel a bit more part of the international world, I think, because, we are very isolated [in New Zealand]...and, you know, to get out of here takes hours, hours to fly and it costs a lot of money. It just makes the world open up a bit to them I think.”¹⁵⁴ I found that commercial farmers particularly appreciated the social contact because they were often unable to leave their farms unattended for a longer period of time. Helga, a goat farmer from Austria, said: “I can’t leave, so I bring the world to my home”. While moving to the countryside and living off the land is pursued as the better lifestyle, it can also bring rural isolation and a lack of services and entertainment. Hosting WWOOFers is a way of entertaining the family. It might be an “excuse” for the farmer to leave their work for an hour or a day, go on a trip and show the WWOOFer around. Hosts frequently referred to the WWOOF exchange as a form of “armchair travel”; Anaru, a Maori WWOOF-host, said: “It’s like travelling without travelling; it’s like going to another country without actually having to buy the ticket.”¹⁵⁵ For the hosts, WWOOF can be the “window to the world”, a world that they have often left behind themselves, of urban living, travelling, and experimenting with different lifestyles.

Hosts stated that their children in particular benefit from a non-nuclear family upbringing, exposing them to other languages, foods, and habits within their homes. Having chosen an alternative rural lifestyle for themselves, many parents among the hosts did not want their children to grow up in a culturally homogenous surrounding. The WWOOF exchange was one way of exposing their children to cultural diversity. They acknowledged the impact the WWOOF exchange has on their children, as Nicole said: “[My son] also profits from the WWOOFers; otherwise he would never have met all these different people.”¹⁵⁶ Valerie, a New Zealander in her early twenties who grew up on a WWOOF-farm, remembered sharing her family home with a number of WWOOFers when she was between five and twelve years old:

I am not sure if I was always fascinated with people from other countries but I think it influenced that in a way. Just having, because [my hometown] is such a small place, the only people are New Zealanders, basically, no other ethnic groups or other nationalities. So having like this Indian girl I remember really strongly, because she looked so different to us. And we had lots of Danish people and they

¹⁵⁴ Interview with WWOOF-NZ directors, New Zealand: 2010.

¹⁵⁵ Conversation with WWOOF-host, field notes, New Zealand: 2011.

¹⁵⁶ Conversation with WWOOF-host, field notes, New Zealand: 2010.

*were quite different, just their attitudes...That was a really good experience for us, just to have to deal with people of different nationalities.*¹⁵⁷

Stehlik (2002) writes about his own experience as a WWOOF-host in Australia: “As a family our horizons are also broadened by the cultural exchange offered by the WWOOF program, and it is especially valuable for the children to meet people from other cultures with different accents who bring another worldview into the home” (2002:225). Other studies also have recognised ‘education for the hosts’ children’ as an additional benefit when hosting WWOOFers (Campbell 2000, Cronauer 2011).

Valerie appreciated having grown up in a WWOOF household that provided her with unique experiences in her otherwise culturally homogenous upbringing:

*I just remember watching this guy from Israel once, reading a book and you know, they read books “backwards”. And I just remember watching him for ages and trying to work out why he was doing that. And then he would teach us how to write our names in Hebrew.*¹⁵⁸

Many hosts considered the WWOOF exchange to be part of their children’s education, especially where the challenging of ethnocentric views was seen as a valuable educational experience. Cultural diversity as an ideal is rooted in 1960s social movements, the civil rights movement in the US and de-colonisation and immigration in Europe, especially the UK (Pearson 2001). It is part of a liberal ideology of tolerance, social justice, equal rights and opportunities, an inclusionary ideal that resonates with the values of the WWOOF movement.

Jamieson (2007) reports about her experience with a host family in New Zealand where part of her duties was to help the hosts’ children with their correspondence school lessons. But, Jamieson observes, the benefit for the children goes beyond that:

On top of their usual maths, science and English lessons, the girls obviously learnt a lot from having WWOOFers from all over the world, including cultural differences, international cuisine, and smatterings of different languages. My special offering was yoga lessons, which is what my early morning yoga sessions turned into once the girls discovered me doing a headstand in the living room before breakfast. (2007:81)

¹⁵⁷ Interview, New Zealand: 2011.

¹⁵⁸ Interview, New Zealand: 2011.

Exposure to other cultures was often noticed as learning other languages and tasting new food. A limited choice in education and seeking exposure to diversity, for the children as well as the adults, were important factors for hosts for opening up their homes to strangers. Ingrid, an Austrian host, said: *“I invite them right away to cook something that is traditional for them; then I can learn something too...It’s not just that the others [WWOOFers] should learn something, I want to experience something new too.”*¹⁵⁹ Many WWOOFers cook and bake for the host which is often considered a treat – a kind of “culinary tourism” for the host. *“Every WWOOFer contributes something, maybe a new dish”*¹⁶⁰, said Helga, a goat farmer from Austria. The WWOOFers were something of a “lifeline” for the hosts with the city, and often, in the case of immigration, with their home country.

For expats, WWOOFers sometimes made up for a lack of family networks in their own private life. Lynn, a New Zealand host who emigrated from Ireland, said: *“You extend your family. As an immigrant you don’t have so much family around. Some people don’t have the need to fill up their life with additional people. For us, it’s nice to have someone else around the table, it’s an extended family.”*¹⁶¹ Many others shared this experience; Will, the WWOOF-NZ director, noticed this as a possible trend among hosts who immigrated from Europe to New Zealand. Referring to hosts who migrated from Germany as an example, he said: *“A person who comes from Germany to live in New Zealand on a farm, their connection with their whānau or their family is maybe to have WWOOFers, because lots of WWOOFers are German or European, some have that connection through WWOOF.”*¹⁶² A wish to speak one’s own language, or sing, listen to and make music, and discuss the current affairs of the “old home” with others is a treat for immigrants. Brigitte Bönisch-Brednich (2003) observes how German immigrants in New Zealand seek and create social occasions for informal contacts with others who share not only the language but the same norms and codes of social conduct. For the WWOOFer this experience would equally give a degree of comfort and familiarity, and the safety of being able to communicate in their own language in an otherwise foreign country. However, this is not universally shared by all WWOOFers, some deliberately seeking the “authentic” cultural experience of the “other”.

¹⁵⁹ Interview with WWOOF-host, Austria: 2009.

¹⁶⁰ Conversation with WWOOF-host, field notes, Austria: 2009.

¹⁶¹ Conversation with WWOOF-host, field notes, New Zealand: 2011.

¹⁶² Interview with WWOOF-NZ directors, New Zealand: 2010.

It is not just immigrants who like to extend their private network. Tina, who was hoping to find a wife for her brother among their WWOOFers, also considered what she called a “WWOOF pensioner”, an older person who would move in with her family and stay indefinitely on the farm to help with the work. Hosts joined WWOOF for various reasons. Some, like Tina, specifically pointed out that they enjoy the company of new people. Emere, who got divorced the previous year, simply stated: *“I like the company; after 25 years of marriage it’s strange to be alone.”* At the monthly WWOOF gathering in Vienna a voluntary organiser told me about an older woman who came to one of these meetings. She asked for advice whether to join WWOOF:

Die Frau, die was vorher da war, die sagt ganz offen, sie sucht eigentlich Anschluss, sie will in der Natur sein, aber nicht irgendwo in einem Försterhäusl im Wald alleinig hocken, sonder sie will einen Familienanschluss haben. Und sie arbeitet aber gern im Garten und so. Sie tut gern kochen und da denkt sie sich, vielleicht findet sie bei den WWOOF-Höfen da des.¹⁶³

That woman, who was here before, she says, honestly, what she wants is company. She wants to be outdoors, but not like sitting alone by herself somewhere in the middle of the wood, but be part of a family. And she likes working in the garden and that sort of thing. She likes cooking and so she thinks maybe she can find that sort of thing with a WWOOF-host.

The wish to become a member of another family, or to include new people into the household, could be considered as fictive kinship based on voluntary association (Maddy 2001), a ‘family of choice’.

Gundula Fischer (2010), in her ethnography of tobacco manufacturers in Tanzania, points out how spatial proximity and everyday contact between the workers established closeness and familiarity that became the basis of a mutual support system. Spatial proximity and everyday contact are similarly significant for the relationship between host and WWOOFer. Rosa was an Austrian WWOOF-host with a free range chicken farm. The first WWOOFer who came to stay with her, her husband and their three young daughters, was Silvia, an older woman who lived in the area. Even though the family’s grandmother lived next door and they, in my observation, had a good relationship with each other, Silvia came to join the family as what they called a ‘voluntary grandmother’ (*Leihoma*). Silvia’s husband had passed away and her own children were grown up and had left home but had no children of their own. She joined WWOOF with the intention to find a “new” family

¹⁶³ Interview with voluntary organiser, Austria: 2009.

with young children she could connect with. When I met Silvia she had been with the family for three years, staying every week for several days.

Bringing likeminded people into the household also means for many hosts to receive new encouragement for their lifestyle choice, particularly where they feel alienated from their surroundings. Some of my host-participants felt like outsiders and experienced a negative attitude towards their lifestyle from their local community and even from their families. Living off the land and organic farming methods are still often treated with suspicion by mainstream society (McMahon 2005). Particularly in Austria several hosts with organic farms mentioned conflicts with their neighbours who farm “conventionally” and accused them of being “do-gooders” (also Dana 2012). For some of my participants it was their lifestyle more generally that led to feelings of alienation, for example being a pagan witch in predominantly Catholic rural Austria. Sometimes arriving as a new farmer from the city, or like in Austria, moving from one village to another, was enough to lead to conflicts with the local community (Groier 1999). Sue, the founder of WWOOF, observed the effect WWOOFers can have on their hosts:

WWOOF-hosts generally get a lot from having WWOOF help besides the much-needed assistance. Sometimes they feel lonely or out on a limb as none of their neighbours are of the ‘organic’ mind set. WWOOFers bring a fresh, enthusiastic attitude and an enquiring mind, and appreciate the hard work the way of life demands.¹⁶⁴

McMahon (2005) makes a similar observation regarding biodynamic farmers in Ireland who feel alienated from their conventional neighbours, a feeling that is often intensified by being ex-urban newcomers to the country. McMahon finds that the farmers would like to share their ideas with the wider society but are afraid of isolating themselves from their local community. WWOOF-hosts invite likeminded people into their homes, to share their ideas of the alternative lifestyle. An Austrian host said: *“It’s just really nice when someone else is interested in your work.”*¹⁶⁵

Mosedale (2009) finds that WWOOF-hosts feel encouraged in their choice of an alternative lifestyle when they can share it with likeminded people like WWOOFers:

¹⁶⁴ Pier 2011, interview.

¹⁶⁵ Conversation with WWOOF-host, field notes, Austria: 2009.

Hosts may draw energy and hope from WWOOFers as their enthusiasm re-affirms their decision to be different from the mainstream and engage in the struggle towards sustainable farming or sustainable living...Conversely, hosts demonstrate to their WWOOFers that an organic and/or alternative lifestyle is possible. (2009:26)

The WWOOF household is the sphere where hosts “perform” their alternative lifestyle choice, sharing their utopian vision of the better life. Drawing on earlier work by Sargisson (2000), Sargisson and Sargent make a similar comment on cooperative lifestyles and how “[l]ife inside them is less private than in the mainstream, the home is public showcase for alternatives and the home itself becomes a site of political or ideological opposition” (2004:79).

This first section focused on the construct of the WWOOF household as an extended household and ‘open house’, and the benefits expressed by the members. In the following section I will turn to the WWOOFer’s incorporation into the host-family, or what is referred to by the members as the ‘cultural exchange’. The exchange goes both ways but it involves unequal demands because the WWOOFer has to learn the unwritten rules of the household and fit into an existing household structure.

“Being part of the family” – The ‘cultural exchange’

For Sue, the founder of WWOOF, the sharing of living conditions with the host has always been an essential aspect of the WWOOF-experience:

When I did it, you were usually a house guest and now there seems to be an awful lot of people who seem to camp, who sleep in separate dwellings and not partaking in the family life. Personally, I would not want to go camp in a field in order to WWOOF with someone. I’d rather be in a nice bedroom in their house. Some people feel happy to be slightly more independent. I sort of liked the idea of living as a member of the family while you are with them. But I suppose they don’t all want people [to] live with them the whole time.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁶ Interview with the founder of WWOOF, England: 2011.

The WWOOFers' integration into the host family and household is promoted by the WWOOF groups as a significant aspect of the WWOOF exchange. The conference report of the first international WWOOF conference notes that WWOOF is (among other things) about the "Cultural exchange, aiding communication and understanding between people from different backgrounds" (Conference Report 2000:10). The former WWOOF-Canada director is quoted in the conference minutes, explaining the concept of the 'cultural exchange':

Cultural exchange - taking an interest in each others' worlds, is the most important aspect of WWOOF. Because WWOOF involves entering peoples' homes, there has to be a lot of trust on both sides. A sense of appreciation as a host and as a WWOOFer is integral to WWOOF. (Conference Report 2000:9)

Different to a work exchange arrangement, host and WWOOFer are encouraged to share and learn from each other beyond the exchange of bed and board for labour. Different to a paying or private guest, the WWOOFer is immediately incorporated into the work and family routine, carrying out their allocated tasks. The conference report emphasises that hosts share their lifestyle with their helpers, where possible sharing the same living conditions. The 'cultural exchange' takes place by "living as a member of the family" and "letting strangers into one's home".

The concept of the 'cultural exchange' phrased in terms of fictive kinship is not unique to WWOOF. Mellini et al (2007) study the role of au-pairs in Switzerland and France. They describe how the work of an au-pair, similar to the WWOOF exchange, is conceptualised as a cultural exchange for young people, not as employment. They "share a home with the family and by definition should be treated like a member of the family rather than an employee" (2007:61). Like the WWOOFer, the au-pair does not usually take on the work out of financial necessity but for the "cultural experience" of living in a foreign country. Incorporating the live-in help as a family member facilitates the sharing and learning experience. It also obscures the work-exchange dynamics and power imbalance, as Mellini et al point out (2007:52). I will return to this aspect in the final section of this chapter. Like with the WWOOF exchange, the 'cultural exchange' of the au-pair depends on the integration into the host-family as a family member.

This "fetish" of the 'cultural exchange' is sometimes also used as a euphemism for "non-organic". It allows national groups to incorporate anyone who claims to be interested in

alternative lifestyle ideas.¹⁶⁷ Stehlik (2002) writes: “WWOOF now includes hosts who may not be particularly rural or even necessarily into organic growing, but at least embrace some sort of ‘alternative’ worldview and are generally interested in gardening, in people and in the opportunity for cultural exchange” (2002:221), while the WWOOFers enjoy “the added benefit of the chance to live as part of the host family and experience local customs and lifestyle” (2002:221). During my time of research, WWOOF-NZ had a special ‘Cultural Exchange Section’ separate from their ‘Organic Section’. I visited two hosts from this section, a non-organic orchard experimenting with three rows of spray-free seedlings, and an urban family home with a nut tree in the backyard. Neither of them was aware they were in this particular section and both were unsure about what it meant. The WWOOF-NZ directors reasoned that they did not want to exclude anyone from WWOOF and rather offer everyone the opportunity to participate in the cultural exchange. This attitude, however, is not universally accepted among WWOOF members and directors.¹⁶⁸ Therefore, the enthusiasm with which some groups emphasise the importance of the ‘cultural exchange’ can be seen somewhat critically.

The WWOOFer is expected to act, and to a certain extent feel, like a member of the household. “*They are part of the family*”, said Emere, talking about the WWOOFers’ involvement as a member of her household:

*I prefer people who understand themselves as part of the family. That is a Maori thing, when you come and live in the house, you are not a stranger anymore, you are part of the family. I expect my friends to treat my WWOOFers with that respect because of their regard for me; also, the WWOOFer is part of my family. I make them feel at home; when I have guests I expect the WWOOFer to act as part of the family, to make my guests feel at home, offer them a cup of tea, talk to them.*¹⁶⁹

Participants in the WWOOF exchange used kinship terminology to describe the sharing of the household and living together. This rhetoric was strongly encouraged by the national WWOOF groups. Fischer (2010) argues that kinship is a result of construction and interpretation, based on and supported by indigenous social categories. In her study, the Tanzanian factory workers who define relationships among themselves in terms of kinship do so in order to find their place within the social structure of the shop floor. Similarly,

¹⁶⁷ See Chapter One on the various meanings of ‘organic’.

¹⁶⁸ See Chapters Four and Five on the conflicts between national directors.

¹⁶⁹ Conversation with WWOOF-host, field notes, New Zealand: 2011.

hosts and WWOOFers need to define and negotiate their roles within the social structure of the shared household and establish how to relate to each other.

The WWOOFer is socialised into the alternative rural lifestyle of sustainable living by their hosts. Cronauer (2011) interprets this process of becoming a member of the WWOOF household as ‘growing up’. I call it socialisation, or what Harris (1990) refers to as ‘cultural reproduction’. The host, and sometimes other WWOOFers, become role models for the alternative, environmentalist lifestyle, as Rita, a New Zealand host, stated:

Aber was ich vor allen Dingen spannend finde ist halt diesen Austausch zu kriegen wo die wirklich was lernen von der alternativen Lebensweise und was sie mit sich nehmen.

What I find exciting above all things, is to get that exchange where they [WWOOFers] really learn something about the alternative lifestyle and what they take with them [when they leave].¹⁷⁰

I was advised to familiarise myself with books and documentaries well known within the environmental movement, and was invited to attend seminars on biodynamic farming and food processing. Indeed Stehlik (2002) describes WWOOF as a form of informal adult learning. However, Melin (2012) finds that no learning occurs where WWOOFers work and eat alone; only when there were opportunities for discussing tasks and ideas did WWOOFers report learning something and developing pro-environmental behaviour. WWOOF-hosts often deliberately create such opportunities for discussions and teaching. Many seem to have extensive experience in teaching and education; almost all my host-participants were involved in child or adult education, giving seminars (from forest education for children, herbal lore, and tutoring in sustainable living and self-sufficiency, to art classes and personal development seminars). In Austria a number of farms were accredited training farms for agricultural teaching; in New Zealand many hosts home-schooled their children. It seems to be a recurring theme, demonstrating that hosts enjoy teaching and sharing their knowledge.

As the aims of WWOOF state, the WWOOF-host is supposed to offer a learning experience for the WWOOFer. Some hosts took this aspect very seriously and volunteered much time and effort to educate WWOOFers in organic farming techniques and

¹⁷⁰ Conversation with WWOOF-host, field notes, New Zealand: 2010.

philosophies. Rita emigrated from Germany and lived in an intentional community in New Zealand, where she was responsible for the WWOOFers. Rita reflected on how much time and energy was consumed by introducing the WWOOFers to the work and lifestyle:

Klar, manche Leute würden sagen, das ganze, was da alles rein geht an Energie das macht's nicht so richtig wett. Aber ich denk schon, weil's halt nicht nur um Arbeit geht, weil's ja auch um so viele andere Sachen geht.¹⁷¹

Well, some people would say, all that energy that goes into it, it's not really worth it. But I think it is, because it's not just about the work, it's about so many other things as well.

While hosts benefited from the WWOOFers' help, many regarded the educational aspect as a vital part of the WWOOF exchange. Even though Nicole depended on the help from WWOOFers, she said: *"It's about getting more people into the garden, make an impression in their lives, change something."*¹⁷² Nicole was a "missionary" with, she stated, little interest in the 'cultural exchange'. Rather, she was interested in educating WWOOFers about environmental issues and the organic movement. She recollected several cases where WWOOFers completely changed their lifestyle, even their jobs, after staying with her, like a US-American WWOOFer who gave up his job as a toxic waste manager and became a social worker. Like many hosts, Nicole hoped WWOOFers would bring back what they had learned to their everyday life, buy local and organic, have their own garden, and "spread the word" of the green lifestyle.

The WWOOFer who has gained a deeper understanding of the work and the knowledge necessary to live the alternative lifestyle might also be more inclined to accept the often simple living conditions of the host. Kathleen Bubinas (2011), in her study on urban farmers markets, observes how vendors emphasise the importance, and the joy, of educating the public about their produce and sharing their knowledge and expertise with the community. "Indeed, the educational component of the transaction becomes just as important as the goods and currency being exchanged" (2011:166). Like the educated consumer who learns to appreciate what the vendor has to offer (and buy the more expensive organic or local produce) the WWOOFer is educated about living sustainably and therefore expected to accept the modest lifestyle and hard working conditions.

¹⁷¹ Interview with WWOOF-host, New Zealand: 2010.

¹⁷² Conversation with WWOOF-host, field notes, New Zealand: 2010.

Sometimes the relationship between host and WWOOFer goes beyond that of a teacher and student, and becomes more of a mentoring, or parental relationship.

Emotional sustenance and ‘kinship of support’

Some hosts find themselves in the position of a guide or mentor for their WWOOFers. Sue, the founder of WWOOF, retells the stories of extraordinary support some hosts have given to their WWOOFers. Sue WWOOFed at a Christian convent in the UK where she met Sister Mary:

She reckoned she saved one or two people from quite deep psychological problems, or even from committing suicide. There was one girl and they thought she was very depressed and they kept her there for a little bit until she recovered...And then there was a man, he was quite a troubled person, Sister Mary gave him a big patch to dig and he dug and he dug and he worked through all his anger; he did a hell of a lot of digging for her. And there is another couple...they had this young lad that used to come and WWOOF for them and he didn't know how to work, he was useless. But they didn't just tell him to go away, they tutored him how to work properly and they took an interest in his studies and encouraged him because his parents didn't seem to do that much. And they really encouraged him to do something sensible with his life. They were really good people...So you get all this, sort of [pause] amateur social work, I suppose you could call it, and mentoring perhaps.¹⁷³

Emotional support can extend to mentoring relationships that go beyond what is generally expected from the ‘cultural exchange’. Cronauer (2011) also states how one of her participants enjoys her role as a “wise woman”, passing on her wisdom to her young female WWOOFers.

As other studies on WWOOF have found, WWOOFers are often in a state of “reorientation”, like a gap-year or sabbatical (McIntosh and Bonnemann 2006, Bernkopf 2009, Stateva 2010), and hosts find they can have a strong influence on their WWOOFers. Rita, the New Zealand host, stated:

Ich hab schon so viel Feedback gehabt...wo das für deren Leben hat das wirklich einen Unterschied gemacht, dass sie sich vielleicht das Leben anders angeschaut

¹⁷³ Interview with the founder of WWOOF, England: 2011.

*haben von da an...Ist eine riesen Möglichkeit in das Leben von Menschen irgendwo einzutreten, also positiv einzutreten.*¹⁷⁴

I got a lot of feedback...where it really made a difference for [the WWOOFer's] life, so that they were looking at life in a different way from then on...It is a huge opportunity to enter the life of other people, in a positive way.

Daisy, a New Zealand host, expressed a similar notion: *"I can see that I can have a very profound impact on some of the young people's lives, where they go from here, what they should do."*¹⁷⁵ Maddy (2001:299) observes how mentoring relationships among medical practitioners develop into fictive kinship. I argue that the mentoring relationships and emotional support, not just among co-workers but in all social situation, can be considered as fictive kinship.

Some WWOOF-hosts have observed that especially young and inexperienced travellers are often looking for a host from whom they expect to receive the emotional support of a family. Fischer (2010) states how emotional support can be an aspect of 'fictive kinship', what she terms 'kinship of support'. Rita, a German immigrant in New Zealand who is responsible for the WWOOFer in her intentional community, stated:

*Die wollen einfach nur irgendwo unterkommen wo sie jemanden haben, wo sie irgendwo sind wo sich irgendwer um sie kümmert und wo sie irgendwie auch was lernen können, gleichzeitig. Manchmal kommen ganz junge, so 19, 20 jährige.*¹⁷⁶

They just want to arrive somewhere where they have someone, where they are somewhere where someone takes care of them, and where they can also experience something at the same time. Sometimes we get really young ones, 19, 20 years old.

Bernkopf (2009) observes in her study, how the mother of the WWOOF-host in Portugal would be in charge of communicating with the WWOOFers, signing her e-mails with "WWOOFer-mum". However, not all WWOOF-hosts are willing to extend this kind of emotional support. Lesley at the eco-village, for example, said:

*I am not a host mum and a lot of people come wanting [a] host mum, to take care of them. And I understand it, they are transitioning away from their families, they are being independent but still nice to have that. Like, no, I wanna relate to you as an equal, I don't really want to be your mother.*¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁴ Interview with WWOOF-host, New Zealand: 2010.

¹⁷⁵ Conversation with WWOOF-host, field notes, New Zealand: 2011.

¹⁷⁶ Interview with WWOOF-host, New Zealand: 2010.

¹⁷⁷ Interview with WWOOF-host, New Zealand: 2010.

There is a gender aspect to this observation, how female hosts are to a greater extent expected to take on the social role as a nurturing and supporting mother to their young and inexperienced WWOOFers.

The WWOOFer who is socialised into the host-family and establishes bonds of fictive kinship of support and mentoring, may also experience the negative aspects of ordinary family life, or what Nimmo calls the “grimmer realities of daily life” (2001:134). The WWOOFer might witness arguments between members of the host household, sometimes becoming involved in them, experience times of high stress for the hosts (Nimmo 2001, McIntosh and Bonnemann 2006, Lipan and Murphy 2012), and possibly even experience domestic violence and abuse. In their study of au-pairs, Mellini et al (2007) state that abusive relationships between host-parents have a negative effect on the ‘cultural exchange’ experience. Even though I never experienced domestic violence in a WWOOF household, I can only assume that this would also apply to the WWOOF exchange. Violent and abusive behaviour, directly or indirectly involving the WWOOFer, would necessarily compromise their feelings of comfort and security within the WWOOF household. However, some hosts mentioned to me how they like to challenge their WWOOFers’ romantic vision of the harmonious farm and family life. In Chapter Two I discussed how hosts reproached WWOOFers who come to their farms to “cuddle lambs”. Some hosts liked to confront the “city-people” with the realities of farm life, but also with the realities of their, often not so harmonious, family life.

Some of my host-participants had doubts about whether a WWOOFer would be able to cope with their family situation. Ingrid, an Austrian host, was honest about her not-so-harmonious family life and marriage problems and said: *“The WWOOFers, who come here, they have to be able to deal with the fact that not everything is perfect here. That's the way I live, and that's how it is.”*¹⁷⁸ Cronauer (2011) observes how hosts feel they do not need to hide their family reality, especially from long-term WWOOFers. Tashia was a New Zealand host who emigrated from Australia, and a single mother of two teenagers. Because of frequent domestic rows she was unsure if she should join WWOOF. She had WWOOFing experience herself, and she already shared her home with a boarder. Tashia decided that sharing all aspects of her family life, including the negative, was in fact her

¹⁷⁸ Interview with WWOOF-host, Austria: 2009.

contribution to the ‘cultural exchange’. Indeed, Tashia stated that WWOOFers, who are frequently young themselves, can become moderators between her and her teenaged children. This too, I argue, is an element of a ‘kinship of support’.

Only the WWOOFer as family member experiences the full work and family life of their hosts, which is constructed as the positive ‘cultural exchange’ experience. For the host-family it means they can be themselves, there is no “show” of a harmonious family life for the benefit of a guest. However, being caught in the middle of a domestic row can also be an embarrassing and stressful experience for the WWOOFer. For some, this is in fact too much family life and closeness, needing to reclaim some privacy by, for example, living outside the family home and having less interaction with the family members. Still, this must not necessarily diminish the ties of kinship. Other kin relations do not always live under the same roof and are constantly together. Individuals also need privacy, as I will discuss in the final section of this chapter.

“Partaking in the family life” and “living as a member of the family”, as Sue, the founder, described it, means host and helper share all aspects of ordinary everyday farm and family life, as well as special occasions, rituals, and celebrations. Many hosts, for example, had WWOOFers stay for Christmas or come with them on a holiday trip, as Stehlik (2002) reports about his own experience as a WWOOF-host in Australia:

We don't have more than two at a time and they usually stay about a week or so. They always become part of the family – joining us at mealtimes, working alongside us in the garden, playing with the children or the dog, perhaps coming to the beach with us, or in the case of one young English WWOOFer, ending up staying with us for some months and even coming on holiday with us. (2002:222)

Nimmo (2001) observes how WWOOFers experience special occasions in their hosts’ life while being a member of their household: “Shuggie participated in a ‘stirring’, in which the whole neighbourhood turned out to assist with the application of a biodynamic solution on her host’s farm. Joyce attended a powhiri at the local marae, which welcomed a First Nation medicine man onto the marae” (2001:134).

Doris, the former WWOOF-Austria director, had a young Korean woman stay with her for a few days, before her host arrived to pick her up. Doris remembered:

Hat sie gesagt 'wir müssen uns tummeln, weil heute gehen wir noch zu einer Hochzeit!' Ist sie gleich mit ihr zur Hochzeit. Das Dirndl hat sie verweigert, aber sie hat die ganze Nacht getanzt, also mit den Einheimischen, auf einer Bauernhochzeit hat sie schon getanzt die ganze Nacht.¹⁷⁹

[The host] said, 'we need to hurry, we are going to a wedding today!' So she took [the WWOOFer] to a wedding right away. She refused to wear the national dress, but she danced all night, with the locals, at a country wedding, she danced all night.

The WWOOFer as a temporary household member is invited to, and expects to be welcome to, experience all aspects of their host's lifestyle. This can include joyful as well as sad occasions. When a death occurred in Emere's family, she took her WWOOFer along to the *tangihanga*.¹⁸⁰ The WWOOFer, a young woman from Europe, had been with Emere for two months; staying at the *marae*¹⁸¹ and experiencing the ceremonies was, in Emere's opinion, her contribution to the 'cultural exchange' of her WWOOFer.

Substance sharing and gift exchange

WWOOFers frequently bring gifts when first arriving at the host's place. Bernkopf (2009) observes this during her study of a host place in Portugal. The WWOOFers were largely of Western origin and, Bernkopf states, would usually bring something from their home country, or something they had bought or found during their journey. The gift was given either to the host or to the entire household of host-family and WWOOFers. I too brought gifts for my hosts; wanting to remain with the ethos of WWOOF, I chose organic and fair trade products, like tea, chocolate, or soap. One of my hosts, Nicole, the New Zealand host mentioned in the narrative at the beginning of the previous chapter, was obviously at a loss what to do with my gift and did not respond with the appreciation I expected. I felt confused about her behaviour at first as this had not happened to me before, and slightly hurt, but came to realise that this host was not interested in establishing a personal relationship with her WWOOFers. Therefore, her reluctance to accept my gift signalled her intention to barter with me, and not to initiate a gift-relationship. A barter arrangement

¹⁷⁹ Interview with former WWOOF-Austria director, Austria: 2009.

¹⁸⁰ Funeral, rites for the dead.

¹⁸¹ Courtyard; the open area in front of the *wharenui* (meeting house) where formal greetings and discussions take place.

with little personal involvement is acceptable within the norms of the WWOOF exchange. However, for most members the exchange is just one aspect of the personal relationship that they wish to establish.¹⁸²

As discussed in the previous chapter, there are different ways of engaging in the WWOOF exchange and, consequently, expectations occasionally clash. Okura-Gagné (2011) analyses the relationship between buyers and sellers at farmers' markets in US-America. She observes how buyers like to establish personal relationships with the sellers in order to render the transaction less commercial and more social. However, Okura-Gagné states that a personal relationship is not necessarily in the sellers' interest as they are not there "for social hours" (2011:286) but to sell their produce. Similar situations can occur between hosts and WWOOFers, where one side wishes to establish a closer, more intense personal relationship than the other is prepared for. In the WWOOF exchange, the relationship can likewise remain that of farmer-worker, or develop into a personal relationship, through gift giving, sharing of stories and knowledge, and company. The gifts are no "perfect gifts" (Carrier 1990) free from expectations of return. On the contrary, they are laden with expectations and obligations. It is the very idea of creating dependencies that initiates the gift-exchange.

Gifts are usually given by the WWOOFer to the host on arrival. This emphasises the non-monetary nature of the exchange relationship, reciprocating the initial "gift" of the host who invites the WWOOFer to their home. Drawing on Maurice Godelier's (1999) discussion of the gift, the WWOOFer's gift is the first move to "equalise" the relationship between host and WWOOFer. The next gift to the WWOOFer might follow very soon, in the form of a first shared meal. Food featured strongly in the participants' stories, as the narratives in the previous chapter have already illustrated. The hosts and WWOOFers experienced sharing meals, cooking, and eating together as an essential aspect of creating the social bonds between them. Substance sharing, feeding and caring can be the basis to create kinship bonds (Bodenhorn 2000, Carsten 2000). A meal is more than feeding the volunteer, it is the intimacy of a family home and shared dinner that creates the emotional bonds. The WWOOFer might be an international traveller on their own, or a domestic WWOOFer in search of connecting with a family because they feel lonely in their lives.

¹⁸² See Chapter Two.

This may also be true for the host who longs to have “*someone else around the table*”, as mentioned in a previous quote.

It is considered good “WWOOFer-etiquette” not to arrive too late on the first day, so the WWOOFer can at least offer to do some work right away, even if this is declined and the WWOOFer is invited to make him- or herself at home. The first shared meal is an important opportunity for the other household members (family members and other WWOOFers) to “inspect” the newcomer. This could be the first main meal of the day, which for example in Austria would be lunch, and in New Zealand dinner; and it might bring a little celebration to welcome the new WWOOFer, maybe with wine, or a special desert. For the very first meal the WWOOFer might still be treated as a guest and served at the table, but often this is not so and the WWOOFer offers, or is asked to help with cooking, setting the table, and later with the washing-up. This sets a pattern for the rest of their stay. There are countless unwritten rules to be observed and learned right away, for example household members having a particular seat, or their private cup. In one of my host families in Austria each family member had their own special fork, each a little different, and it caused much laughter when I placed the forks in the wrong place. Learning about these rules marks the transition from a stranger to a member of the household. The WWOOFer is not expected to challenge the customs of their hosts’ (their eating habits, choice of food, or religious practices) but to accept them as part of the ‘cultural exchange’.

The first shared meal is often also an occasion to “interrogate” the WWOOFer about their person, their home and travels. Often, sensitive topics where hosts and WWOOFers fear they might not comply with each other’s ideas are avoided. Instead, they look for things they have in common, like environmental protection, organic farming, and issues of social justice. With these topics, neither party usually expects controversies since they assume to be dealing with likeminded people. In this way, bonds are created through the intimacy of sharing personal details, stories, and laughter while sharing a meal. Mellini et al state in regard to au-pairs that “[r]eciprocity in sharing personal information is central to the establishment of an equal relationship” (2007:55). Where both sides share personal information and are equally interested in each other, the helper may feel more appreciated and included in their host-family’s life. Conversely, when hosts do not ask about their helpers’ personal life, the au-pairs feel that their hosts “are not interested in them as

people, only as employees” (2007:56). This is also the reason why WWOOFers enjoy, and expect to be working alongside their hosts, since this is another opportunity to learn about and from each other. Labour also enters into the gift-relationship, in particular where the WWOOFers commitment and enthusiasm for the work go beyond what the host expects. Therefore, not only do shared meals create intimate bonds, but sharing time more generally. Yet there is no guarantee that sharing meals or labour will bring intimate connections, as the narrative at the beginning of the previous chapter has illustrated.

The gift-giving can continue both ways throughout the WWOOFer’s stay. Daisy, a New Zealand host, recalled: “WWOOFer[s] frequently leave small gifts, send cards, etc; things pertaining to their countries, ie a special meal, sweets, cards, games, soap is a favourite and we love it, photos; friendship bracelets, musical recitals”¹⁸³ A “special meal” was mentioned by several participants, referring to the WWOOFer baking or preparing a traditional meal related to their own background, which is considered a gift by the host-family. They might reciprocate by taking the WWOOFer on trips and including them in family activities. In my observation, like the first meal, the final meal is an equally important occasion between host and WWOOFer. Bernkopf (2009) also mentions a final shared meal of host-family and WWOOFer, going out for a meal or a drink. If there was an initial gift by the WWOOFer, the host might reciprocate with a gift for the WWOOFer on their departure. The WWOOF-Australia newsletter printed a comment from volunteers who had WWOOFed at a place for 40 days: “They gave us a cookbook when we left as a present and they did us a birthday party before leaving. We felt like family!” (WWOOF-Australia newsletter 82, 2012:2). I would often have a good-bye dinner with the whole family, sometimes eating out for a special treat, and received a variety of gifts, like some of the organic produce from my hosts’ farm or garden.¹⁸⁴ I was also given a number of other things, like children’s drawings, shells, organic tea, “pre-loved” clothes and jewellery, and an old cookbook too. These gifts have explicit connections with the giver, the household, and the place that underline and reinforce the intimate connection between host and WWOOFer.

Many WWOOF-hosts keep a ‘WWOOFer-guestbook’, where WWOOFers leave entries, drawings, poems, pictures before departing. Daisy, a New Zealand host, took a picture of

¹⁸³ E-mail conversation with WWOOF-host, 2011.

¹⁸⁴ See also Chapter Two.

each of her WWOOFers, pinning them to the wall in her office. The departure of the WWOOFer is often not quite the end of the gift-relationship. The WWOOFer might reciprocate their final good-bye gifts sometime after their departure by sending an e-mail, letter, or postcard after returning home or from their next destination. Stehlik (2002) observes how WWOOFers keep in contact after departing:

One of them went on to establish her own organic growing business, while another went on to do a training course inspired by his experiences with us. We know because they keep in touch – we often get postcards, letters or emails from ex-WWOOFers telling us what they are up to (2002:223).

Gerda and Paul, Austrian hosts, had what they called a “WWOOFer-wall” in the kitchen next to the dinner table, where they collected all their WWOOFers’ postcards. Contact via e-mail and social networking sites, sending postcards and Christmas cards, can continue for years. Some hosts went to visit their former WWOOFers. Other relationships wane when they are no longer what Bodenhorn (2000) refers to as “enacted”. Many hosts expressed regret for having lost contact with some of their former WWOOFers. However, many WWOOFers also return, reviving the relationship with a second and third stay. The sharing of a household is an intense and often memorable experience that can create lasting bonds. The physical sharing of living space, however, is not at all easy and obvious. Boundaries need to be observed and learned, and negotiated between the inhabitants, as well as personal boundaries that need to be respected. Crossing them can lead to tensions and conflict.

Privacy and boundaries: The micro-politics of negotiating space

Paul and his wife Gerda from Germany were Austrian WWOOF-hosts with a herbal garden, who shared the 200 year old farm house with Paul’s parents. Their daughters were the 9th generation born and raised in the family home. Gerda and Paul joined WWOOF because they desperately needed help with the workload. Paul’s parents and siblings were not welcome to help, the two sides of the family were not on good terms with each other. *“That is not my grandmother, I despise that woman”* said their 15year old daughter, and Gerda pointed out how they never shared a meal. Gerda and I talked about the WWOOF exchange, the give and take relationship between host and helper, and Gerda explained why they would not accept her parents-in-law’s help on the farm - their help would come

with demands: *“You know, exchange, they don't understand the concept; only take, take, take, but never give anything back.”* The grandparents’ and siblings’ help was only ever experienced as interfering and obstructive. Gerda and Paul, with their daughters, decided to cut the family-ties. Even though they still lived in the same house, the grandparents inhabited a separate area with a separate entrance and were not welcome in Gerda and Paul’s home. WWOOFers, on the other hand, were invited to share their private space, join them in the living area, help themselves in the kitchen, and move freely around the house. Gerda said: *“They are like family members, new ones, almost.”*

This narrative illustrates how blood relations are not necessarily favoured over fictive kin. While the parents were barred from Gerda and Paul’s family living area and excluded from shared meals, the WWOOFers were welcome. Not all family members have, therefore, automatic rights to all spaces and activities within the household. Matters of privacy and boundaries are part of the family dynamics that concern all household members and do not necessarily prioritise blood relations.

However, the relationship between host and WWOOFer is not that of equals. The WWOOF-host is not only in charge of allocating work tasks, but also decides on the rules of engagement and the boundaries within the domestic sphere (see also Nimmo 2001, Cronauer 2011). It can be embarrassing and uncomfortable for the WWOOFer having to point out, for example, that their allocated sleeping area is damp, smelly or too cold, or the bathroom facilities inadequate to their standards. WWOOF-Australia reminds hosts to provide sufficient bedding, “especially if dealing with travellers from warmer areas than yours” (2012:10), so that the WWOOFers do not have to ask, or have to endure the cold. Fulfilling primary needs of food and shelter, comfort and a feeling of security are major concerns for the WWOOFers, but they are not necessarily (expected to be) voiced.

The relationships within the WWOOF household are at odds with contemporary notions of egalitarian family structures. They are also at odds with counter-cultural ideas of egalitarianism and communal living where all members have equal rights as well as obligations (Sargisson 2004). To some extent it does resemble the nostalgic notion of the historic farm household as discussed at the beginning of this chapter (Riehl 1856 [1854], Brunner 1956). In this construct of the household, all members, related and non-related, are considered part of the family, though strict hierarchies apply. In this model of the household all household members willingly accept their subordination to the farming couple, and in particular to the authority of the farmer. This model applies to some extent

to the reality of the WWOOF exchange, regarding the voluntary submission of the helper under the authority of the host. The WWOOFer has to quickly adapt to the norms of interaction and communication within the host-family, and find their place within the household in relation to each household member. Rules about where things (and people) should be or not be, such as having a meal sitting on the floor, have to be observed and learned.

Physical space

WWOOFers and hosts move in together before they get to know each other, immediately sharing domestic space upon first contact. Carsten and Hugh-Jones (1995) describe the first impression of the anthropologist entering their participants' house, which reminds me of my own experience of entering a WWOOF-hosts' house for the first time:

To enter another culture is to stand nervously in front of an alien house and to step inside a world of unfamiliar objects and strange people, a maze of spatial conventions whose invisible lines get easily scuffed and trampled by ignorant foreign feet. But these first, revealing, architectural impressions, reinforced by the painful process of learning who is who, who and what lives where, and what to do where and when, soon fade into the background to become merely the context and environment for the increasingly abstract and wordy conversation of ethnographic research. In time, for both anthropologists and their hosts, much of what houses are and imply becomes something that goes without saying (1995:4).

Like the anthropologist, the WWOOFer enters a foreign house and the hosts welcome a stranger into their home. Both sides need to adapt; the volunteer needs to learn the household rules and routines and find their place among the other household members. Stehlik (2002) reflects on his experience as a WWOOF-host in Australia, saying "generally they [WWOOFers] do not know what to expect – after all, we are complete strangers" (2002:222).

By sharing domestic space, even if not entirely and at all times, host and WWOOFer still have to merge their personal space and give up much of their privacy. Even where the WWOOFer might sleep outside the family home, the household is still a shared sphere, for food preparation and shared meals, sharing the bathroom, and spending time together

during and after work. Jamieson (2007) reflects on the experience as a WWOOFer, constantly having to adjust to someone else's rules and standards:

One of the things about WWOOFing was having to fit in with different domestic arrangements. I had to be flexible and suspend my own ideas about how things should be done, increase my tolerance for mess and dirt in some cases, or pull up my standards in others...Most of the hosts seemed fairly laid back and weren't too worried if they found tools in the wrong place, for example though some found it necessary to lay down rules, like certain places that were off-limits. Although I almost always had my own room, sleepout, caravan or house bus, privacy was something I really missed, and didn't realise how much until I returned to my own home. (2007:80)

There is, of course, no universal conception of privacy; Narotzky (1997) notes that European concepts of privacy, as the nuclear family unit exclusively sharing a household, historically developed as a bourgeois ideal in the 19th century. Cultural, social, and personal backgrounds influence people's notions of privacy, personal space, and housing, including feelings of comfort and safety.

Sharing domestic space means that actual physical boundaries are laid out in the private home. In my observation, generally all areas that are open to all family members are also available to the WWOOFers; a significant boundary is the sleeping area of all household members (including the WWOOFers') that remain private to the occupant(s) for most of the time.¹⁸⁵ In their study on boundaries of homes in Canada, Margaret Rodman and Matthew Cooper (1996) conceptualise boundaries as:

socially constructed and often ambiguous transition zones, borders, barriers, and edges. Our view is that such boundaries are spatially expressed but not always obvious in built form. Often they are observable only in the discourse and action of residents. Boundaries are not neutral, although they may define neutral zones. They are one dimension of ordering space that expresses power relations. (1996:91)

Boundaries in the WWOOF household are usually not made explicit and have to be learned by observation. Some hosts do not like their WWOOFers to help themselves to food, or use the telephone without asking; other hosts hand over the house keys to their WWOOFers and lend them their car. Mellini et al (2007) observe how au-pairs feel like equal members of the family if the social relationship with the host-parents is positive. The

¹⁸⁵ There are exceptions, e.g. children entering all bedrooms; the WWOOFers' room might have a dual function in the family home so that others have to enter it at times; the WWOOFer doing chores in the household might enter the private space of their hosts e.g. when hovering. Therefore, the boundaries are flexible.

au-pairs' experience is similar to that of WWOOFers; drawing on Mellini et al's findings, I argue that the WWOOFers feel accepted as full members of the family when the same rules apply to them as to the host, instead of hosts setting up different standards for themselves and for their WWOOFers in regard to what, when, or how much they can eat, sleep, shower, watch TV, or use the internet for example. Freedom to move around the family living space for recreational activities, even entertaining friends, and using the families' bike or computer, for example, make a difference for how the WWOOFers experience their role as household members. Also, the inclusion or exclusion from family events and celebrations matters to how the WWOOFer perceives her/his role within the host-family.

An ambiguous object is the family computer and the home-office is a space of uncertain boundaries. Some hosts invite or allow WWOOFers to use their home-office, which means allowing them to access the internet via the host's private computer. Other hosts take this as an intrusion into their private space. Even though Gerda, the host mentioned in the narrative at the beginning of this section, invited her WWOOFers to join the rest of the family in the living room and kitchen, the office and computer was "off limits" for WWOOFers. Many WWOOFers rely heavily on the internet to arrange their travels and communicate with friends and family back home. Some hosts experience this as excessive internet usage. Rural households in many parts of the world, Austria and New Zealand included, often still rely on expensive internet connections with limited data usage. Hosts also complained about WWOOFers who preferred to chat with friends online than involve themselves in their family life, or search the internet for their next host, instead of experiencing their stay with them. However, cutting off the WWOOFers' access to the internet may also mean cutting off their connection with their home and family, completely isolating them with their hosts. But Gerda also made the point that the family computer, as well as the office, held many personal documents and information which she preferred to keep private. It might be worth noting that the WWOOFers might have the same reservations when asked to lend their private computers, cars, or other possessions to their hosts. The rhetoric of "being part of the family" obscures the various degrees and blurred boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. It is a question of trust, and long-term WWOOFers might win their hosts' confidence to such an extent that they gain the privilege of using the family computer, or family car, or be trusted with money, and vice versa.

Participants also have different senses of privacy; a bathroom door that cannot be locked might already be enough for some to feel uncomfortable in a place. Nicole, a New Zealand WWOOF-host, remembered a WWOOFer who would never use the washing line in front of the house to dry underpants but instead used “*all sorts of other places*” that were out of public view. Lesley, a US-American host in an eco-village in New Zealand, reflected on having to adapt to their WWOOFers’ various habits:

*Well, sometimes it’s cultural, sometimes it’s just differences amongst people. Some people are night owls, some people are early birds, some people like loud music, some people really like quiet, some are social, some are loners and need their alone time, some have different standards of cleanliness and tidiness. We have had them on both ends of the scale and on both ends it can cause tension.*¹⁸⁶

If the differences are too big this might lead to an unsatisfactory experience for the host and WWOOFer, or even an early termination of the WWOOF exchange.

The more limited the living space is, the more negotiations over sharing and privacy take place. Privacy within shared family space, kitchen, living area, veranda, (even the bathroom in some cases, as Jamieson (2007) reports about one host whose bathroom had no door), is not possible unless host and helper “take a break” from WWOOFing or hosting all together; the term ‘WWOOF fatigue’ has become descriptive for this feeling of exhaustion among the members. However, privacy can rely on time as much as on space. In their analysis of suburban homes in Scotland, Moira Munro and Ruth Madigan (1999) find that shared space is often “time-zoned” to allow for privacy. “In this way, the same physical space can be made more flexible by the social norms that structure the way it is used” (1999:113). While Emily’s WWOOFer had a separate house for sleeping, all other activities took place within the family home. She encouraged her WWOOFers to spend time with her and her children, sitting in the open kitchen living room area, but on her conditions. After dinner the WWOOFer was sent to their separate house, giving her family privacy in their home. WWOOFers too can choose to spend time on their own; I often found myself going for long walks or spending time in the nearest town, to regain some privacy, or enjoying time on my own when the host family was out. However, sharing a household is not only about sharing time and space – there are also personal boundaries involved.

¹⁸⁶ Interview with WWOOF-host, New Zealand: 2010.

Personal boundaries

Romantic relationships can be an aspect of the WWOOF exchange, as the narrative in the beginning of this chapter illustrates. Tina's comment regarding her hopes of finding a wife for her brother were, I felt, meant for me. This led to an awkward moment of embarrassment before I decided to ignore the hint. Stories of romantic attachments between host and helper are, however, not uncommon. In an e-mail the WWOOF-Portugal director wrote: "[I]t is impressive the amount of ex-WWOOFers married with Hosts!"¹⁸⁷ Jamieson (2007) notes in her recollections as a WWOOFer in New Zealand:

For a couple of weeks my main task was picking, alongside a couple from Uruguay, Nathan...the farm manager, and Steph from England, who had arrived as a WWOOFer, but became Nathan's partner and stayed - a not altogether uncommon phenomenon in the world of WWOOFing. The following year they were married. (2007:50)

When I had just moved in at an eco-village in New Zealand, I mentioned this to my new host. "Ah yes", he mused "*that happens quite a bit [pause]; I married my WWOOFer*".¹⁸⁸ Some however go too far, as gossip and stories circulating among the members of the WWOOF movement reveal, of adultery and inappropriate behaviour of WWOOFers and hosts.

Daisy, a New Zealand host, observed: "*young women are vulnerable, especially in remote places where they depend on their host*."¹⁸⁹ Volunteers depend on their host for food and shelter, in many cases for transport, leading to an imbalance of power between host and volunteer. Although rare, all directors know of some incidences in which members, hosts as well as WWOOFers, have been victims of (sexual) harassment and abuse. When I visited the WWOOF-NZ directors I told them of an incident where I thought a host had behaved inappropriately; they took this very seriously and Will responded by saying: "*he doesn't chat you up in a bar and can say to you what he likes; such thoughts should not even be voiced*."¹⁹⁰ But, probably like many other members, I did not think the incident was "serious enough" to make a complaint, which would allow the WWOOF directors to give the host an official warning. Each national group has different protocols, but once an

¹⁸⁷ E-mail conversation with WWOOF-Portugal director, 2010.

¹⁸⁸ Conversation with WWOOF-host, field notes, New Zealand: 2010.

¹⁸⁹ Conversation with WWOOF-host, field notes, New Zealand: 2011.

¹⁹⁰ Conversation with WWOOF-NZ directors, field notes, New Zealand: 2010.

incident becomes known, or a member had several complaints, the offending member will be excluded from the organisation. However, Will observed: *“The WWOOFers might be really unhappy but they never let us know; instead they tell their next host”*, and Anna stated: *“I understand there are conflicting feelings; you lived with these people, in their house.”*¹⁹¹ This demonstrates how strong feelings of obligation and loyalty can develop within a shared household, despite tensions among members.

WWOOFers and hosts can feel an intense sense of obligation towards each other, from caring for a WWOOFer who has fallen ill, to volunteering time and energy far beyond what the WWOOF exchange generally entails. Cronauer states how WWOOFers in her study “felt obliged to provide hosts with help that went beyond the initial WWOOFing agreement because they felt like a family member” (2011:66). Mostly, obligations, being entrusted with responsibilities, were seen as adding value to the established relationship. However, WWOOFers are sometimes required to do work that goes beyond their personal abilities, or is outside their comfort zone, from minding the hosts’ children, to operating heavy machinery, to managing the entire farm on their own. Jamieson (2007) writes about her own experience as a WWOOFer: “Sometimes hosts ask you to do things that aren’t strictly WWOOFing type tasks, not gardening or farming, but DIY activities like building or painting. Some of these things are well out of my comfort zone” (2007:130). In my study, Simon the Austrian goat farmer, who previously had three long-term WWOOFers and one intern, voiced his disappointment that his WWOOFers were not capable of handling responsibilities; all four had left before the arranged period was over. He was particularly upset about a US-American WWOOFer who confused the chemicals used for cleaning the milking machine, causing some damage. The WWOOFer was a young college student without farming experience; Simon had left him in charge of the milking job for several days while he was gone on a business trip.

In Portugal Bernkopf (2009) observes a similar situation of taking advantage of the WWOOFers’ sense of obligation. A volunteer felt he had to carry responsibilities that were beyond what he expected from the WWOOF exchange. She quotes the young man:

Es geht im Prinzip darum, dass du da irgendwelche Leute dressierst, die für dich da den Laden schmeißen....Jetzt machen wir das so, dass jeder für irgendwelche

¹⁹¹ Conversation with WWOOF-NZ directors, field notes, New Zealand: 2010.

Sachen verantwortlich ist...Wie kannst du irgendwelche Leute...die freiwillig für dich da was machen...nein, geht nicht. Ich war für die Autos verantwortlich, für die Kassen, dass da jeder sein Benzingeld reinlegt und wenn da was gefehlt hat, war ich der Blöde. (2009:95).

What happens is you drill random people so they can run the show for you...Now what we do is, everyone is responsible for something...How can you ask that from people...who work for you voluntarily...no, that's impossible. I was responsible for the cars, for the accounts, that everyone would pay their money for the fuel and if something was missing, I was the one to blame.

Not all WWOOFers wish to be involved in all the aspects of their hosts' life. This might be because the WWOOFers have a romantic notion of what farm-life entails and a "tourist attitude" avoiding the realities of other people's hardship as other studies on WWOOF suggest (Stateva 2010). Yet it is equally possible that WWOOFers wish to keep some level of independence and distance.

The final issue of crossing personal boundaries I wish to discuss in this section are conflicting attitudes and beliefs. Hosts whose living and family situation are specific, for example religious convictions and practices, will most likely refer to their lifestyle in their profile to ensure the exchange will be successful. An Australian nudist host, for example, stated in his profile in the host-list:

The owner is a Gay male nudist but there is a mixed bag of residents and workers (2-5). We prefer nudists and have clothing-optional safe areas. If you are not comfortable around naked people – stay away. Gays, lesbians, bisexuals, free thinkers, artists, musicians, students, earth mother, assorted OM chanters, seekers, Mensa members, esotericists, Greenpeace members, horticulturalists, nursery people, computer types & extra trannie-terrestrials & assorted Wiccans are on the VIP list. (Australian WWOOF-book 2012:298)

Ryan, the WWOOF-Australia director, stated that some hosts would even like to share their partiality for drugs in their host-profiles, but for legal reasons he could not publish such references. Nonetheless, Ryan suspected, there might be a "secret lingo" among the WWOOF community: while many hosts state that they are smoke-free and prefer non-smokers, those who make a pro-smoking statement in their profile might indeed mean cannabis. Drug-use can be a critical issue regarding shared space and personal boundaries. In one WWOOF household I visited, the hosts smoked cannabis every evening. I did not and so, to respect my boundaries, they went outside, since the house only contained one large room with no doors. I appreciated my hosts' considerate behaviour; however, when I

realised that other drugs were also consumed at this place, I began to feel out of my comfort zone and soon left.

Ignoring personal boundaries, inappropriate behaviour and unwanted attention, conflicting attitudes and beliefs, and exploitation of the social ties established between host and helper, will most likely end in a negative experience for the participants. This emphasises the importance of ‘family of choice’ and ‘kinship of support’ as the processes creating relatedness between hosts and WWOOFers. However, not all encounters in the WWOOF exchange fulfil the ideal, reaching this level of intimacy and mutual appreciation.

Concluding remarks

In this chapter I have argued that the concept of the ‘open house’ is an aspect of the alternative lifestyle, challenging mainstream norms of the nuclear family as the Western norm of living. The ideal of communal living is influenced by the counter-cultural ideas of intentional communities (Bunce 1994, Sargisson and Sargent 2004), back-to-the-landers and eco-villages, as well as a conservative nostalgia for the extended farm household that includes related and non-related members as one family (Riehl 1856 [1854], Brunner 1956). The WWOOF members call it the ‘open house’, a household that includes temporary and permanent “additional” people.

This model of living has not only economic but also social benefits for the household members. The informally employed helpers, incorporated as part of the family, contribute to the household economy without taking away a personal profit (see also the previous chapter). The narrative of Tina and her family in the beginning of this chapter illustrates the social aspect. WWOOF-hosts often wish to avoid or end their rural isolation, extend a restricted family network, and find encouragement in living with likeminded people where integration into the local community has not been satisfying, or where their own family members reject the alternative lifestyle. The hosts establish new alliances and keep a “lifeline” to the city, or their home country. Like other findings (Maddy 2001, Mellini et al 2007), I argue this ‘family of choice’ is predominantly a choice of likeminded peers.

In the second section of this chapter I focused on what the members call the ‘cultural exchange’ – the changing and dynamic relationships involved in becoming a member of a WWOOF household and its social structure. The kinship bonds are created through a “myriad of reciprocities” (Bodenhorn 2000:143) of food and substance sharing, alliance, ceremonial participation, company and living together, and emotional connection. Everyday practices can create the bonds of kinship and relatedness (Carsten 2000), questioning the distinction between ‘real’ and ‘fictive’ kinship. Kinship ties remain active as long as they are “enacted” (Bodenhorn 2000). The WWOOFer is socialised into the alternative lifestyle of the host. This is an emotional process that occasionally extends to a parental and mentoring relationship, a ‘kinship of support’ (Fischer 2010). It encompasses the good and bad sides of family life, the mundane and the extraordinary occasions. This is all summed up as the ‘cultural exchange’ that allows all expressions of interpersonal relationships to be part of a learning experience.

Participants in the WWOOF exchange do not only negotiate their emotional relationships, but also physical boundaries. The concept of privacy is a modern ideal and not culturally universal (Narotzky 1997). There are physical boundaries within the shared household that need to be observed, learned, and respected by the new member, as well as personal boundaries. Overstepping personal boundaries most likely leads to conflicts and prevent the creation of close personal ties, like unwanted “romantic attention” which is as much a reality of the WWOOF exchange as happy unions between hosts and WWOOFers. The reality of sharing a household and “being part of the family” is usually expressed by participants as a positive experience, but it might also put the participants outside their comfort zone, or exploit their senses of obligation.

This chapter leads to the question of whether the ideal model of the ‘open house’ and its nostalgia for the historic pastoral household is actually “resurrecting” conservative ideas of patron-relationships (as well as gender inequality). The relationship between WWOOF-host and WWOOFer is only nominally that of equals. The host remains the decision-making authority in almost every respect. A paternal relationship can develop that is not unlike the conservative ideal of the farm household of the past (Riehl 1856 [1854]). This romantic ideal, and not necessarily the historic reality, emphasises the dependency of the household members on each other and the wilful submission of the “additional” household members under the authority of a patron. However, different to the historic situation of

servants, WWOOFers are not socially or economically dependent on their hosts and free to leave at any time.

The ‘open house’ of the extended household and the ideal of communal living are part of the utopian dream of alternative sustainable living. In reality conflicting ideas can occur about what a shared household and fictive kinship should entail, leading to tensions among the participants. Nonetheless the ideal remains paramount to the WWOOF ethos. Many members feel they successfully live an alternative green lifestyle, while fulfilling the aims of WWOOF, educating WWOOFers about their lifestyles, “spreading the word”, and establishing networks for the alternative sustainable lifestyle movement. In the next chapter I ask if and how the morality of the WWOOF exchange is transferred from the “grassroots” level between host and helper to the organisational level of the WWOOF groups and directors.

4

Green organisational structures

For a week I stayed with the WWOOF-NZ directors, Will and Anna, and their many children in their family home in a remote rural area on the South Island of New Zealand, where they farmed cattle and operated WWOOF out of their home office. Sitting together around the large wooden dinner table every day, I would listen in when they discussed their daily affairs and concerns about WWOOF. Their motivation for taking over WWOOF was the prospect of meeting people. Will explained: *“I think it was interesting having contact with people from around the world. People would say ‘I want to come and stay on a farm’, and [we would] hear about what they are doing.”* They have been the directors of WWOOF-NZ for more than twenty years. Their neighbour used to organise WWOOF in New Zealand, with about a hundred hosts. Will and Anna started to help out and slowly grew into their roles of WWOOF directors themselves. Will remembered how it used to be: *“It grew steadily, it became 200 farms, then 300, we started doing a little newsletter...still run from home. We spread out bits of paper all over the floor to make the new book, we didn’t have any computers. We got someone to type up each host, glue them on a bit of paper, put all the bits of paper together and then move it off to the printers.”* For the last decade the group has operated over the internet. Will and Anna mediate between the members of the organisation, distribute the host-list and newsletters, and handle complaints. They also take WWOOFers and meet with hosts. Will remembered the first meeting: *“We had our first meeting at [a] farm in Kaiteri, I think early 90’s... It was a good meeting, we had about 50 people coming together and we talked about, I am sure there were the same issues then like”,* Anna joined in: *“nothing has changed”* and Will continued: *“who should be a host, who should not be allowed to be a host and [pause] WWOOFers who are good WWOOFers and WWOOFers who don’t really want to do any work or aren’t interested in learning.”* Will and Anna also stay in contact with other directors, representing WWOOF-NZ at international conferences around the world, as Will stated: *“to share ideas, but just to meet the other people you are dealing with, because we all support each other.”*

Introduction

The above field note extract offers an introduction to a group of WWOOF members who have been overlooked in research about WWOOF so far – the directors. As the narrative illustrates, the WWOOF directors mediate between the members on a local level in personal meetings, on a national level implementing policies, and engage with other directors internationally. The directors have significant influence in shaping their WWOOF organisation and therefore the WWOOF movement. In this chapter I analyse the organisational life of the WWOOF phenomenon, the complex organisational processes and structures, flexibility and growth, and the transformation and moulding of the organisational character. I observe the processes involved in operating a national WWOOF group, the ideals and values influencing the organisational structures, policies and practices. By illustrating how the grassroots level of the WWOOF exchange and the organisational level of the WWOOF group are interlinked I demonstrate the connection between the alternative lifestyle movement of green utopianism and the environmental, socio-economic, and political ideals and green policies of the alternative organisation, based on the morality of sustainability, anti-capitalist notions, and close personal relationships.

The alternative organisation structure of the original WWOOF group is rooted in the counter-cultural context of the 1970s in the UK. With the counter-cultural movement there came a significant increase in cooperative organisations (service, worker, and housing co-ops) based on values of egalitarianism and profit-sharing, as Schwartzman states:

The late 1960s and early 1970s saw an unprecedented number of alternative organizations appear in American society as experiments in “antibureaucratic” ways of organizing social relationships and accomplishing objectives. The communes, collectives, women’s centers, free schools, health clinics, and crisis centers that developed at this time were important organizational manifestations of the radical political and cultural movements of this era. (1989:91)

This development was followed by increasing academic interest, predominantly in sociology and social policy, particularly in the US (Nash and Hopkins 1976, Rothschild 1995 [1979], Mansbridge 1980, Newman 1980, Baker 1995 [1982], Douglas and Wildavsky 1982, Mellor et al 1988, Schwartzman 1989). As these researchers demonstrate, organisation studies provide a useful framework with which to examine the

value system of a social trend by analysing the “organizational manifestations” of a movement (Schwartzman 1989). A comprehensive ethnographic study of the WWOOF movement benefits from the analysis of the organisational structures of WWOOF and the ideals and actions of the organising members. This study of the organisational structure of WWOOF groups and their directors offers insights that extend this body of literature of an anthropology of organisations by providing an ethnographic example for how the ideals of the sustainable lifestyle and the processes of operating an alternative organisation are interlinked.

Obtaining knowledge about the internal processes of the WWOOF groups was difficult. Mosse (2001), who simultaneously worked in and observed the processes in a development organisation, found that investigating organisational procedures can cause tensions, “especially where research draws attention to the weakness of prevailing models, and points to contradictions or the gap between intention and action” (2001:176). The realities of operating a WWOOF group are rarely discussed with outsiders, especially where the reality falls short of their ideals of egalitarianism and altruism. While some WWOOF directors as well as WWOOF documents provided me with “official” statements about the organisational ideals, some (former) directors, volunteer organisers, and ordinary members also voiced critique about actual practices of operating WWOOF groups. Mosse points out how ethnographic work explores and reveals the “complexity of social relationships and the untidy business of practice” (2001:177). This “untidy business” of operating WWOOF groups is the focus of this chapter.

The set-up of the original WWOOF group and the values of the WWOOF philosophy – the ideal of the non-monetary exchange, harmonious relationships, sharing and sustainability – have led to certain expectations among the members how a WWOOF group should operate according to the morality of WWOOF. I argue that the directors try to actively engage in a set of alternative socio-economic and political practices that fulfil what they interpret as the organisational ideals of the WWOOF movement. In order to achieve this aim they need to constantly negotiate the tension between their ideals and reality, between the ethos of the green movement and the necessity of pragmatic decision-making. I begin this chapter by illustrating how the counter-cultural values of equality and cooperation became part of the organisational ethos of the original WWOOF group. The organisational structure will

be analysed in the following four sections regarding the ideals of co-operation, non-profit, inclusiveness, and decentralisation.

I begin by analysing the concept of equality, a taken-for-granted ideal among the members of the WWOOF movement. However, there is a rift between ideals and practice, which seems to be a common observation in research on alternative organisations of the counter-cultural movement (Rothschild 1979, Mansbridge 1980, Newman 1980, Baker 1982, Schwartzman 1989). Jane Mansbridge (1980) was surprised to find that inequality is seemingly accepted in alternative organisations despite their ideology of egalitarianism. I demonstrate how the rhetoric of equality of all members – in the sense of cooperation, decision-making, and election to leadership roles – obscures the realities of pragmatic decision-making processes, hierarchies based on personal relationships, and a general acceptance of inequality.

While stratification and professionalization is often accepted, the not-for-profit nature of WWOOF groups, and the ideals of sharing and sustainability, is of great importance to many members. Non-profit, or the sharing of profits, is one of the principal ideals of WWOOF groups and the original organisational ideal, as discussed in Chapter Two. Rothschild (1995 [1979]) observes that there is an expectation in alternative organisations that members work for little or no money. However, since some WWOOF groups have become privately owned businesses, I ask how members of WWOOF deal with this contradiction. This is the most significant difference between the WWOOF groups, causing conflicts between directors, and receiving critique from many members.

Another aspect of the alternative organisational structure of WWOOF groups is the contested ideal of inclusiveness. While the WWOOF ethos states that everyone is welcome, this seems to apply mostly to those who already share a “green utopian thinking”; an aspect of WWOOF that has been mentioned in Chapter One. Scale can be a controversial aspect in voluntary groups (Douglas and Wildavsky 1982). In the third section of this chapter I investigate the conflicting ideals of WWOOF directors, some promoting inclusiveness, growth, and diversity, while others try to remain a grassroots organisation with a largely homogenous membership of likeminded people. A preference of small-scale is connected to the ideal of the autonomy of individual groups. Hood (2000) states that egalitarian organisations tend to operate in decentralized self-governing units.

Turning to the international network of WWOOF directors, I illustrate why autonomy is paramount for the independent WWOOF groups. Among these groups there is strife, but also mutuality that goes so far as to become a mechanism of social control, capable of excluding groups deemed unsuitable to belong to the network of WWOOF groups.

For clarity of terminology, I begin this chapter by providing a short overview of the “protagonists”, introducing the directors, administrators, and volunteer organisers. They are active members of the WWOOF movement whom other studies on WWOOF have largely overlooked. I then turn to the story behind the name of WWOOF, which has changed three times in its history. The story illustrates how directors shape and influence the WWOOF movement, how they interpret and negotiate their ideals and values, but also how outside influences shape and change WWOOF. The values and ideals introduced in the story of the WWOOF acronym will be the focus of the following four sections in which I discuss the ideals of the cooperative.

Some background on directors, administrators, and volunteer organisers of WWOOF groups

During my field research I met eight WWOOF directors in person, from five different countries (Australia, Austria, Italy, New Zealand, and the UK). As I state in the introduction, I also had e-mail interviews with eight more directors (Bangladesh, Cameroon, Canada, Chile, India, Portugal, Spain, and USA). During my research I was also in contact with and learned about the personal and professional situation of a few more directors (France, Japan, Uganda, WWOOF International, for example). I am therefore acquainted with about half of all the WWOOF directors in the world, as well as number of voluntary organisers and administrators.

The *directors* operate the WWOOF groups on the national level. WWOOF directors are either elected members of a non-profit organisation, or private owners of a business-operated group. The director, or board of directors, is the decision-making body of the group, deciding on policies, inclusion and exclusion of members, and overseeing the

financial matters of the group. They are therefore significant members of WWOOF, committed to, and engaged with, the organisation on the local, national, and international level. It is the directors who are involved with WWOOF long-term; their livelihood may even depend on operating a WWOOF group. Most WWOOF groups produce newsletters and maintain an online forum, and promote WWOOF at events or in magazines. Apart from the administrative work, directors often emphasise personal contact with their members as an important aspect of their work. They hold regular meetings or annual AGMs, organise WWOOF celebrations, and visit WWOOF-hosts. Many directors, like the founder herself, have experience as WWOOFers, as well as hosting WWOOFers.

During my research I observed that WWOOF directors are most often middle-aged, hold tertiary education degrees, or have professional careers. Many groups are headed by a couple, many have children. They are computer-literate and many are fluent in English in addition to their native language. Many have extensive travel experience themselves. Some operate WWOOF voluntarily besides their regular jobs, like the WWOOF-Chile director who owned an organic seed company, and the WWOOF-Cameroon director who was a civil servant. Others take on the administrative work for payment as part of their role as director, like Nadine in Austria, and Hannah in the USA:

I am the founding Board Member of WWOOF-USA, and when we needed someone to manage the program in a part-time situation, I decided to fit in the job along with farming. I wanted to know what [the] organization had grown to become, and to bring it to the next level.¹⁹²

Some directors were also involved in environmental schemes, IFOAM,¹⁹³ development projects, and social work. Others owned and operated their WWOOF groups as full time businesses, like the Australia and New Zealand directors.

The *administrators* are involved in the daily tasks of operating WWOOF groups. The WWOOF-Canada director, who is also administrator, listed her duties:

Assisting members, both Hosts and WWOOFers (volunteers) with coordinating WWOOF-stays: answering emails and phone calls; help using website; monitoring on-line forum; addressing & investigating reports of problems or concerns; approving Host applications; on-site visits to Host properties. Continued research

¹⁹² E-mail interview with WWOOF-USA director, 2010.

¹⁹³ International Federation of Organic Agricultural Movements.

and development of resources & website to assist and improve user experiences. Coordination and collaboration with international group of WWOOF organizations around the world.¹⁹⁴

In some groups administrative staff comes from among the members, in others they are recruited from outside the organisation. Often the administrators become extremely knowledgeable about the operations of a WWOOF group. In voluntary associations this can cause internal conflicts with the elected decision-making body of voluntary directors. One such case will be discussed later in this chapter.

The *voluntary organisers*, often (former) hosts and WWOOFers, help their national organisation in various capacities, for example as regional organisers, contacting new and potential hosts, advising WWOOFers in their region, and promoting WWOOF at local events. In Austria volunteer organisers attend the monthly meetings in the capital city to meet hosts and WWOOFers, hand out the host-list, and answer questions. They also promote WWOOF at various environmental and other events. Current and former WWOOF members can become involved with the organisation as volunteers; the WWOOF-Portugal director wrote: “*One host is the English Reviser, one WWOOFer is the French translator and another WWOOFer is helping as a Lawyer.*”¹⁹⁵ Some hosts take on the role of voluntary organiser for their groups and arrange WWOOF celebrations on their farms. Many members are active online, setting up and maintaining online forums and groups on social networking sites. These volunteer organisers get actively involved with their national groups on the organisational level. However, the majority of regular members only contribute with occasional feedback, contributions to newsletters or online blogs, and mostly with their membership fees. In their research about the environmental group Friends of the Earth, Douglas and Wildavsky (1982) similarly observe about membership involvement that while members’ financial contributions make up a substantial part of the groups’ resources, “[a]t the national level the members play a relatively passive role.”

Many members on the organisational level started out as WWOOFers themselves. Nadine, the current WWOOF-Austria director, contacted Doris, the former director and founder of WWOOF-Austria, to find out about WWOOFing in New Zealand. Returning from her trip,

¹⁹⁴ E-mail interview with WWOOF-Canada director, 2010.

¹⁹⁵ E-mail interview with WWOOF-Portugal director, 2010.

Doris offered her the position of WWOOF director. Doris had been an accountant before starting up WWOOF-Austria after her retirement. But having just celebrated her 70th birthday, Doris decided it was time to hand over her role as director of WWOOF-Austria. Nadine, a young woman in her 30s who was about to give up her office job (also as an accountant) and begin her training as a nutritionist, took up Doris's offer. Anna, the WWOOF-NZ director, knew of many similar cases:

[L]ots of the time it started because these people have been WWOOFing, like I think [the WWOOF-Israel director] said he had been in New Zealand, WWOOFing; and the [US] Americans said they had been... WWOOFing, and they obviously liked the idea, and they got home and said why don't we start one. The guy from Sweden, he had been WWOOFing in New Zealand.

The WWOOF-USA director remembered:

I heard about WWOOFing in New Zealand from a friend back in 1996 while at University. It interested me because I had become very aware of what I was eating and how that made me what I am. I sought out the freshest, organic food possible, and when the opportunity to learn on a farm through WWOOF appeared, I grabbed it”¹⁹⁶

The WWOOF-Portugal director took up the role as director after becoming a WWOOF-host himself in order “[t]o promote WWOOF in Portugal and be in a closer contact with the WWOOF reality.”¹⁹⁷ The roles of directors and administrators are diverse, some voluntary, some paid, depending on the size of the group and their organisational structure, and whether the organisation is a non-profit association or privately owned business. Who makes the decisions and who has access to information, administrators or directors, depends on the specific context of each national group.

In the following section, I investigate the interactions among national directors further by retelling the story of the acronym ‘WWOOF’. The story illustrates how the values of the WWOOF ethos translate to the organisational level, and the significant influence organising members have in shaping WWOOF, nationally and internationally. It also demonstrates how outside forces of governments and legislations shape the national organisations, often in conflict with the ideals of WWOOF. I will return to the issues raised in this story in the following discussion of the rhetoric of the cooperative.

¹⁹⁶ E-mail interview with WWOOF-USA director, 2010.

¹⁹⁷ E-mail interview with WWOOF-Portugal director, 2010.

The story of the WWOOF acronym

The abbreviation ‘WWOOF’ was an invention by Sue, the founder, short for her exchange scheme ‘Working Weekends on Organic Farms’. Sue recalled:

*It occurred to me, right at the outset before I even placed the ad in TIME OUT, that I had better check out the insurance aspect, so I consulted the local Citizens’ Advice Bureau. They said “What’s the name of the organisation?” which I hadn’t even thought about. So I gave it the name of what it was offering: WORKING WEEKENDS ON ORGANIC FARMS. Which was quite good because it was something you could pronounce and was slightly funny.*¹⁹⁸

As discussed in Chapter One, ‘Organic Farms’ was always an element of the WWOOF organisation that has not changed over the last forty years; the connection with the organic movement has remained explicit. While WWOOF-UK was still called ‘Working Weekends’ and organised compulsory “trial weekends” for new members, this did not appeal to the first English WWOOFers who travelled overseas. As international travellers they wished to stay longer than just for a weekend, and to have an open access to the organisation, having a less exclusive attitude towards membership eligibility.

WWOOF-Australia, founded ten years after the original WWOOF group in 1981, was the first to change the acronym to ‘Willing Workers’ soon after the group was established;¹⁹⁹ WWOOF-NZ and WWOOF-UK followed their example. Sue observed this development: “NZ and other WWOOFs changed the meaning to WILLING WORKERS ON ORGANIC FARMS because their greater distances meant it wasn’t just weekendening, and UK WWOOF followed suit for the same reason.”²⁰⁰ This first change of the acronym is a detail of WWOOF history not well known among the members, not even among the national directors, since it predates almost all WWOOF groups except the UK, New Zealand, and Australia.

Seymour (2007b), a former WWOOF-UK director, reflects on the meaning of the new name and how it revealed the purpose and moral beliefs of WWOOF, elaborating that, “including the adjective ‘willing’ indicated that the helpers were not seeking to maximise compensation for the disutility of their work” (2007b:17). While Seymour interprets the

¹⁹⁸ E-mail interview with the founder of WWOOF, 2010.

¹⁹⁹ <http://www.woof.com.au/> [1/11/2011].

²⁰⁰ E-mail interview with the founder of WWOOF, 2010.

name in regard to the non-monetary nature of the WWOOF exchange, others expect an altruistic attitude from volunteers. Nicole, a self-sufficient gardener and WWOOF-host in New Zealand, found the emphasis on the word ‘willingness’ particularly important as she expected WWOOFers to work voluntarily without having to be encouraged. ‘Working Weekends’ and ‘Willing Workers’ both reflect the founder’s original idea of a hands-on experience of “country life” for the volunteer. This name remained with WWOOF for twenty years.

The second name change, to ‘World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms’, occurred during the first international WWOOF conference in England in 2000. At this time there existed twelve WWOOF groups, situated in North-Western Europe (Austria, Denmark, Germany, Switzerland, UK), the Pacific (Australia, Japan,²⁰¹ New Zealand), West Africa (Ghana, Nigeria, Togo²⁰²) and North America (Canada).²⁰³ At the conference, the attending delegates²⁰⁴ agreed that the name of WWOOF should be changed, while again keeping the acronym. They were concerned about international WWOOFing and immigration laws. Sue, the founder of WWOOF, reflected: *“Possibly some UK immigration officials did not comprehend WWOOF’s altruistic volunteer ethos and construed from our then name (Willing Workers) that WWOOF was acting as a migrant worker agency.”*²⁰⁵ This led to the dropping of the word ‘worker’ in the name, in order to make access to all countries easier for foreign WWOOFers. The problem was first raised at the first international WWOOF conference by several directors and organisers from Africa.

As the papers and minutes of the first international WWOOF conference reveal, the issue arose even before the conference began, when two delegates from Africa had trouble obtaining visas for the UK. Indeed, the WWOOF-Ghana director could not attend the conference, but sent his conference paper, writing:

²⁰¹ WWOOF-NZ, WWOOF-Australia, and WWOOF-Japan, who share distinct features, such as high numbers of members, operating as commercial businesses, and attracting large numbers of budget tourists as WWOOFers, are sometimes referred to as ‘the Pacific groups’ within the international network of WWOOF directors; they also collaborate on many of the international issues; the director of WWOOF-Japan is Australian.

²⁰² Group dissolved.

²⁰³ Not counting WWOOF-Hawai’i operated by WWOOF-Canada and the South Korean travel agency calling itself WWOOF-Korea at the time.

²⁰⁴ Representing either national WWOOF groups, or representing groups of hosts without a national WWOOF group, like France.

²⁰⁵ Pier 2011, interview.

We agree with the current aims of the UK, and have them as our aims too. We also agree that they need re-wording for Immigration Department purposes. If this is not effected, no volunteer from Africa could ever travel overseas to WWOOF. And no volunteer or host has had the opportunity to travel out since I started the WWOOF programme in Ghana, six years ago. This makes WWOOFing a one-way programme. (Conference Paper 3: Ghana, 2000)

The WWOOF-Togo director, who did attend the conference, similarly stated that visa regulations prevented African volunteers from WWOOFing “in north countries” (Conference Paper 6: Togo, 2000). It was agreed that this situation was not in accordance with the WWOOF ethos of inclusion and therefore the word ‘worker’ was abandoned. Only WWOOF-Australia has kept the old version of ‘Willing Workers’ since WWOOF is an officially acknowledged volunteer exchange scheme in Australia where volunteers do not require a work visa in order to WWOOF (Lipman and Murphy 2012).

At the time of the first conference, the practice of volunteers WWOOFing in foreign countries had become commonplace and all national WWOOF groups experienced WWOOFers being turned away at the border because of immigration legislations and issues concerning work permits. The change was meant to erase the connection with ‘work’ in order to avoid conflicts with work and immigration legislation. In their report undertaken for WWOOF-UK, Chris Smaje and Cordelia Rowlatt (2003) state about the second name change:

This, in turn, would help to move the organisation away from the possible perception that it was a method of recruiting cheap agricultural labour (indeed WWOOF UK and other overseas WWOOF organisations experience ongoing problems with immigration authorities who sometimes turn away overseas WWOOFers from non-EU countries or countries with which there are no reciprocal working visa arrangements for students; WWOOF’s name was changed...in order to signal the distinction). (2003:25)

However, the change had no effect on immigration laws or their application. In many countries, such as New Zealand for example, a work permit is still required for WWOOFers. Therefore, certain WWOOFers have easier access to some countries, like persons eligible for working holiday visas or EU-citizens within the EU. This has a significant influence on who the WWOOFers are and where they are allowed to go.

The “international scope” of the WWOOF movement is a matter of perspective. In my research I observe that the vast majority of members (hosts and WWOOFers) are from

Europe, Australia/New Zealand, North America, and increasingly South East Asia. WWOOF, like the back-to-the-land movement, is a Western phenomenon and trying to reproduce the concept in other contexts often proves difficult. Therefore, WWOOF might not be quite as international as the name would imply. While talking about the ethnic background of WWOOF-hosts in New Zealand, Will and Anna, the WWOOF-NZ directors, reflected more generally:

Anna: You do get kind of the feeling that WWOOFing is very European, it's an Engl- [stops] a Western idea really. If you think about it, how many Africans are there WWOOFing?

Will: Two of them? [laughs]

Anna: It's a very Western idea, volunteering, it's very Western... but we do get a lot of Israelis, they know about that because of the Kibbutz system.²⁰⁶

Like the WWOOF-Ghana director, they have come to realise that WWOOFing is often “a one-way programme” (Conference Paper 3: Ghana, 2000). Nonetheless, the directors agreed on ‘World Wide’ as the new name, referring to the spreading of WWOOF to almost fifty countries by then. For Seymour, the second name change “neatly encompassed the, now, international scope of the movement and the inclusion of ‘opportunity’ implies advantageous conditions for interaction on organic farms without stating the nature of the interaction” (2007b:17).

The rhetoric of the “worldwide opportunities” obscures the reality of WWOOF groups outside Europe, North America, and Australia/New Zealand. Other groups can find it difficult to implement the policies developed by Western WWOOF groups. The director of WWOOF-Cameroon wrote: “*Here in Cameroon we initially had problems because in our own part of the world labour is no major problem; so, we do not ask our WWOOF hosts to pay membership fees but WWOOFers pay 48 dollars.*”²⁰⁷ Hosts cannot be asked to pay membership fees where there is no demand for extra-help. WWOOF-Bulgaria, by contrast, avoided fees for WWOOFers since “volunteering” on farms has a distinct history in Bulgaria: “*Joining WWOOF in Bulgaria has to be free and easy – the smallest of hurdles will prevent people participating. ‘Volunteering’ on farms, at weekends, was compulsory towards the end of the communist era*” (quoted in Seymour 2007a:25). Volunteering is thus not a “Western idea” but rather the concept depends on the specific context (Lewis

²⁰⁶ Interview with WWOOF-NZ directors, New Zealand: 2010.

²⁰⁷ E-mail conversation with WWOOF-Cameroon director, 2010.

1999). The policies that work for WWOOF groups in the West are not necessarily applicable in every other context. However, as WWOOF groups are autonomous organisations, each can develop guidelines that best suit their own situation.

The new name for WWOOF was not collectively adopted and many still believe ‘Willing Workers’ to be the official name of the organisation. Some members rejected the “international scope” of WWOOF in favour of remaining a small-scale movement, as Smaje and Rowlatt (2003) report. Some of them suggested the name change be retracted, avoiding “the ‘World Wide’ designation in ‘WWOOF’ so as to encourage a more local focus” (2003:29). Indeed, there are WWOOF-hosts in the UK who explicitly stated that overseas WWOOFers are not welcome because of the environmental implications of long-distance travel.²⁰⁸ At the WWOOF conference in 2000 the delegates agreed that each group should choose their own name, while keeping the acronym, as ‘WWOOF’ was too well known in public to be changed: “It was decided that we should definitely keep the acronym which has passed into the language of a generation of travellers. Individual organisations can interpret it as they chose [sic]” (Conference Report 2000:14). Many WWOOF groups followed the suggestion to choose their own version of ‘WWOOF’. Doris, the founder of WWOOF-Austria, opted for the alternative version ‘We’re Welcome on Organic Farms’, a personal preference according to Doris.²⁰⁹ The directors of WWOOF-NZ stopped translating the acronym altogether and instead use the slogan ‘Living and learning on organic farms’. Both versions emphasise hosts welcoming WWOOFers to live on the farm; the words ‘Organic Farms’ remained unchanged.

Creative engagement with the acronym is common among the members and many variations have sprung up over time, playing with the themes of WWOOF. Immediately after the first international conference, some of the attending national directors from several countries went on a WWOOF tour around England. While travelling, they found two new alternative versions for the acronym: ‘Wet Walks On Organic Farms’ and ‘Work! Work! Or Off the Farm!’ (Conference Report 2000) were two suggestions, reflecting the reality of potential exploitation of WWOOFers by their hosts, and challenging nostalgic notions of the idyllic farm and family life. It is a common source of amusement among all members, hosts and WWOOFers, to find new versions for the acronym. During my stay at

²⁰⁸ Field notes, England: 2011.

²⁰⁹ Interview with former WWOOF-Austria director, Austria: 2009.

Nicole's self-sufficient garden in New Zealand, River, the US-American WWOOFer, redefined WWOOF as 'Willing Weeders on Organic Farms', referring to the often monotonous hand-labour, a task that does not always live up to WWOOFers' expectations of farm life and learning about organic farming. Engelsted (2011) observes that this joke is well known among the WWOOF community in US-America. The wordplays hint on the conflict between the original idea of WWOOF as an idyllic country escape, and the realities of organic farm work and the WWOOF exchange. In the following sections, I ask how WWOOF groups are structured in regard to the values of cooperation and face-to-face relationships, non-profit and sustainability, inclusiveness, and decentralisation, analysing what place the directors have within this structure. With this I will demonstrate the connection between the alternative lifestyle movement of green utopianism and the ideals of the alternative organisation structure.

***“Owned by its members”* – The rhetoric of the cooperative**

In the beginning, Sue, the founder of WWOOF, operated WWOOF by herself for a year and a half. When she left England to travel around the world, the organisation of WWOOF was handed over to a group of enthusiastic members. This was the first organisational structure of WWOOF, conceptualised as a kind of non-profit “service cooperative” of shared management, facilitating the WWOOF exchange:

WWOOF became a co-operative when I knew I wanted to travel abroad and invited all the (35) members to a meeting to discuss what should happen. About 15 people came along and it was then that the administration was split into several people's jobs...But the question of pay for the organisers just never arose as I hadn't been making any money from it. We just wanted it to happen. Running the Main Office received no pay for quite a few years until the job became much more time consuming and demanding...When I got back after my travels, I re-joined the team of organisers and used to organise the meetings, etc., co-ordinate PR and things, and any trouble-shooting. We still had a very good ethos where at the annual meeting anyone could make a suggestion and perhaps get the job of getting it off the ground to see if it worked or not.²¹⁰

²¹⁰ E-mail conversation with the founder of WWOOF, 2012.

This was the beginning of WWOOF-UK as based on the ideals of a cooperative organisation, open to all members, decentralised, and based on a division of labour. It was the first time the members dealt with questions of leadership and authority, of how to distribute rights and responsibilities, wages and profits.

It never occurred to Sue that WWOOF would grow as it has, from about thirty members to an estimated 90,000 signed-up members today.²¹¹ Nonetheless, even when WWOOF began to spread around the world, Sue still kept to the rhetoric of the cooperative as the ideal model of organising WWOOF. At the second international gathering of WWOOF directors Sue reminded the delegates of the original values: “She urged WWOOF groups to avoid appearing paternalistic, but to develop structures that would encourage input and inspiration from the members and create an ethos of worker-owned co-operative” (Conference Report 2006: no page number). But why was the cooperative the ideal organisational form? In her discussion of workers’ collectives in the USA, Katherine Newman (1980) demonstrates how the alternative organisation is rooted in the counter-culture values of the late 1960s. Mary Mellor, Janet Hannah, and John Stirling (1988) add to this a class distinction: “Those who formed the alternative cooperatives were generally young, middle class and well educated” (1988:39). The environmental movement also has some roots in the counter-cultural movement, and the cooperative organisation structure has been adopted by many environmental organisations as the most appropriate organisational model. Hood (2000) points out that the green movement derives “from 1960s New Left ideas about restructuring society through anti-bureaucratic, democratic forms of organization for all human relationships, including government” (2000:135-136). Mellor et al (1988) critically analyse how “the virtues of mutual aid and cooperation” become central to the environmental movement, as “the most appropriate form of economic structure for an ecological society” (1988:153), including decentralisation and non-hierarchical structures.

The ecologists’ idea of cooperation, Mellor et al argue, invokes a nostalgia for the past and the virtues of “exotic others”, praising a “golden age” of cooperation and natural living. “There is a tendency in the new thinking to uncritically attach the cooperative principle to a presumed ‘new holism’ of a communal and ecological lifestyle” (1988:154). Sue

²¹¹ WWOOF-document ‘WWOOF Around the world in 2011’.

described WWOOF as owned by its members, drawing on the metaphor of the extended family:

Oh, WWOOF is like an extended family, like when you go to weddings and christenings and funerals, you meet your large, you meet all the branches of the family, and that always makes me think of that. Hatches, matches, and dispatches that is when you meet all your greater family, you see. WWOOF always makes me think of that, it's like having an extended family all over the world, really. I think the whole organic movement is a bit like that, really, but WWOOF is a bit more specific. I always feel it's owned by its members, it isn't really, but I always feel it.²¹²

Sue's description resembles the rhetoric of the shared household of the WWOOF exchange and its 'kinship of choice'.²¹³ It is the ideal of the cooperative, egalitarian organisational structure and profit sharing that fits with the ideology of the environmental movement of a sustainable lifestyle.

However, despite the counter-cultural rhetoric of the cooperative, there is also a more conservative element to WWOOF. Many WWOOF groups rather belong among the clubs, societies, and associations of the bourgeoisie that combine environment, leisure activities, volunteering, and education (like the bird watching societies and mountaineering clubs for example, rooted in the conservation movement, see Douglas and Wildavsky 1982). Many WWOOF groups are far less concerned with the "ethos of the cooperative", developing pragmatic decision-making processes and leadership roles. I will investigate this development further in the following section. Today, most WWOOF groups are non-profit societies, though a few are privately owned businesses. The UK group is a non-profit making company (Ltd.) overseen by a board of voluntary directors and the administrative work subcontracted to an external office; WWOOF-Austria is a registered non-profit association with an elected board and one director who is also the administrator; WWOOF-NZ is a privately owned family business. In the following four sections I analyse the processes and tensions of how WWOOF groups engage with the original ideals of egalitarianism, non-profit, inclusiveness, and decentralisation in practice.

²¹² Interview with the founder of WWOOF, England: 2011.

²¹³ See Chapter Three and the discussion of the WWOOF household as 'kinship of choice'.

Equality and cooperation

Sue, a reader of *Communes Magazine* and secretary of *Resurgence Magazine*, decided to set up her back-to-the-land venture as an alternative organisation, based on consensual decision-making processes and equal opportunities of involvement for all members: *“When I started WWOOF, my approach was very inclusive and ‘Round Table’, and I invited agenda items, suggestions and involvement from all the members. I personally felt this was very productive.”*²¹⁴ This organisational approach was popular among alternative organisations of the time. Two themes, according to Newman, were important to alternative organisation: the realisation of alternative ways of life and the preference of collectivism over individualism (1980:145).

The people who formed workers’ collectives during this period were often “refugees” from the bureaucratic worlds of business, of college, and of government-sponsored social service. What the so-called “countercultural” milieu meant to them was an opportunity to engage in meaningful work, free from the trappings of time cards, bosses, rule books, and formal attire. In short, it was bureaucracy (among other things) that they wanted to leave behind. (1980:145-146)

In particular, as Hood points out, it was a “conscious reaction against Weberian hierarchist principles of bureaucracy, particularly impersonal relations, hierarchy of authority, technical competence, and specialization” (2000:136).

Sue remembered how anti-bureaucratic ways of organising, face-to-face relationships, and consensual decision making were central to the organisation of WWOOF in the beginning:

*When I started it, we used to have more, we had fewer people of course, fewer members, it was more communal, submitting agendas and discussing new agendas and working our way through all things. And people said why don’t we do this, I have got a good idea and I try this for you and see if it works. It was more of that among all the members than there is now, so it’s bigger now...I suppose it was inevitable when the WWOOF groups get bigger that you probably have to have a sort of, a body of people who run it and the others don’t get involved much.*²¹⁵

The small group of enthusiastic members grew into a large organisation and problems arose concerning organisation and decision-making processes. This development resulted

²¹⁴ E-mail conversation with the founder of WWOOF, 2010.

²¹⁵ Interview with the founder of WWOOF, England: 2011.

in the formalisation, professionalization, and stratification of the group, changing the roles of the organisers.

As the story of the acronym illustrated, outside forces can play a significant role in formalising organisations; demands by state, policies, insurance, and banks influence the organisation's form and development. Schwartzman (1980) calls this the bureaucratic 'paper context', "its regulations and policies often dictate or constrain the actions of a center and its staff" (1980:46). Individual WWOOF groups have handled this process in different ways; generally, state government policies are observed as much as necessary and often ignored as far as (legally) possible. Doris had to formalise WWOOF-Austria early on in order to apply for funding:

*1996 hab ich's dann gegründet als Teil von WWOOF-Deutschland, gleich so, ohne Verein, ohne alles...Und dann hab ich wollen ein bißl Fundraising machen und dann habens gleich gefragt: "Ja ist das Ihre Privatgeschichte oder wie?" Ja, da muss ich einen Verein haben.*²¹⁶

1996 I founded it, as part of WWOOF-Germany, just like that, without an association or anything...And then I wanted to do some fundraising, and then they asked me: "Is this your private business or something?" Right, so I need an association.

WWOOF-NZ became a company: "In 2002²¹⁷ we saw that we needed to protect the name WWOOF, so we...what we did do at that stage was formal... just a, what do you call it, just a registered company, we call that in New Zealand."²¹⁸

Outside influences are not the only factors leading to the formalisation of voluntary groups. The need for professionalization also resulted in the installation of formal procedures and policies. As Schwartzman states, after the early phase of enthusiasm and commitment many groups go through a process of "formalization for the sake of services" (1989:93). The same argument was brought forth by some WWOOF directors who favoured a more pragmatic attitude towards operating their groups. Facilitating the smooth operating of the service of the WWOOF exchange was deemed more important than large

²¹⁶ Interview with former WWOOF-Austria director, Austria: 2009.

²¹⁷ HelpX was founded in 2001, <http://www.helpx.net/about.asp> [5/10/2012]; the WWOOF-NZ directors had to take legal action against the owner to prevent the use of the term 'WWOOF' on this website; in 2002 WWOOF-UK became WWOOF Ltd., launching WWOOF.org; see Chapter Five on the conflict between the groups.

²¹⁸ Interview with WWOOF-NZ directors, New Zealand: 2010.

organisational structures and member involvement in decision-making processes. In his report on the role of the voluntary organisers in the UK, Smaje (2006) critically points out that WWOOF mainly functions as what he calls a “dating agency”, facilitating the contact between hosts and WWOOFers but not fostering relationships among the organic movement more generally, as the WWOOF aims proclaim. This illustrates the dilemma of the directors who find themselves between the ideals of the alternative organisation and the reality of operating a WWOOF group. Rebecca Gray (2008), studying Wellington’s volunteer sector, suggests that there is a wider trend within the voluntary sector where volunteer groups experience increasing formalisation and professionalization enabling them to facilitate services. This trend, she states, is seen as controversial, perceived to challenge the fundamental values of volunteering, turning community development into service providers (2008:56).

Formalisation and professionalization can lead to stratification among the members in voluntary organisations. Knowledge and skills translate into power, where the division of labour leads to specialisation of knowledge and skills (Nash and Hopkins 1976). Rothschild (1995 [1979]) states, that collectivist organisations deliberately avoid the monopolisation of knowledge as an “effective instrument of power in organizations” (1995 [1979]:460). Newman (1980) argues that this is more an ideal than reality in collectivist organisations. The paid staff, undertaking the day-to-day business of administration, accumulate knowledge about the organisation that the official decision-making body of directors lacks. The administrators effectively become the decision-making authority due to their specialist knowledge of the operations (1980:155).

Such a development indeed occurred within WWOOF-UK, where the sole administrator began to dominate processes within the group, overshadowing the board of elected voluntary directors. The administrator was a paid staff member who was recruited from “outside” of the organisation, and who managed the group on her own for many years. Nancy, a former WWOOF-UK director, stated: *“for a start, all the knowledge is with her, we were very risky relying totally on this one person”*²¹⁹. Newman (1980) observes a similar development among workers’ collectives: “The paid staff, present on a daily basis, were better informed about the activities of the collective than the volunteer members

²¹⁹ Interview with WWOOF-Italy director and former WWOOF-UK director, England: 2011.

could possibly be” (1980:154). Schwartzman, drawing on Newman’s findings, states that in alternative organisations such processes “led to emergent stratification (e.g. between volunteer and full-time staff) and also undermined egalitarian processes of decision making that the group had adopted” (Schwartzman 1989:92). The WWOOF-UK administrator was “made to leave” when no new arrangement could be found that would distribute the workload between several administrators, and return the decision-making powers to the elected directors. Rothschild states that in alternative organisations, “[e]xpertise is considered not the sacred property of the individual, but an organizational resource” (1995 [1979]:460).

Despite the founder’s rhetoric of the cooperative, WWOOF groups (including the UK) had a rather pragmatic attitude towards leadership. Nancy, a former WWOOF-UK director, started out as a volunteer for WWOOF-UK, helping with the organisation. She remembered her election to become one of the directors: *“really, there was never any competition”*;²²⁰ more positions had to be filled than there were volunteers. Doris, the former WWOOF-Austria director, faced a similar situation of lacking participation of other members in the organisation of WWOOF. She could only fill the required eight positions of the board by promising they would not actually have to take on any responsibilities. A small number of committed volunteers are left with running the organisation. WWOOF-NZ solved this problem by becoming a company: *“The feedback from the hosts is that they didn’t want, when we talked about forming a society or something, they said ‘ah, that just means a lot more meetings and it becomes bureaucratic, we want WWOOF to stay very simple.”*²²¹ The simple solution was to form a company that provided services for paying members, relieving the ordinary members from their obligations towards a cooperative organisation.

There may be a parallel between the ideal of the WWOOF household, of harmonious relationships, sharing, and equality among all members, transferred to the operation of the WWOOF group. However, like the WWOOF household has, in reality, clear hierarchies, so does the WWOOF group. The head of the group is often the sole decision-making

²²⁰ Conversation with former WWOOF-UK director, field notes, England: 2011.

²²¹ Interview with WWOOF-NZ directors, New Zealand: 2010. To start a society in New Zealand the following requirements have to be met: An application form (signed by 15 members, with signatures witnessed by someone who has not signed the application form as a member); a copy of the society’s rules certified by an officer or solicitor of the society; a fee of NZ\$102.22.
<http://www.societies.govt.nz/cms/incorporated-societies/starting-an-incorporated-society> [18/11/2012].

authority. Andrea Baker (1995 [1982]) describes the formation of elites in egalitarian organisations: “Taking the initiative in establishing the organizations and contributing resources of money, time, and knowledge, leaders create a lasting pool of organizational ‘credit’ (Sills et al, 1980), which discourages challenges from appreciative members” (1995 [1982]:478). Doris never believed in the decentralisation of her organisation, feeling that this would only lead to chaos and possibly impede the smooth operations of her WWOOF group. She was not so much an elected director than the undisputed leader of the group. A voluntary organiser pointed out: “[*The board members’ names are only on the paper; it’s a one-woman-operation - with her it works or it breaks.*”²²² It may have been Doris’ personality, in that she was used to an independent lifestyle and making decisions on her own. She referred to WWOOF-Austria as “her” group, and as she observed herself, did not appreciate divergent opinions in regard to how her group should be operated.

Mansbridge (1980) made a similar observation regarding the ideal of equality in her study on workplace democracy in a crisis intervention centre in the USA. While the members proclaimed a strong commitment towards political equality among all staff, hierarchies did nonetheless develop. Despite this, Mansbridge reports that staff felt comfortable with the situation, arguing that everyone could have access to power if they wanted to. They felt that the people at the centre represented the ideals of everyone in the organisation and therefore could be trusted with authority. The homogeneity of the group was the basis of mutual trust in the centralised leadership.

When Doris decided to retire from her position, she installed Nadine, who was known to her as a WWOOFer, as her successor. This procedure of informal succession did not find approval with all members, and Simon, an Austrian goat farmer, commented with sarcasm: “*Very democratic! She just appoints someone from among her own friends.*”²²³ However, no one ever challenged the decision and Nadine became the new director. The ideals of “anti-bureaucratic ways of organising” seem to foster an organisational elite that is connected through personal ties rather than elected through democratic processes. Rothschild (1995 [1979]) observes similar incidents in collectivist organisations, stating that “their selection criteria explicitly emphasize friendship networks, political values, and personality traits” (1995 [1979]:450; see also Baker 1995 [1982]). Doris searched a long

²²² Interview with voluntary organiser, Austria: 2009.

²²³ Conversation with WWOOF-host, field notes, Austria: 2011.

time for her successor. The primary attribute she was looking for was a likeminded person “with the right attitude” regarding the ethos of WWOOF. About Nadine, she said: “*Yes, [she] is exactly right, she is like a daughter, so similar to me, her behaviour and everything, exactly the same as me.*”²²⁴ The current owner-directors of WWOOF-Australia and New Zealand gained their positions much in the same way, through personal ties with the previous owner, in the case of Australia, and the previous voluntary director in the case of New Zealand.

Rothschild (1995 [1979]) observes that in collectivist organisations friendship and commitment to the organisational goals, as well as work experience in the field, were stated as relevant attributes for candidates applying for positions. Smaje and Rowlatt’s (2003) consultancy report for WWOOF-UK hints at the possibility of discrimination and exclusion of members in the process of election. In theory, anyone could get involved in operating the WWOOF organisation, but as Smaje and Rowlatt (2003) state:

At present, the process of election to a directorship is somewhat unclear. It may not be appropriate for it to be excessively formalised, but we believe that the process should be transparent and clearly understood by WWOOF members, so that there is no room for implicit discrimination (2003:8).

Douglas and Wildavsky (1982), who studied the environmental organisation Friends of the Earth, observe a similar organisational structure of formally democratic procedures but in fact “little opportunity for members to participate actively in national decision making. At the local level it is loose and decentralized, but at the national level the leadership continues as a small, active elite” (1982:133).

Formally egalitarian and inclusive organisations can, in practice, be operated by a small group of what Douglas and Wildavsky (1982) term “big-interest members”. This development of charismatic leadership and oligarchies is frequently observed in studies on egalitarian alternative organisations. In her case study of leadership in a lesbian-feminist alternative organisation in the US, Baker observes how “some individuals inevitably perceived as more assertive and effective came to exert a disproportionate influence on group actions, giving rise to the charge of ‘elitism’, so dreaded among radicals denouncing oligarchy” (1995 [1982]:467). In reality, personal attributes, rhetoric and other skills, as

²²⁴ Interview with former WWOOF-Austria director, Austria: 2009.

well as time and resources determine who may be part of the elite group. Considering that the members of WWOOF are largely farmers, bound to their place and short on time, and international travellers, the pool of possible board members of the non-profit WWOOF associations is relatively small. This also explains to some extent the lack of participation of the members in their groups.

The question of leadership was, in my observation however, of little concern to the members of WWOOF who seemed to largely accept stratification within their groups. They emphasised anti-bureaucratic ways of organising WWOOF groups as more important, trusting that the centre adhered to the WWOOF ethos, with the members' best interest in mind. The ideal of cooperation remains; all WWOOF groups offer opportunities for members to get involved with the organisation on some level. What seemed to be of much greater concern to the members was the non-profit character of WWOOF groups.

Non-profit and the ideal of sustainability

In the beginning WWOOF was conceptualised as a service cooperative where the members who use its service also facilitate the operating of the organisation. Coordination and administration was done as a "labour of love" for no pay. Sue remembered that right from the beginning members' financial input was necessary:

*At first I charged a small amount just for people to go on a WWOOF weekend. However, I soon realised that if people kept receiving the newsletter it would need to be paid for, so instead of charging for weekend WWOOFs I charged a modest (infinitesimal by today's standards!) annual subscription, so that WWOOF was not running at a loss with me footing the bill. After all, everything costs money to run!*²²⁵

Keeping the membership fees as low as possible has remained part of the organisational ethos. Profit-making and money issues are a sensitive topic for many WWOOF groups. Sue said she never considered the WWOOF exchange to involve payment,²²⁶ either by the host for the WWOOFer's labour, or the WWOOFer paying the host for a farm stay

²²⁵ E-mail conversation with the founder of WWOOF, 2012.

²²⁶ See Chapter Two.

holiday. The concept of the WWOOF exchange was based on the ideals of mutual help and sharing.

The members applied the ideal of sustainability to the operation of WWOOF groups, with all members working towards the benefit of the group and without taking away a personal profit. “WWOOF groups, in the main, conduct their business in the money economy but they sell their basic service, producing and maintaining a host list, at a low a fee as is possible irrespective of ‘market opportunities’” (Seymour 2007a:7). The members see the group as operating for the benefit of all, without exploiting people or environment. In her report, Seymour observes about national WWOOF directors:

WWOOF groups, by and large, are concerned with the broad spectrum of environmental and social justice issues. Most were striving to minimise their consumption of the earth’s resources by using recycled paper... and low energy light bulbs. The Japanese WWOOF office even boasts a compost toilet and has taken a leading role in a local recycling initiative. Relatively few WWOOF groups employ more than an individual coordinator but those that did were frequently providing employment in a rural area, where job opportunities were limited, and evidenced a high level of consideration for the welfare of their employees. (2007a:19)

WWOOF groups are ideally operated sustainably: ecologically (using solar energy operated computers and eco-friendly printing), socially (offering rural employment opportunities and fair treatment of employees), and economically, without exploitation of environment or people.²²⁷

Rothschild (1995 [1979]) states that in alternative organisations in the US, the general expectation is to work for little or no money: “Because material gain is not part of the acceptable vocabulary of motives in these organizations, public discussion of such motives is suppressed” (1995 [1979]:451). Rothschild observes that work for alternative organisations is constructed as a “labour of love”, generating a high level of moral commitment based on shared values and personal relationships rather than on material benefits. Mellor et al (1988) add about the alternative organisation: “Profitability was seen as taking second place to democratic control and the nature of the product or service” (1988:40; see also Schwartzman 1989). Taking a profit, as discussed in Chapter Two, was

²²⁷ See Chapter One on the discussion of sustainability.

understood as selfishly benefitting at the expense of others, while the ideals of the ecological lifestyle emphasise sharing.

Groups have grown significantly since the beginning of WWOOF; in many cases national groups need to employ administrative staff to handle the day-to-day business of running an organisation with hundreds or even thousands of members. Because of this development, questions emerged about wages for directors and administrators, as well as the profit-making ability of WWOOF groups. Sue wrote to me:

*It occurred to me this morning over the washing-up that there is another aspect of the WWOOF admin template you might find interesting:
Although (I believe) some WWOOFs are run purely as commercial businesses, as far as WWOOF UK is concerned - and no doubt some others - there remains an element of unpaid voluntary work: as far as I am aware, although our Executives are paid, our small group of Directors, who meet quarterly to make the overriding policy decisions, are not paid for their work - just expenses refunded.²²⁸*

The nature of WWOOF as a non-profit organisation remained paramount for Sue, and for the organisational ethos.

WWOOF directors frequently find themselves in a moral dilemma, wishing to remain economically independent and sustainable, paying a fair wage to their administrators (a particular moral dilemma where the director is also the administrator paying wages to him or herself), and being expected to share their profits, if there are any, with their members (usually in form of low membership fees). Leon, the WWOOF-Italy director pointed out:

I mean, WWOOF organisations can make money...WWOOF-Australia certainly was big enough to employ people, so, if it wasn't a personal income, it was a livelihood, it was a job, running. Where, it was a job for WWOOF-UK but it was much smaller; it was...people put themselves out a lot I think to run WWOOF-UK. And I suppose they were very passionate more about the principles and things.²²⁹

As discussed in Chapter Two, many members understand money as a destructive force, alienating people and preventing the establishment of personal relationships. Equal to the non-monetary voluntary WWOOF exchange, the organisation of national WWOOF groups is expected to be a “labour of love”; the altruistic motive is imperative. Leon contemplated

²²⁸ E-mail conversation with the founder of WWOOF, 2012.

²²⁹ Interview with WWOOF-Italy director and former WWOOF-UK director, England: 2011.

that being the WWOOF-Italy director was the only altruistic thing he ever did in his life: “and I really got into it; it felt good to do something where people benefited from it.”²³⁰

I have already mentioned the story of the WWOOF-UK administrator who was “made to leave” earlier in this chapter. Nancy, a former WWOOF-UK director, remembered:

*Her salary was based on a proportion of membership, so for every member she got a two pound fee or whatever it was to cover the admin, and that was how we did it. And she was very very good, she was really dedicated to it. But the membership went up and up... she would get a larger salary every year, and it was a huge amount of work. I mean she would work seven days a week, twelve hours a day, but she was taking a lot of money out of this. And we said this isn't [pause]. For a start, all the knowledge is with her, we were very risky relying totally on this one person and we didn't think it was right with WWOOF that she should be getting a lot of money.*²³¹

The decision to change administration procedures was justified with the administrators' large earnings that were not in line with the spirit of WWOOF as a non-profit organisation. (Although, as discussed above, the administrator's leading role also undermined the position of the voluntary directors, causing conflicts between them).

Leon, the WWOOF-Italy director told me two stories in an attempt to illustrate which WWOOF group had the “right attitude” and which one did not, even though both WWOOF groups in these stories were privately owned businesses. As mentioned earlier, Leon interpreted his own involvement with WWOOF as an altruistic activity, which for him was paramount. Of the former WWOOF-Canada director he said:

*He is a really nice guy; he embodies all the philosophies of WWOOF... At the 2000 meeting he met the WWOOF organiser from Kenya, who is a priest, who runs an orphanage. WWOOF-Canada has been the main financial supporter of this orphanage, because of the personality running it.*²³²

Leon then told me a second story, about the new directors of WWOOF-France, commenting: “[They] were living in a rented flat, just outside Paris when they started WWOOF; they now have a four bedroom house in the country.” I pondered over this and commented that nothing can stop anyone from running WWOOF for profit and Leon responded: “No [pause] except, WWOOF is about non-monetary exchange, people's

²³⁰ Conversation with WWOOF-Italy director, field notes, England: 2011.

²³¹ Interview with WWOOF-Italy director and former WWOOF-UK director, England: 2011.

²³² Interview with WWOOF-Italy director and former WWOOF-UK director, England: 2011.

goodwill, you know.” There was a lot of context missing to these two stories, perhaps on purpose, or perhaps Leon did not know the particulars. In either case, the purpose was to illustrate the difference between right and wrong behaviour according to the morality of the non-profit nature of WWOOF. The questions for the members of the WWOOF movement are whether the profit was acquired due to a profit-oriented attitude of the owner, or an “accidental” outcome of a successfully operating group, sharing their profits with the members or give it away for charity, thereby not compromising their altruistic intent.

A New Zealand WWOOF-host felt that WWOOF-NZ operating as a privately owned business was a moral dilemma: *“as soon as you turn something into a business, it’s all about the profit.”*²³³ Many members, hosts and WWOOFers as well as national directors, see this as conflicting with the ideas of WWOOF, in particular the non-monetary ethos eminent in the original setup of WWOOF as a non-profit cooperative, but also in the ideal of the non-monetary nature of the WWOOF exchange. Possibly, the owners of WWOOF groups experienced this moral dilemma too, like Will, the WWOOF-NZ director, who felt the need to explain their situation:

*You have to have a very big structure for [a society]...we didn’t want to create a lot of bureaucracy; we wanted to keep it simple... For us it was just simpler, to keep the bureaucracy simple [pause] was just to form this company [pause] which was still based on non-profit making, but it wasn’t the official non-profit making.*²³⁴

In the self-perception of the WWOOF-NZ directors, their group remained the same after the change, a (“non-official”) non-profit organisation. Comments on any personal benefits derived from this change were absent, likely because this would not comply with their self-perception of the organisation of their WWOOF group, and the nature of WWOOF as a non-profit venture.

However, this perspective of remaining alternative while turning WWOOF into a business is not universally accepted by all members. A former WWOOF director from Europe expressed this opinion in no uncertain terms:

²³³ Conversation with WWOOF-host, field notes, New Zealand: 2010.

²³⁴ Interview with WWOOF-NZ directors, New Zealand: 2009.

Interviewee: I hate to say this, but I think Australia, New Zealand, and Japan's main priority is cash.

Elisabeth: They are businesses.

Interviewee: Almost everybody in Europe and India and, well almost everyone apart from these guys I found to be interested in the principles of [the WWOOF movement]; people dedicated time and didn't ask for money. Where I found those three weren't really running WWOOFs, they were running backpacker organisations, they weren't inviting co-operation, they were selling a product.²³⁵

This critique mirrors the discussion in Chapter One, of commercial farmers who are under suspicion of farming organically only for their private profit. For some, the involvement with the market economy is incompatible with the ecotopian morality.

By contrast, the owners of WWOOF groups operating as profit-making companies argued that economic sustainability, making a living by operating a WWOOF group, was in accordance with the WWOOF philosophy of sustainable living. Will and Anna, the WWOOF-NZ directors, were a middle-aged couple with eight children, living in rural New Zealand and employing Anna's sister as an administrator. They explained their understanding of sustainability as socially, ecologically, and economically responsible living, benefitting the community not only by employing local people and treating employees fairly, but also by buying locally, organic farming and the ethical treatment of animals, as well as being economically sustainable by operating a profitable venture.²³⁶

However, for many voluntary directors and WWOOF members, the involvement with the market economy leads to the suspicion of profit-orientation, thereby placing the business-operated WWOOF groups outside the moral universe of the WWOOF movement. Like members' suspicion against free-riders in the WWOOF exchange, the trust relationship between the members is disturbed.²³⁷ The WWOOF-Italy director told of a conversation he had with the WWOOF-NZ director at an international conference:

He would stand up and say 'Everybody must be open and transparent.' So I say okay, WWOOF-Italy, here are our published accounts, that's open, we have so much work, we gonna pay somebody, we added up what that person does, computer skills, language skills, this skill, that skill; we compared it to council employees, public service, we arrived at the salary. How much does WWOOF-NZ earn, how much do you pay yourselves? [In a mocking voice, imitating the

²³⁵ Interview with former WWOOF director, 2011.

²³⁶ Conversation with WWOOF-NZ directors, field notes, New Zealand: 2010.

²³⁷ See Chapter One.

WWOOF-NZ director] “Confidential commercial information, I am not telling you.” Then you tell me to be open and transparent?²³⁸

Voluntary directors may very well feel frustrated when owners of WWOOF groups make a private profit with the non-profit image of the WWOOF movement. Sue had never taken money from WWOOF, as she said: “it never occurred to me that it would grow as it did - or I might have secured some income from it! In fact, I've never received a penny for my work for WWOOF - for work then, or now.”²³⁹ Sue's observation seems to have a frustrated undertone, possibly regretting her idealism in hindsight.

However, Sue always kept an altruistic attitude towards her creation of WWOOF, and liked to believe that others do too: “If they [WWOOF directors] care about the organic movement, they are going to be altruistic”.²⁴⁰ Some members contest this idealistic view, sensing a tension between those who value mutual aid and sustainability over personal profit and those who do not share these ideals. In the next section I turn to the question of inclusiveness, which is connected to the issue of profit-making. Privately owned WWOOF groups promote the growth of their organisation in the name of diversity and inclusiveness, causing conflicts with other members who prefer WWOOF to remain small-scale and “grassroots”.

Diversity or more of the same

As an ideal, everyone is welcome to join the WWOOF movement. Some groups extend this ideal to include non-organic hosts of no particular alternative lifestyle in their organisations. The WWOOF-NZ directors believed that non-organic hosts would be “converted” to the organic philosophy through contact with WWOOFers and the WWOOF organisation at large. WWOOF-Japan also accepted non-organic farms. They emphasised their decision with their own version of ‘A brief history of WWOOF’:

²³⁸ Interview with WWOOF-Italy director and former WWOOF-UK director, England: 2011.

²³⁹ E-mail conversation with the founder of WWOOF, 2012.

²⁴⁰ Interview with the founder of WWOOF, England: 2011.

The first WWOOF organization originated in Europe in the 1970s, and spread to more than 40 countries throughout the world, some of the leading groups today being Australia, New Zealand, and us in Japan. 'WWOOF' began as an organic farming movement, but, these days other kinds of places where people & families are involved in all kinds of lifestyles and activities are becoming Hosts, thereby giving WWOOFers access to a greater diversity of experience and learning. Organic ways of thinking, and sustainable lifestyles, are a growing part of the WWOOF experience.²⁴¹

This offer of “all kinds of lifestyles and activities” refers to a learning experience within the context of the ‘cultural exchange’.

The same applies to the inclusion of volunteers who are primarily tourists without any particular interest in organic farming. WWOOF-Australia made a strong case of allowing great numbers of backpacker tourists to join their organisation, although apparently aware of a contradiction with the ideals of WWOOF:

To the purist, our involvement with backpackers would seem out of place...Let me tell you a story. I went to the IFOAM²⁴² conference in Christchurch in 1994 and there I sat and talked with a young German girl who was there as a delegate from her association. She had first been introduced to Organics in 1989 when she toured Australia and New Zealand as a backpacker and heard about WWOOF. She joined, was influenced by our wonderful hosts, and got involved in the movement on her return home. I do not know how many other similar stories there are within WWOOF...but my guess is that there are quite a few, and that Australia and New Zealand are responsible for many of them. Not because we are any better than anyone else, but because we have a deliberate policy of attracting into our WWOOFs people from outside the Organic Movement – the very people the movement needs to attract and influence if it is, in fact, to be a growing thing! (Conference Paper 2: Australia, 2000)

The rationale is phrased as in accordance with the WWOOF philosophy of supporting the organic movement by “spreading the word”. However, while some groups emphasise inclusiveness, the value of the ‘cultural exchange’, and “spreading the word”, others experience aggressive expansion as a threat to the homogeneity of the group of likeminded members, adhering to an “ecotopian” morality and green lifestyles.

While “spreading the word” is part of the WWOOF ethos, growth, as it was promoted by

²⁴¹

http://www.WWOOFjapan.com/main/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=14&Itemid=29&lang=en [15/9/2010].

²⁴² International Federation of Organic Agricultural Movements.

WWOOF groups such as Australia and Japan, is not generally perceived as a value of the alternative lifestyle movement. Rather, it is part of mainstream market ideology and therefore contested by the counter-cultural and back-to-the-land movement, as Douglas and Wildavsky (1982) point out in their analysis of environmental organisations and religious separatist groups. The separatists, as Douglas and Wildavsky find, see small scale as a virtue, refraining from “material goods that could be had at the price of destroying the character of the community” (1982:120). The same applies to some WWOOF groups who did not consider growth a virtue but a threat of mainstream society. From an ideological point of view, environmental groups like Friends of the Earth are “against big technology, big industry, as well as big organization” (1982:139), therefore favouring small-scale organisation structures. Expansion is not welcomed by all members and WWOOF groups, following the logic that “a small group is always more likely to have common interests than a large one” (Mansbridge 1980).

Whether or not WWOOF should indeed be a growing movement or attract much attention is a subject of debate among members, as some prefer the “quiet” grassroots image of the movement. Nicole, a self-sufficient gardener in New Zealand and active member of a local community of WWOOF-hosts, believed in WWOOF’s capacity to “spread the word” of the organic lifestyle as a grassroots organisation: “*grassroots is staying under the radar, not to create too much attention and work quietly, spread the network*”.²⁴³ Smaje and Rowlatt (2003) report, that several members urged WWOOF-UK to “remain small scale and ‘down market’” (2003:30), as mentioned in the introduction to this chapter. Nadine, the WWOOF-Austria director, also explicitly rejected the idea that WWOOF-Austria should be a growing organisation (Dana 2012). This is a fundamental difference, causing tension with those groups who encourage growth and inclusiveness, upsetting “the purists” who are apprehensive about including members who might not share the same ecotopian ideals.

Some groups were especially cautious about new members and refused to send out the host-list if they had reasons to believe the applicant might be a tourist agency, or distribute the list to migrant workers giving them misleading information about WWOOF. Sue, the

²⁴³ Conversation with WWOOF-host, field notes, New Zealand: 2010.

founder of WWOOF, remembered a time when WWOOF-UK stopped sending host-lists to certain countries:

Indeed, on arrival in the UK some new members from certain countries did go AWOL and we never heard from them again! As a result, other unfortunate wannabe WWOOFers were sent straight home. Our membership secretary stopped sending application forms to the rogue nations as it was felt too many applicants could not be trusted not to abuse WWOOF's function.”²⁴⁴

These are drastic measures, excluding entire nations from the participation in the WWOOF exchange on suspicion of not adhering to the WWOOF philosophy. While some directors encourage inclusiveness and welcome a diversity of opinions and lifestyles, others find these prospects threatening, desiring a homogenous organisation of likeminded people. This conflict remains, since all WWOOF groups are autonomous and independent. Autonomy and the importance of decentralisation for WWOOF groups is the final aspect I will analyse in this chapter.

Decentralisation of autonomous groups

WWOOF-UK never held a special position among the subsequent WWOOF groups, which, according to the founder, was preferred: “[WWOOF] probably worked (a) because it answered so many people's needs to become reconnected with the countryside; and (b) because we weren't hierarchical and didn't set up an 'Empire' governed from London! In fact, we were/are very helpful to local autonomy.”²⁴⁵ WWOOF-UK, Sue believed, never aspired to be the centre of WWOOF and a decentralised network of equal groups developed. Will, the WWOOF-NZ director, stated: “All the WWOOF organisations are flat, we are all sort of equal, like Australia doesn't have any control over any one even though it's got nearly 2000 farms, doesn't have any control over WWOOF-Rumania with ten farms. So we are all very flat.”²⁴⁶ WWOOF directors emphasise their independence and autonomy; there is no hierarchy among WWOOF groups – neither size nor age of the group brings authority. Hood (2000:120) states that egalitarian groups prefer decentralized

²⁴⁴ Pier 2011, interview.

²⁴⁵ E-mail conversation with the founder of WWOOF, 2010.

²⁴⁶ Interview with WWOOF-NZ directors, New Zealand: 2010.

self-government as an alternative to centralised power, large bureaucracies, and hierarchies. This ideal has been adopted in particular on the international level of WWOOF. Each national group has their own context-specific setup, not answerable to any other group. Mansbridge (1973) states, “[d]ecentralization to the level of the small group has, then, the practical advantages of flexibility, accuracy, and innovation” (1973:353).

Reflecting on the relationships between national groups, the founder described it as a cooperative network of individual WWOOF organisations: *“It is an organisation, yes, it’s a network of organisations, each separate WWOOF is an organisation, it’s a lot of co-operating organisations, co-operative network? I mean, you could say it’s a co-operative network of organisations.”*²⁴⁷ All WWOOF groups which are registered in their country (mostly national or territorial groups, and two transnational groups listing hosts in countries where there are no national groups), were recognised by the community of directors as individual, independent groups equal to the others. Equality, as Mansbridge (1980) observes, can be interpreted as mutual respect, acknowledging others as equal members of the group, while at the same time accepting persistent inequalities among the members regarding access, power and influence. I will return to this aspect in the final chapter of this thesis when analysing the relationships among directors on an international level.

While there is an unwritten rule among the community of directors that there can only be one national WWOOF group in each country, there is no consensus regarding WWOOF groups that did not represent nation states, but rather, territories, as in the case of WWOOF-Taiwan and WWOOF-Hawai’i. The WWOOF-Canada director stated: *“[The former WWOOF-Canada director] believes (as do many Hawaiians) that Hawaii should be independent and unfairly belongs as a state of the USA based on a history of dominance.”*²⁴⁸ However, the question as to what constitutes independence for a WWOOF group remains unresolved. The WWOOF-Germany newsletter announced the establishment of a WWOOF-Palestine, reporting that the joy was great among the WWOOF members around the world and the virtually transmitted “group hug” reached its climax when WWOOF-Israel sent its congratulations and offered support.²⁴⁹ This is well

²⁴⁷ Interview with the founder of WWOOF, England: 2011.

²⁴⁸ E-mail interview with WWOOF-Canada director, 2010.

²⁴⁹ WWOOF-Deutschland, Rundbrief 80, Winter 2012.

in accordance with the WWOOF ideals of harmonious peaceful relations and supporting the independence of WWOOF groups. Yet it is not a universally shared sentiment among directors. One of them thought the idea of a WWOOF-Palestine was rather laughable, denied the independence of WWOOF-Hawai'i on the grounds of it belonging to the US, and asked "WWOOF-Taiwan? What Taiwan?"

Even some long established groups find it necessary to assert their status as autonomous and independent from a central authority, as in the case of WWOOF-NZ. Sue, the founder, recalled that when she travelled to New Zealand in 1973, she found that WWOOF was already operating there. A New Zealand farmer had become the first international host on the UK's list and a young couple, Rob and his wife-to-be from England, became his first WWOOFers. Rob, who came to stay in New Zealand for some years, went on to set up a first host-list for New Zealand, contacting members of the Soil and Health Association of New Zealand and some intentional communities.²⁵⁰ This story, however, was contested by the WWOOF-NZ directors, who saw the independent role of their group undermined by the statement that WWOOF-NZ had been established with the help from the UK. They stressed the point that WWOOF-NZ developed independently, with the New Zealand farmer as the first to set-up WWOOF in New Zealand. This conflict is linked to the larger history of New Zealand as a British settler society. The early 1970s to the mid-1980s was a time of decolonisation for New Zealand. Mass media, increasing air travel, communication technology, and particularly the internet, opened up New Zealand to the world, developing an identity in its own right, while Britain lost its dominant position as the "mother land" (Belich 2001:425).²⁵¹ These cases of WWOOF-Hawai'i, WWOOF-Palestine, or WWOOF-NZ demonstrate how much larger developments outside WWOOF influence the politics of the WWOOF movement. Different issues are at stake for WWOOF groups, when emphasising their independent status and decentralisation of the network of WWOOF groups.

There is no authority in WWOOF that can authorise a WWOOF group or forbid its formation. However, there do exist some forms of control between the groups. One way of challenging a group is by denying them the status of a WWOOF group. Doris, the former WWOOF-Austria director, remembered a time of tension between WWOOF-Italy and

²⁵⁰ E-mail interview with founding member of WWOOF-NZ, 2011.

²⁵¹ I will discuss this conflict further in the next chapter, regarding the "WWOOF commonwealth".

WWOOF-NZ:

Der Italiener zum Beispiel hat auf seiner homepage geschrieben, Neuseeland ist keine richtige WWOOF Organisation. Das haben mir die Neuseeländer geschrieben, ich hab das nicht gesehen...eben weil sie nicht nur biologische Höfe haben, und Australien genauso. Und ich hab ihm [WWOOF-Italy] dann geschrieben: "Bist du der WWOOF Richter?" Er hat mir nie geantwortet. Und ich hab gesagt ich find das nicht in Ordnung, dass wir keinen Frieden haben.²⁵²

The Italian guy for example, he wrote on his homepage that New Zealand is not a real WWOOF organisation. That's what the New Zealanders told me, I didn't see it...because they don't just have organic farms, and Australia too. And I wrote to him [the WWOOF-Italy director]: "Are you the WWOOF judge?" He never replied to me. And I said, I don't appreciate that we don't have peace.

The "WWOOF judge", a phrase Doris used repeatedly, was her symbol of a centralised authority that she abhorred. However, while Doris was a strong advocate of each group's independence, this also illustrates how WWOOF groups are not completely independent from each other but do in fact depend on the network of directors to be, however informal, acknowledged.

While there is no centralised government of WWOOF, there is control by mutuality (Hood 2000). In one case, social control was used against a single WWOOF group with drastic results. The story of the expulsion of WWOOF-Korea featured strongly in the narratives of my participants, like Leon and Nancy, former directors of WWOOF-Italy and UK, who remembered the proceedings at the first international conference:

Nancy: Yes, someone from Korea came who was basically operating a travel agency, they were charging, and they didn't have any hosts, so we said, national organisations obviously had to have hosts in their country. They were charging people to join WWOOF-Korea and then basically they would join the individual to WWOOF-Italy, or WWOOF-France, or WWOOF-Canada, and sending them to a Canadian farm or something like that. And they were calling it WWOOF-South Korea, but they didn't have any hosts in Korea...

Leon: ...he started getting in touch with WWOOF organisations in various countries to get hold of addresses and hosts. Everyone told him to get lost...In the end WWOOF.com [the WWOOF-South Korea homepage] was excluded and passed by and he had six months e-mails from other WWOOFs and he disappeared...In the end there were so many other WWOOFs and everyone was saying, don't go to WWOOF.com; it didn't turn into the business idea he wanted.²⁵³

²⁵² Interview with WWOOF-Austria director, Austria: 2009.

²⁵³ Interview with WWOOF-Italy director and former WWOOF-UK director, England: 2011.

The same story has been retold by many directors, emphasising their feelings of success in disrupting this travel agency pretending to be a WWOOF group. Will, the WWOOF-NZ director, recalled: *“I think they got a clear message that, what WWOOF is about. And then they sort of disappeared after that.”*²⁵⁴ WWOOF-Korea ceased to exist because of the lack of cooperation from other groups.²⁵⁵

The well-established WWOOF groups, like UK and NZ, shared a vision of “what WWOOF is about”, taking it for granted that, for example, WWOOF groups produce host-lists for their own country. Emerging groups are “monitored” by existing WWOOF groups. Where the new groups do not meet the mutually shared assumptions about the aims of WWOOF, they are excluded from the support network of WWOOF directors, and volunteers are warned not to join these organisations. In several cases this has led to their disintegration. Hood (2000) analyses mutuality as a strategy of control among egalitarian members of an organisation, enforcing collective norms “through informal group criticism of and influence over individuals” (2000:126). Within the egalitarian network of WWOOF groups, the same principles of mutuality apply. When the directors of the older and well established WWOOF groups decided that WWOOF-Korea did not embody the ideals of WWOOF, they reacted with coordinated actions through mass e-mails, exclusion, and warnings to their members. Sue, the founder of WWOOF, stated: *“it’s probably best to just try and freeze them out; by standing shoulder to shoulder and not allowing them [in].”*²⁵⁶

However, among the established groups, this form of social control is not effective to the same extent. Directors have various alliances with other groups, like the Pacific groups, or WWOOF-South America, and various obligations towards each other. Some groups are particularly supportive towards a newly established group, providing information and even financial support, like WWOOF-NZ supporting WWOOF-France. Many directors invite new or prospective directors for a stay, getting to know each other in person and helping with advice on how to establish and operate a WWOOF group. Doris, the former WWOOF-Austria director, was supported in this way by WWOOF-Germany. The director of WWOOF-Chile met Will and Anna as a WWOOFer in New Zealand, and a prospective

²⁵⁴ Interview with WWOOF-NZ directors, New Zealand: 2010.

²⁵⁵ WWOOF-South Korea was later re-founded and accepted by the WWOOF community, hosting the third international WWOOF conference in 2009.

²⁵⁶ Interview with the founder of WWOOF, England: 2011.

WWOOF-Ireland director was invited by the WWOOF-Australia director for a visit. These are close personal ties that lead to alliances and obligations among WWOOF groups that influence the politics of the international network of WWOOF directors. I will return to this topic in the final chapter of this thesis.

Concluding remarks

The narrative in the beginning of this chapter introduced the directors as significant actors within the WWOOF movement, who so far have been overlooked by previous studies on WWOOF. By analysing the processes involved in the operation of WWOOF groups, and engaging with the literature on organisation studies, this chapter further discussed the values of WWOOF, and the alternative lifestyle trend. WWOOF organisations are expected to implement “green policies” based on “the virtues of mutual aid and cooperation” (Mellor et al 1988), and operated sustainably (ecologically, socially, and economically) without exploiting environment or people. These values inform the alternative socio-economic and political structures of the organisation of WWOOF, based on the ideals of sharing and personal relationships, rejecting a capitalist market economy and centralised, bureaucratic structures. However, there is a continuous tension between the ideals of the alternative organisational structure and the practical aspect of operating an organisation. As I have demonstrated, the directors engage differently with these ideals and their actions are often governed by pragmatism. Opinions among the members vary as to whether the alternative structures of WWOOF groups do in fact live up to the values of WWOOF and a green utopianism of an ecological society.

The analysis of the original WWOOF group, conceptualised as a cooperative, demonstrated how ideal egalitarian decision-making processes are not in reality organisational practice. While bureaucratic ways of organising were avoided, this process also led to the formation of organisational elites, based on the accumulation of specialised knowledge and close personal relationships, undermining democratic election and decision-making processes. Much of the literature on alternative organisations of the 1970s and 1980s is concerned with the ideal of equality between gender and class and the reality

of stratification (Rothschild 1995 [1979], Newman 1980, Baker 1995 [1982], Schwartzman 1989). This aspect, however, does not appear as a major issue for WWOOF members today. Instead, the members' preference for anti-bureaucratic ways of organising WWOOF resulted in authoritarian, centralised leadership structures based on personal friendships. However, where WWOOF groups support their members, inequality in leadership and inexplicit election processes are largely accepted (Mansbridge 1980), because the members trust the leaders to adhere to the aims of WWOOF.

What seems to be of much bigger concern to the members than stratification is the economic character of the WWOOF group as non-profit. Since some groups are privately owned businesses the discourse among directors focused on the question whether this might be a contradiction. Private material gain has no part in the ideals of the alternative organisation (Rothschild 1995 [1979], Mellor et al 1988, Schwartzman 1989). The fact that a few WWOOF groups are privately owned businesses has created a schism among the network of directors, damaging the trust relationship based on the premise of a shared belief system. Even the directors who own their groups occasionally voice doubts, justifying their organisational set-up as "not the official non-profit". This moral concern is the same against the organic farmer who operates commercially. Involvement with the market economy, and therefore possibly benefitting at the expense of others, is perceived by some members as incompatible with the alternative green lifestyle based on the ideal of mutual aid and sustainability.

It is the privately owned businesses that brought the idea of growth onto the agenda of the international discourse among WWOOF directors. The owners of WWOOF groups frame growth within the context of inclusiveness, accepting a more diverse range of hosts and WWOOFers. This is the conceptual opposite of the ideal of small-scale and grassroots, where remaining small and homogenous is considered a benefit to the voluntary, egalitarian group (Mansbridge 1980, Douglas and Wildavsky 1982). Diversity is welcomed as diversity of nationalities, class, sexual orientation, religious or political beliefs, etc., but not as a diversity of thought. A shared common green philosophy and support for the aims of WWOOF is expected by these members. This tension among the directors remained unresolved.

The ideal of the small-scale group is interconnected with the ideal of decentralisation, as the explicit rejection of a centralised hierarchy and big organisational structures (Mansbridge 1973, Rothschild 1995 [1979], Douglas and Wildavsky 1982, Hood 2000). However, the ideal of autonomy stands in contrast to the reality that directors do in fact depend on each other. Who is accepted within this network of directors as an independent group is a matter of debate. This is the basis of mutuality as a form of social control (Hood 2000), rejecting groups that are deemed inappropriate in respect to the WWOOF philosophy. While this chapter has introduced the organisational life of the WWOOF movement, analysing its values and practices of the individual organisations and the directors, the next chapter will focus on the realpolitik of international relations and the director's dreams and struggles with ideal democratic processes.

5

The politics of the international WWOOF network

For two days I stayed with Leon, the WWOOF-Italy director, and Nancy, a former WWOOF-UK director, on their sheep farm in the North of England. Sitting around the kitchen table after dinner and drinking a cup of tea, Leon told me about the difficult relationship between the UK and Australia: “*Should I tell her the story?*” he said, turning to Nancy, before beginning his story of WWOOF, twenty years ago: “*So, there is this guy called Ryan, running WWOOF-Australia, and everyone in this ‘Worldwide’ list.*²⁵⁷ *Then there is this guy called Neil who got hold of Australia’s ‘Worldwide’ list and after working through it and checking it out and all the rest of it, he said: ‘This is a crap list, it’s out of date, everything is wrong, it can be done better.’ He took the list, started going through it and made it into an accurate list. And this is what formed the basis of the ‘Independents’ list. Ryan has never forgiven him this, never.*” Leon had a good understanding of what had happened back then between Ryan, the WWOOF-Australia director and Neil, the IT consultant for WWOOF-UK. Leon and Nancy were already involved with WWOOF, when the first signs of this conflict appeared. Leon, although director of WWOOF-Italy, was from England and had a good relationship with the directors of WWOOF-UK. His narrative did not end here; he continued with the story of the first international WWOOF conference that, through misunderstandings and language barriers, drew other national WWOOF directors into this arising conflict between UK and Australia: “*It was poor Neil at the 2000 meeting that was trying to explain this idea of an ‘Independents’ list, which is all the countries where there isn’t an organisation, who was completely misunderstood. I was sitting next to the Germans, because I speak German, and Neil was saying: ‘I want to start [WWOOF-International] for all the countries where there is not a WWOOF organisation.’ And the German guy was saying: ‘What? He wants to take over WWOOF-Germany?’*”

²⁵⁷ A list of WWOOF-hosts in countries without a WWOOF organisation.

Introduction

Directors of WWOOF groups do engage with each other on an international basis, as the narrative at the beginning of this chapter illustrates. The previous chapter has introduced the organisational side of the WWOOF movement and demonstrated how the alternative values of the cooperative formed the moral basis of its green policies. This chapter builds on these findings, while turning to an analysis of the political processes and power relationships among the WWOOF directors. Specifically, this chapter analyses the attempts of some directors to establish an international WWOOF federation, and the political processes that are involved. For the directors, their engagement on an international level raised questions about power, leadership, and authority, the ideals of democracy and the reality of inequality. The endeavour of establishing an international umbrella organisation has uncovered difficulties in international communication, different interpretations of the directors' supposedly shared values, and the difficulty of realising ideal democratic processes.

The concept of an international WWOOF federation is based on the ideals of equality and egalitarianism. Since no WWOOF group has authority over the others members expect decision-making processes to be based on consensus while centralised power is rejected. Again, there is a by now familiar tension between ideals and practice. The realisation of such ideal democratic processes proved difficult and the directors were confronted with fission. In order to analyse the political processes among the network of WWOOF directors, I decided to analyse a sequence of conflicts among the directors which preceded, accompanied, and arose out of the development of an international WWOOF federation. In this chapter I ask how WWOOF directors engage with each other, and how they make decisions regarding the international WWOOF movement, arguing that they try to engage in a set of alternative political processes which they believe to represent the values of the WWOOF movement, and an ecological society at large, of equality, inclusiveness, harmonious relationships, and cooperation.

I found that in order to understand the relationships of the directors it was important to understand their conflicts, an analysis that particularly demanded a multi-sited research approach. In *'The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography'* Marcus (1995) observes that

ethnographic research has moved on from single sites and local ethnographic research to “multiple sites of observation and participation” (1995:95), bringing the local and the global together. This ‘mobile ethnography’ examines the “circulation of cultural meanings, objects, and identities” (1995:95) across many field sites. WWOOF happens in an endless number of physical locations, but the signs, symbols, and stories travel between and through the members, who put them to use, to legitimise and challenge, to signal unity, success, or diversity. Many of these stories, told and written, focus on the international relations among groups. These narratives are not neutral. Rather, people remember and portray events and activities in a specific way for their intended audiences (Lehmann 1983, 2007, Hüsken 2007). Particularly in regard to the conflict between WWOOF-UK and WWOOF-Australia, different stories circulate among the directors. My intention is not to reconstruct “what really happened”, but to analyse how the directors engage with each other, how they negotiate their ideals, and deal with tensions and conflicting intentions.

I analyse the narratives of conflicts as a sequence of social dramas, and the three international WWOOF gatherings (UK 2000, Japan 2006, South Korea 2011) as a form of redressive action (Turner 1968 [1957], 1974). Turner (1974) considers his theory of the social drama as a ‘processual approach’, stating that the “formal, supposedly static, structures” become visible when they are seen “as phases in social processes” (1974:37). While the political processes between the groups are on-going, at the conferences ideals and assumptions about decision-making processes and democracy were expressed and enacted. Following Turner’s social drama theory (1968 [1957], 1974) I explore the relationships between directors on an international level, and how they conceptualise an international WWOOF federation. Analysing the conflicts among the directors as process highlights the issues that are at stake for the participants: egalitarianism and decentralisation, participation and ideal democratic processes.

The social drama theory is generally applied to face-to-face communities of bounded field sites (Turner 1968 [1957], Myerhoff 1978, Schwartzman 1989, Warren 2001). Even John Postill (2011), who applies the concept of the social drama in his research on an online community, focuses on a local group of residents in Malaysia, studying both their online and offline interactions. My analysis goes beyond this approach by applying Turner’s sequence of the social drama not only to online and offline relationships, but also to a multi-sited field site where the actors did not necessarily know each other in person. They

communicated via e-mail and telephone to talk and gossip, read each other's online newsletters, some visited each other, but they rarely met all together at large gatherings. The network of WWOOF directors does not inhabit a shared physical space, and boundaries of membership, as demonstrated in the previous chapter, can be fluid. Anyone representing a group of hosts and WWOOFers (official or unofficial, national or transnational) is an eligible member of the network.

However, Turner's functionalist understanding of conflict has its limitations, as its application to the WWOOF movement demonstrates. Turner's four phases of the social drama (breach, crisis, redress, and either re-integration or schism) do not necessarily always apply, fulfil their function, or occur in this order. Who causes the breach, and with what intentions, might be interpreted differently by the various parties involved. Crisis, redressive actions, and new breaches follow, and not necessarily in this order, and there is not always a solution to every conflict. Some, like the situation regarding the international WWOOF federation, remain unresolved for a long time. Nonetheless, the processual approach sheds light on the underlying value systems, the ideals and the contradictions, of the international WWOOF movement.

Schwartzman (2007 [1987], 1989) applies Turner's theory in her in-depth analysis of a sequence of meetings in an egalitarian alternative organisation. In a similar way I discuss a sequence of social dramas among the WWOOF directors, analysing their struggle of finding consensus in establishing an international association based on egalitarian principles. Unlike Schwartzman's sequence, where one meeting represents each of Turner's phases, I particularly focus on the three international WWOOF conferences as "redressive action". I find that the WWOOF gatherings are about more than making decisions, as Schwartzman (1989) points out. In the first of the following four sections I therefore explore the conference as ritual and performance, before turning to the sequence of social dramas among the directors in the following three sections.

To apply Turner's theory I had to go back in "WWOOF history", looking at the changing contexts and influences over time. I present an introduction to how the question of an international WWOOF federation arrived, particularly focusing on the role of the internet. It continues the story of WWOOF, established in the 1970s as an alternative organisation with counter-cultural values, entering the age of globalisation and online communication.

This is the beginning of the international network of WWOOF directors and how they negotiate conflicting ideas about an international WWOOF association.

Beginning of the international network of WWOOF directors

Doris, the former WWOOF-Austria director, was the first who introduced me to the international affairs of the WWOOF directors:

Die Australier haben eine Liste gemacht und WWOOF Independent gibt's ja auch, das wird von England gemacht. Da hat's ja viele Streitereien gegeben. Und jetzt gibt's WWOOF International, das machen die Neuseeländer und die wollen jetzt eine neue Liste machen und da mach ich jetzt nicht mehr weiter. Ich brauch kaum welche...Ich weiß nicht, ob ich reden soll darüber...ich bin nicht einverstanden, wie das läuft, jetzt bei WWOOF und jetzt war ein Treffen in Schweden, zum Beispiel. Sie machen in Europa ein Treffen und das ist halt WWOOF-Europa und der Rest der Welt, und das will ich nicht...Sie wollen total Australien, Neuseeland auf die Seite schieben und das sind die Bösen und die Europäer sind die Guten. Da sind die Engländer dahinter...das will ich nicht. Das ist schlecht für WWOOF.²⁵⁸

The Australians have one list, and then there is WWOOF-Independents, that's from the UK. They had lots of quarrels between them. And now there is WWOOF-International, that's run by New Zealand and they want to do a new list and now I don't want those lists anymore. I don't need them anyway...I don't know if I should talk about it...I don't agree how WWOOF is developing. There was a meeting in Sweden just now; they have a meeting in Europe and that's WWOOF-Europe and the rest of the world; and I don't like that...They try to push Australia and New Zealand aside, they are the bad guys and the Europeans are the good ones. The English are behind this...I don't want this; this is bad for WWOOF.

As I realised much later, Doris continuously confused the names and operators of those lists. Sometimes, it would seem, she would do it deliberately, demonstrating how it was all the same to her. New Zealand in fact never produced a transnational list of WWOOF-hosts, only the UK and Australia did. Doris did not want to be part of the quarrel and decided not to attend international conferences after 2000. This, it transpired, was a technique employed by a number of directors involved in this conflict, as I will illustrate later.

²⁵⁸ Interview with former WWOOF-Austria director, Austria: 2009.

Before the internet became widely available in the 1990s there was comparatively little interaction between the directors of national WWOOF groups. Spread all over the world communication between directors was limited. WWOOF itself was only known among a group of likeminded people within the organic movement – organic farmers and urbanites with an interest in healthy food and “reconnecting” with nature. New groups were established with the help of older ones, the knowledge about WWOOF spreading by word-of-mouth. From the original group in England, WWOOF first spread within the British Commonwealth, to New Zealand (1973), Australia (1981), and Canada (1985). The founder describes the expansion of WWOOF in the early days in her essay ‘*History and Momentum*’:

[I]ndividuals from other countries who had enjoyed WWOOFing in the UK would take the idea back home and, with a little help from UK Main Office, set up a national WWOOF, each quite distinct from its brethren as all are autonomous and in[di]vidually tailored to suit local needs. (Coppard 2006a)

Her use of the term “Main Office” seems to suggest a central role of the original UK-group, even though Sue denied this on other occasions.²⁵⁹ There seemed to be a distinct pattern to this development that WWOOF, within the first fifteen years of its existence, would spread around the British Commonwealth.²⁶⁰

Historically there existed strong links between the UK and its former dominion nations, a link that apparently also supported the spreading of WWOOF. The ‘working holiday’ schemes between these countries date back to the early 1970s. Jude Wilson, David Fisher, and Kevin Moore (2009) state in their discussion of the working holiday experience:

Formal working holiday schemes in Britain originated in response to immigration regulation changes in 1972. This was of particular relevance to the former dominions of Britain, where the tradition had developed of young people moving to Britain for temporary periods before the start of formal careers and marriage. (2009:6)

While WWOOF spread around the globe via the British Commonwealth there exists no special connection among these WWOOF groups. It might, however, be a reason for the “Commonwealth groups” to be especially aware of their own independence, as Anna, the WWOOF-NZ director, suspected: “*And that could be a psychological thing too, all these*

²⁵⁹ See Chapter Four.

²⁶⁰ WWOOF groups also established in Ghana (1994), Nigeria (2000), Uganda (2004), India (2007), Sierra Leone (2007), Cameroon (2009), Bangladesh (2010), and Sri Lanka (2010).

countries are colonised countries [laughs], and we don't want to be told what to do by Europe."²⁶¹

Since the mid-1980s and 1990s WWOOF slowly spread around northern and central Europe, to Denmark (1985), Germany (1987), Switzerland (1990), and Austria (1996). The atmosphere in central Europe was favourable, the green movement gained momentum and Green parties emerged.²⁶² WWOOF-Japan (1992, established by an Australian expat), and WWOOF-Ghana (1994) were the "pioneers" in their parts of the world, and the only WWOOF groups outside Europe and the British Commonwealth for some time. However, there were potential WWOOF-hosts in many countries without national organisations; these hosts were gathered up into the transnational lists. The first transnational list was started by the former WWOOF-Australia director, who began his 'Americas' list in 1992,²⁶³ providing contact details for environmentally-oriented and other volunteer organisations in the US, like Global Volunteers and Habitat for Humanity. This list grew steadily into what became 'WWOOF Australia's Woldwide List', listing WWOOF-hosts without national groups, environmental and social projects they thought were "suitable" for WWOOFers, like Kibbutzim, and other exchange networks, including a list of other national WWOOF groups. The narrative at the beginning of this chapter continues this story, illustrating how the conflict between UK and Australia began.

This was WWOOF before the spreading of the internet, which not only changed communication patterns between the few existing groups at the time, but also contributed to the publicity of WWOOF, leading to a dramatic increase of WWOOF groups. Between 2000 and 2012 37 new WWOOF groups were established and nine international meetings took place. While long-distance-travel becoming more economic was also central to this shift (Castells 2001), the internet changed WWOOF dramatically through faster communication around the globe and easier access to information about the movement.

The internet became widely available in the mid-1990s (Castells 2001, Hart 2000), leading to the so-called 'communication revolution'. Some expected this to be the breakdown of hierarchy and authority (Fukuyama 1995:25) because the internet promised equal access to

²⁶¹ Interview with WWOOF-NZ directors, New Zealand: 2010.

²⁶² See Chapter One.

²⁶³ Original documents provided by WWOOF-Australia.

information and free communication. An analysis of the political processes of the WWOOF movement proves this assumption wrong, demonstrating that the internet did not bring equality, but in fact threatened the principle of egalitarianism and independence that the young international network of WWOOF directors was based on. Communication between the members became faster and more direct over the next two decades. This did not only affect communication between national directors but also between the directors, hosts and WWOOFers. The use of homepages, electronic newsletters, and e-mails simplified the exchange of information between the members. Doris reflected on the changes that resulted from the internet: *“There is no mail anymore [pause]. I have had it for a while now but...A few years ago I could not have imagined that everyone would have their own computer.”*²⁶⁴ The internet was the platform that turned the previously sporadic contacts between national WWOOF directors into a constant exchange of knowledge, information, and opinions. Virtually established contacts turned into face-to-face contacts. It is no coincidence, I argue, that the first international meeting of directors took place in 2000. Without the easy communication over the internet most directors would have never been in frequent contact with each other, discussing the possibility of an international WWOOF organisation.

The newly founded WWOOF-International (operating under the same umbrella organisation as WWOOF-UK) was the first to launch a website in the late 1990s. Nancy, a former UK-director, observed that the IT-literacy among WWOOF groups was low and there were not many who understood the possibilities and consequences of the internet for WWOOF. The homepage was set up by Neil, the IT consultant mentioned in the narrative at the beginning of this chapter. He acquired Australia’s ‘Worldwide list’ and turned it into the so called ‘International list’. At the same time Neil obtained the domain name ‘WWOOF.org’, operating under the title of ‘WWOOF International’ and offering the two transnational lists to volunteers.²⁶⁵ This development did cause concerns among directors of other WWOOF groups. The suffix ‘.org’ derives from the word ‘organisation’ and is intended for organisations of a non-commercial character. By using this domain the impression formed that ‘WWOOF.org’, as part of WWOOF-UK, was acting as

²⁶⁴ Interview with former WWOOF-Austria director, Austria: 2009.

²⁶⁵ Information retrieved with ‘InternetArchive’,
<http://web.archive.org/web/20000919014804/http://www.woof.org/index.html> [19/10/2012].

representative for all WWOOF groups.²⁶⁶ National WWOOF groups understand themselves as completely independent from the original UK-group, constituted as legitimate and equal groups in their own right. These groups had never given their consent to this decision and some directors felt that their rights were overlooked as equal members of an egalitarian organisation.

Anna from New Zealand reflected on how the website redefined the relationships among the directors: *“The website has changed things, because if you have set up a website, nowadays that’s kind of the control, isn’t it, if you have an international website of WWOOF on ‘WWOOF.org’ everyone assumes that that’s managed by the UK.”*²⁶⁷ Anna stated that the relationships between the WWOOF groups ultimately changed after the UK launched ‘WWOOF.org’. She believed that because of this development new groups established after 2000 assumed that the UK-group was the central authority of WWOOF.

However, because of inequalities in resources and skills many members are effectively excluded from participating with the wider network of WWOOF. Manuel Castells (2001) refers to this as the ‘digital divide’ – the inequality of access to the internet. Valentine (2001), in her discussion of global citizenship, observes:

The reality is that there are very real barriers to people’s ability to participate in the emerging cybersociety and to exercise their rights and responsibilities as technological citizens in a networked world. Not least, individuals must have public access to ICT [Information and Communication Technologies], or the economic capital to their own networked PC, and the social and cultural capital to know how to use one. Even though the figures for those connected to the information superhighway are growing exponentially, at the moment it is still only a small percentage of the world’s population who are on-line and able to operate in a global frame of reference. They are, of course, largely the affluent, educated, professional and managerial classes of the Western world – though even within the West patterns of access to and use of ICT are highly uneven (Valentine 2001:326).

What Valentine observed at the beginning of the 21st century still applies to WWOOF today (Farfeleder 2012). Apart from personal relationships established through the WWOOF exchange, members largely communicate via ICT (hosts and WWOOFers before and after the exchange, hosts with other hosts and WWOOFers with other WWOOFers, national organisers and directors with their members and with each other). Unequal access

²⁶⁶ Eleven groups existed at the time (five had homepages).

²⁶⁷ Interview with WWOOF-NZ directors, New Zealand: 2010.

to the internet, a reality for many members and directors, translates as unequal opportunities to participate not only in the WWOOF exchange, but also in the exchange of knowledge, and for directors, participation with the network of WWOOF directors. Language is another barrier to members' participation within the wider network of WWOOF. English has become the communication language not only of the internet (Hart 2000), but also of WWOOF, between international WWOOFers and hosts, as well as between the directors. Those who do not have sufficient language skills in English are automatically disadvantaged in participating in the international WWOOF exchange and the global network of WWOOF groups. This results in a significant over-representation of English speakers among the members of the WWOOF movement.

The international network of WWOOF directors began to develop with the widespread public access to the internet, observably since the late 1990s. However, the internet did not cement WWOOF's egalitarian organisational ethos that considers all groups to be autonomous and independent. This assumption of equality was challenged by one individual setting up 'WWOOF.org', causing conflicts that led to a series of "social dramas" (Turner 1968 [1957], 1974). Turner states that the "disturbances of the normal and regular often give us greater insight into the normal than does direct study" (1974:34). In Turner's systematic theory "normal" refers to an ideal structure of harmonious relationships. In lived reality, I argue, such an ideal might never be reached as conflicts overlap, continue, and follow one another. For WWOOF the conflicts happened while or because the relationships between the groups were just being established, while at the same time seeking harmonious relationships and ways of relating to each other.

The social dramas of the WWOOF directors

Turner (1968 [1957], 1974) separates the social drama into a sequence of four phases: breach, crisis, redress, and either re-integration or schism. The breach is the violation of a social rule; the crisis is a period of social uneasiness after the breach; actions of redress are taken by the members who try to restore the community; and finally, either re-integration is reached, or the opposing sides separate completely. While this provides a structure for

analysis, Schwartzman (1989:177) warns that the use of the concept is an “outside characterisation”. It does not necessarily represent the participants’ interpretation of the sequence of events. Discussing these conflicts, the members saw the three international WWOOF conferences as particularly important for shaping their relationships. Using Turner’s theory of the social drama, the divergences in the social structure and political processes of the social network of directors are made transparent. Yet it also illustrates the flaws in Turner’s theory when applied to actual cases, where conflicts can remain unresolved or lead to new conflicts, as I will demonstrate in the following sections.

The conflicts arose around the directors’ questions about if and how the international WWOOF movement should be governed. Sue the founder, while respected by the directors, had no particular authority within WWOOF. She did not own WWOOF as a trademark and only recently established it as her intellectual property in the UK.²⁶⁸ She left the question of how WWOOF could or should operate on an international level to the individual national directors. Nonetheless, Sue observed the development of the relationships among the network of directors and attended all three international WWOOF meetings. While other national directors sought her opinions and recommendations, Sue never took on an official role as a leader of WWOOF. A volunteer organiser from WWOOF-Australia called her a “figurehead”, not involved in the operations of WWOOF groups or the international politics of WWOOF. Sue’s own words reflect the same notion:

*I guess I don’t know probably half of it...there is a lot going on behind the scenes, people consulting one another and offering advice and so on, I think that’s very good...I don’t really know what’s going on in detail around the world, probably because I’m not very good with using the computer. When [e-mails] come to me I deal with them, I read them, but I never go exploring websites, because if they don’t send it to me I tend to let it go.*²⁶⁹

In an e-mail she commented: “*I personally don’t really influence the development of other WWOOF groups or the global network, apart from taking an interest and giving moral support.*”²⁷⁰ Since the founder remained in the background, who then is involved in the international politics of WWOOF?

²⁶⁸ E-mail conversation with the founder of WWOOF, 2010.

²⁶⁹ Interview with the founder of WWOOF, England: 2011.

²⁷⁰ E-mail conversation with the founder of WWOOF, 2010.

Not every member of the social group is equally involved in the social drama. Turner too points out that the “main actors are persons for whom the group which constitutes the field of dramatic action has a high value priority” (1982:69). This has significance in regard to who has a voice in the decision-making processes. Researchers analysing decision-making processes in egalitarian organisation have similarly observed the emergence of such “main actors”. Douglas and Wildavsky (1982) call them “big-interest members”, while Mansbridge (1973) refers to them as “heavies” – those, who are most interested and contribute the most time and energy towards the group. It is a particular group of WWOOF members who are involved in the process of setting up structures for WWOOF internationally, arranging their relationships and confirming their egalitarian status. Some members feel this is achieved with a loose network of autonomous groups communicating with each other, and occasionally meeting in face-to-face gatherings. Others would prefer a formal structure with a legal setup and a “mission statement” to orient themselves, unify standards, and arrange more regulated channels for communication and support. These are the “big-interest members” (Douglas and Wildavsky 1982), for whom the political processes among the members has “a high value priority” (Turner 1982).

Eight WWOOF groups have been present at two or all three international conferences: UK, Germany, France, Italy, Canada, USA, New Zealand, and Australia. The conferences were almost always attended by the same delegates (usually the directors themselves). Using the attendance of conferences as an indication for who is involved in international affairs, is, however, too narrow a perspective. Mansbridge (1980), who discusses presence at meetings as an indicator of interest, makes the important observation that attendance “must involve equal inconvenience to all before we can say with confidence that those who attend feel more strongly about the issue than those who do not attend” (1980:249). Many directors cannot afford to travel, or do not attend for environmental reasons (long distance travel as an environmental hazard). In addition, recently established WWOOF groups might not have had the opportunity to attend many meetings yet. There are also language barriers that prevent many members from actively engaging with other directors, in particular with the “main actors” like WWOOF-UK and WWOOF-Australia. Some groups might not even be aware of the event taking place, because of communication problems, for example. Finally, non-attendance can be an equally strong statement regarding the agenda of a conference, as I will discuss later.

Nonetheless, the main actors in these social dramas were from among this small group of directors who attended the international meetings and who made the affairs of the international network of WWOOF directors their priority. They were the “big-interest members” (Douglas and Wildavsky 1982). Many favoured the establishment of an international body, some were content with the UK being (officially unofficially) acknowledged as WWOOF-International, some preferred continental or regional co-operations, like WWOOF-Latin America and WWOOF-Africa, while some were strong supporters of the decentralisation of all groups. The analysis of the sequence of conflicts within WWOOF reveals these tensions in the social structure of the international network of WWOOF directors: Many members believed that an umbrella organisation based on democratic processes would be the answer to the question of authority, while a number of directors preferred to remain decentralised without a super-structure.

In Turner’s (1974) social drama sequence, redressive actions are taken with the intent to seal the breach and bring the community back together. Turner includes a broad range of what he calls ‘mechanisms’, “from personal advice and informal arbitration, to formal juridical and legal machinery, and to resolve certain kinds of crisis, to the performance of public ritual” (1982:70). In this respect, the international WWOOF meetings are such performances of public rituals. I am particularly concerned with the three international conferences which were each set up in response to a previous breach of the social norms and the crisis that followed. Before I turn to the analysis of the sequence of social dramas, I therefore investigate the international gatherings as rituals in the following section, how they are set-up and who participates. They were open to all representatives of national and transnational WWOOF groups, and all followed a similar structure. The question of when and where an international meeting takes place is part of the conflict itself. Each of these three gatherings was about establishing a joint transnational list for hosts without national WWOOF groups, from where the idea grew to establish an international WWOOF association.

The international WWOOF conference as ritual and performance

Unfortunately, I was not able to attend a conference myself. At first it seemed possible that I would be allowed to attend the European co-ordinators meeting in the Czech Republic that coincided with my research trip to Europe. I had introduced myself to all WWOOF groups by e-mail, but not everyone responded to me. I could not be sure whether they had not received my e-mail, were not interested, or could just not find the time to respond. The director of WWOOF-Portugal, who had become an important contact among the directors for me, offered to advocate on my behalf and asked all attending delegates of the upcoming conference whether I could join them. Regrettably, some groups had doubts about “letting an outsider in” and therefore, since WWOOF operates as an egalitarian organisation and consensus could not be found, my request to attend the conference was denied. This episode created a lot of controversy among the directors. Some thought WWOOF was not “ready” to allow guests, journalists, and researchers to attend their meetings. Others thought it was not the “spirit” of WWOOF to exclude anyone who wished to attend. The issue was discussed at the conference itself and it was agreed that in the future “outsiders” would be allowed to attend conferences if they are part of a national delegation. Since there will be no other conference for some years, however, I missed my opportunity for participant observation.

Besides my conversations and interviews with members who attended international conferences, I rely on the conference minutes in describing these rituals. Ute Hüsken (2007) cautions about using texts to analyse rituals. There are questions concerning who wrote the text, for whom, and with what intentions, displaying “idealisations, or even cover-ups” (2007:343). The WWOOF conference reports portray procedures of proper conduct and successful outcomes, but not the interpersonal and non-verbal communication processes that occur between members, of fractions and alliances and intimate relationships between directors, or “*a certain amount of drunken socialising*”²⁷¹ in hotel rooms, that influence relationships and outcomes of the gatherings. However, this applies not only to written narratives of the conference reports, but also to the spoken narratives of my participants, who wished to relate their story in a particular way (Lehmann 2007).

Schwartzman refers to ‘key meetings’ as “special events” that become “significant because of the special status accorded them by individuals in the organization” (2007 [1987]:351). The WWOOF conference is a meeting place for face-to-face interactions, a “communication event” (Schwartzman 1993:39), and a ritual establishing community and

²⁷¹ Interview with WWOOF-Italy director and former WWOOF-UK director, England: 2011.

confirming continuity. Anna, the WWOOF-NZ director, reflected on the importance of the gathering as a meeting place: *“I think another reason that why Australia and New Zealand really like to have international meetings is because we are a long way from everybody. Like in Europe, you are surrounded by WWOOF groups, so easy to get to places, just driving basically to get to any country in Europe.”*²⁷² In the context of Turner’s social drama, the conference becomes an ‘arena’ (1974:133). Turner’s classic concept of the arena is transferred to an online community in Postill’s study: “traditionally streets, battlefields or courtrooms, but extending in our current era to TV studios, Facebook groups or Twitter trends” (2011:89). Schwartzman (2007 [1987], 1989, 1993) similarly refers to the meeting as a ‘forum of performance’: *“the place to be seen and heard”* (1989:125). The international WWOOF conference is such an arena, a space for the delegates to interact in face-to-face meetings.

The meeting is also a social event, of verbal and non-verbal communication, engaging and relating, and a ritual creating a sense of community. “[M]eetings are an important social form for the generation of social relationships (producing a sense of organizational and/or community identity) and for the reproduction and validation of social relationships” (Schwartzman 2007 [1987]:355). Drawing on Schwartzman, I argue that the conference is not just a meeting with an agenda to discuss certain issues, but a ritual with significance beyond that. The rituals create a sense of shared experience, purpose, and history among the members, as I will demonstrate in the following sections.

International conferences are open to all WWOOF groups which may send one or more representatives to attend the conference.²⁷³ All three international conferences were also attended by Sue, the founder of WWOOF. WWOOFers are welcome as volunteers who help with the organisation of the conference but apparently do not engage in discussions. The conference always takes place “outside the ordinary”. For most delegates it is an extraordinary experience, as aside from the hosting group all visit a foreign country. The WWOOF group who invites and holds the conference in their country also chairs the conference and oversees the proceedings. The minutes are written in English, by one or more native English speakers, and sent out to all WWOOF groups. Most of these documents were made available online to the public.

²⁷² Interview with the WWOOF-NZ directors, New Zealand: 2010.

²⁷³ Between twelve and 29 people attended the three international conferences.

The three international WWOOF meetings follow a specific form, a course of action and agenda easily recognised by the attendees as, for example, positions of honour or power (who opens the conference, who moderates). As Schwartzman (1993) points out about Western societies, “Nothing could be more commonplace than meetings in organizations” (1993:38). In order for a ritual to be successful, the form and symbols have to be recognisable by those attending. The conference minutes show that the WWOOF meetings were always opened by the founder herself. At the first conference Sue retold the story of the founding of WWOOF (Conference Report 2000). She opened the second conference with her ‘green prayer’:

The meeting was opened by the founder Sue who expressed delight at this gathering and enormous thanks to WWOOF Japan for organising it so magnificently. She continued saying there was nothing like meeting in person, and that WWOOF organisers were doing a great job for the world...She felt that WWOOF had chosen her as its channel and ended with [her ‘green prayer’].²⁷⁴ (Conference Report 2006: no page number)

At this occasion, Sue also reminded the directors of the cooperative values of WWOOF.²⁷⁵ At the third conference Sue’s official opening was deferred until the third day, when she opened the ‘WWOOF public meeting’ at the IFOAM²⁷⁶ conference that coincided with the WWOOF conference. She again told the story of “the beginnings of WWOOF and its future positive role in the world” (Conference Report 2011:26).

There is a timeframe to the gathering: conferences last for several days during which the delegates discuss the issues on the agenda, attend social events, and visit WWOOF-hosts. Conference reports use a formal rhetoric, referring to ‘plenary discussions’, ‘group discussions’ and ‘in-camera meetings’. Delegates also give presentations on various topics, from insurance and immigration issues to questions of cultural diversity. However, beside this formal rhetoric the protocols also tell about other experiences beyond the official agenda; occasions of socialising, food and music are documented and given much attention, in the reports as well as in the narratives of the attendees. These are significant elements of the ritual.

²⁷⁴ See Chapter One for the ‘green prayer’.

²⁷⁵ See Chapter Four for the quote.

²⁷⁶ International Federation of Organic Agricultural Movements.

Myerhoff (1977) states that rituals use “repetition and the involvement of the entire human sensorium through dramatic presentations employing costumes, masks, colors, textures, odors, foods, beverages, songs, dances, props, settings, and so forth” (1977:199). The WWOOF conferences do this in the context of the ‘cultural exchange’. The conference report from Japan mentions Japanese tea that keeps everyone refreshed, bento boxes full of fresh fish and organic vegetables, and “karaokeing” in the evening (Conference Report 2006). Some activities happen spontaneously, others are organised as part of the agenda of the conference:

WWOOF Korea organised a traditional Korean musical performance followed by a buffet of banquet proportions. After the lunch we made a tour of Gyeongbok Palace and then learnt how to make rice cakes...This was a perfect start for the Conference as we had time to get to know each other and also sample the makgeolli (Korean rice wine) before the meetings started the following day. “Cho-a-yo!” (Korea Report 2011).

The report of the first international conference in England tells of the five-day trip around the country, how “delicious Indian goodies would unexpectedly materialise”, provided by the WWOOF-India delegate, and how Doris entertained the group with “Austrian folksongs played on her zither” (Conference Report 2000:24). These experiences are seen as an essential part of the international conferences that usually take place before or after the “formal” meetings. The members refer to these events as an opportunity for socialising and ‘cultural exchange’, a rhetoric that is taken from the WWOOF exchange between host and WWOOFers.²⁷⁷

Each conference, or rather the conference report, ended on a positive note, with a proclamation of re-integration (Turner 1974) and the confirmation of their unity as a group. The statement does not only refer to the attending groups but is extended to all WWOOF groups in existence and even to future ones. This is reflected in the conference reports, creating new stories for the community to draw on. The UK conference report ends with the story of the last evening of the tour:

On our last evening Sue joined us for supper, and after the meal she played us folk tunes from around the world on her accordion. It left me with an indelible and symbolic memory: this slightly-built woman sitting surrounded by people from many different countries and cultures – people who had been brought together, and

²⁷⁷ See Chapter Three.

whose lives had been so enriched, by her beautifully simple idea of 30 years ago. (Conference Report 2000:25)

Schwartzman (1989) argues “that meetings were the major form that provided participants in this setting with a sense of organization as well as a sense of themselves *in* the organization” (1989:110). The conference minutes portrait idealised relations of the members, enacting the morals of the WWOOF community, of harmonious, personal, and face-to-face relationships. It emphasises their shared roots and collective history, constructing the idea of a coherent movement.

Such stories are an important part of what Schwartzman calls ‘dramatic meetings’, as they constitute “an organizational reality for all participants” (1989:259). Myerhoff (1977) states that rituals provide a sense of continuity for the individual and “collective-historical continuity” (1977:218) for the group. It could be argued that the WWOOF gathering creates “collective effervescence” (Durkheim 1915). Tim Olaveson (2001), discussing Émile Durkheim’s theory, describes rituals as temporary “effervescent assemblies” (2001:97), creating strong emotions by bringing the members into intimate contact, where the group re-affirms, symbolically re-enacts, and revives their common bonds. In this sense the international WWOOF conference serves to (re)establish relationships and, despite the conflicts and disagreements, confirms their unity as a community.

I will now turn to the analysis of the conflicts among the directors, and how the international conferences were used as “redressive action” (Turner 1974). The first social drama concerns fundamental aspects of the WWOOF movement, regarding egalitarianism and autonomy of individual groups, the values of WWOOF (expected to be shared by all), and the rejection of large bureaucracies in favour of personal relationships. Participatory democracy (Mansbridge 1973), and discourse-centred deliberative democracy (Habermas 1999 [1992]) emerged as ideals for the members, that formed the basis for a possible formalisation of an international WWOOF association.

Drama I: Preventing a WWOOF commonwealth (UK conference 2000)

The establishment of WWOOF-International as a sub-group of WWOOF-UK on ‘WWOOF.org’, which implied that this might be the central authority of WWOOF, caused the first breach. Turner (1974) states that the “Breach of regular, norm-governed social relations occurs between persons or groups within the same system of social relations, be it a village, chiefdom, office, factory, political party or ward, church, university department, or any other perduring system or set or field of social interaction” (1974:38). Turner defines it as the public breach or deliberate non-fulfilment of a “crucial norm regulating the intercourse of the parties” (1974:38). He emphasises that the trigger is not a malevolent act but done “on behalf” of others, for “the greater good” of the group: “A dramatic breach may be made by an individual, certainly, but he always acts, or believes he acts, on behalf of other parties, whether they are aware of it or not. He sees himself as a representative, not as a lone hand” (1974:38). In lived reality, however, I argue, it is not usually as clear who caused the breach and why. Different parties might interpret the breach differently, whether an act is well meaning or not, as the following section will demonstrate.

In this first conflict about the two lists, Nancy, a former WWOOF-UK director, emphasised that the true intentions were well-meaning:

So, the idea was in 2000 to try and work out these lists so that people could join one organisation. And then the little people [stops], the smaller organisations like Doris, thought that she was going to be taken over, that WWOOF-UK was going to run the whole world, this was their worldwide list. We had somebody then who was very good on the internet and he could see the advantage of having a central system, you know, and people could join. It was administered centrally by somebody on the computer. He could probably save people a lot of time with card indexes and writing things on pieces of paper. So although they didn't want to take people over and do people out of jobs, in all honesty there was some kind of a background possibility that to make things simple and clear, that you could get your list from one place, whichever country you wanted to go to [pause]. There was lots of misunderstandings and people worried about that this was colonialism [laughs] that the UK wanted to conquer the world.²⁷⁸

In her narrative, Nancy downplays the accusations against an imperialistic WWOOF-UK, while admitting that the possibility was there, however, justifying the UK-group’s actions

²⁷⁸ Interview with WWOOF-Italy director and former WWOOF-UK director, England: 2011.

as well-meaning. Indeed, a “WWOOF Empire” would be the very opposite of the WWOOF values of the individual autonomous groups.²⁷⁹ Nancy pointed instead to misunderstandings and communication problems, allowing that the actions by the UK-group might have been misinterpreted by the other groups.

The significance of WWOOF-UK obtaining the domain name ‘WWOOF.org’ for its group was not immediately realised by the other groups. It was the suggestion of the UK-directors to unite all WWOOF groups on this website that triggered the conflict and turned the relationships between groups into crisis and confusion. WWOOF directors perceive themselves as autonomous; “imperialistic notions” from the UK-group, calling themselves WWOOF-International and using ‘WWOOF.org’, was breaching the convention of equality. Will, WWOOF-NZ director, talked about the phase leading up to the first international meeting: *“The original aim was that UK wanted all the farms at ‘WWOOF.org’, that’s published in April 2000, that they published this and there was a little bit of controversy about that.”* Doris, the WWOOF-Austria director, called it the UK’s ‘WWOOF commonwealth’: *“They want to be the central power in Europe and they want a WWOOF commonwealth, and I have a problem with that.”*²⁸⁰ Doris invoked an image of a historic Britain, “colonising” and dominating other countries, drawing them into a “commonwealth” with England at the centre. The social drama unfolded around this structural contradiction between egalitarianism and status (Postill 2011).

This marks what Turner refers to as the “phase of mounting crisis” (1974:38), the escalation, a moment of danger or suspense with liminal characteristics. John Warren puts it more simply: “While the notion of crisis sounds like wild chaos, this stage actually refers to the period after the breach that is marked by social uneasiness, during which members are left with unstable understandings of what they are to do next” (2001:193). Among the international network of WWOOF directors this period of social uneasiness was a phase when actions were taken without consensus and conversations become “heated”. This is the phase that featured strongly in the narratives of my participants, making sense of their own involvement in the conflict. The UK-group’s suggestion to unite all WWOOF groups online caused great uncertainty and confusion, and met a lot of resistance from other groups. *“We are completely independent”*, Doris insisted, *“no one tells me what to do!”*

²⁷⁹ See Chapter Four.

²⁸⁰ Interview with former WWOOF-Austria director, Austria: 2009.

She was convinced that WWOOF-UK tried to take over her WWOOF group: “Again and again the English tried to get their hands on WWOOF-Austria. They want to organise everything and then distribute the membership fees accordingly, and I get to do all the work. Unbelievable!”²⁸¹ Doris feared losing her autonomy by becoming an “employee” for a global corporation, and losing her status as director of her own group. She was not alone in these fears – the WWOOF-NZ directors, for example, expressed their emotions in similar words.

Nancy, who was a WWOOF-UK director during this time, had a different understanding of what was happening. She reflected how IT-literacy among WWOOF groups was probably not very high at that time and that their approach might have frightened some of the directors:

*The Australians were slow with their computer systems, they would do everything by pieces of paper at the time. I think that Ryan was not very IT-literate, so he felt threatened probably by the computer wizards that were involved with WWOOF-UK. So when we came to 2000 it was actually very refreshing that all the WWOOF organisations had got basically the same principles.*²⁸²

The first face-to-face meeting was an important experience for all attending, many of whom met for the first time in person. It changed the dynamics among the group. While the internet had facilitated the emergence of a network of WWOOF directors, the anonymous nature of e-mail communication was unable to establish committed relationships between them. Putting faces to names, hearing each other’s voices, sharing stories and personal information, and communicating through non-verbal expression added another dimension to the communication processes between the members. The meeting created obligations between the directors towards each other and the shared aims of the WWOOF movement.

The conference could be considered as what Turner (1974) terms “redressive action” of the conflict. According to Turner (1974), during the redressive phase, adjustive “mechanisms” are put into place, “[in] order to limit the spread of crisis” (1974:39). Warren (2001) states: “This step in Turner’s social drama is an examination of how participants work to redress the breach, an attempt to mend the community” (2001:194). The first international

²⁸¹ Interview with former WWOOF-Austria director, Austria: 2009.

²⁸² Interview with WWOOF-Italy director and former WWOOF-UK director, England: 2011.

gathering was seen as an experience of community. Leon, the WWOOF-Italy director, said: *“One of the reasons of the 2000 international thing was for people to talk about what they thought, how they felt, and pull out the homogenous point of view. But we ended up with, what was it, six or eight general principles.”* He continued: *“At the 2000 meeting, where most of us came together for the first time, and actually we all made friends and we all liked each other and we all agreed to co-operate with each other.”*²⁸³

With the first meeting in person, the members established new patterns of engaging with each other. As mentioned in the narrative in the beginning of this chapter, it also brought into focus the question of authority and leadership on an international level. The attending directors discussed whether and how WWOOF should be organised internationally, how decisions should be made and authority distributed. Some suggested the formalisation of an international group, like the directors of WWOOF-NZ, evidently to prevent a “WWOOF commonwealth”:

Anna: For groups like us, Australia, Japan...we are separate groups and we want to have [pause] something in the middle that we are all part of.

Will: Like an association.

*Anna: We are all equal members. Where what the UK wants is more like, they are up here...their model is like [forms a pyramid with her hands], whereas, we would like more of a wheel, something in the hub in the middle.*²⁸⁴

As discussed in Chapter Four, equality is a value of the alternative organisation, working towards “the abolition of the pyramid in toto: organization without hierarchy” (Rothschild 1995 [1979]:448). The conference report also notes it as a concern that the association might become too big and develop impersonal bureaucratic procedures, undermining the personal intimate relationships of members.

It was proposed that an international association “Must be equal representation for all groups irrespective of size of organisation or financial contribution to the association” (Conference Report 2000:15). The international network of WWOOF directors, eleven groups at the time, was conceptualised as what Mansbridge refers to as ‘participatory democracy’ – “radically egalitarian, leaderless, small-group, decentralized decision-making” (1973:367). Research in political science has observed in recent years how

²⁸³ Interview with WWOOF-Italy director and former WWOOF-UK director, England: 2011.

²⁸⁴ Interview with WWOOF-NZ directors, New Zealand: 2010.

theories of deliberative democracy have been much debated within green political theory (Dryzek 1995, Smith 2003, Sargisson 2012). Deliberative democracy rests on the fundamental conditions of inclusiveness and unconstrained dialogue, ‘presence’ and ‘voice’ (Smith 2003:56). “[I]n principle, all citizens are entitled to participate in the process of political dialogue and have an equal right to introduce and question claims, to put forward reasons, to express and challenge needs, values and interests” (2003:56-57). This is indeed how WWOOF directors ideally express their relations to each other, as equal and inclusive, and without a central authority (Mansbridge 1973).

Deliberative democracy theory states that such a process of deliberation would give voice to the marginalised, but also better represent future generations, and the non-human natural world (Smith 2003). Sargisson illustrates why environmentalists tend to rely on deliberative decision-making processes: “Deliberative democracy is attractive to environmentalists: it seeks to raise levels of citizen participation; it seeks to encourage a different approach from the adversarial one promoted by other forms of democratic exchange and this is all consistent with the green affection for grass-roots politics” (2012:118). As Sargisson states, this derives from environmentalist ideals of a green democracy that extends discursive democracy to the non-human world (also Dryzek 1995, Smith 2003). It reflects the ecotopian thinking of the alternative lifestyle, as discussed in Chapter One, where environment and humankind are understood as part of one holistic ecosystem. The next section on the second social drama illustrates how these ideals of democratic processes were confronted with the limits of deliberation, in regard to inclusiveness and unconstrained dialogue, or ‘presence’ and ‘voice’.

The concept of an international WWOOF organisation was contested by some members, revealing the tensions in the social structure of the international network of WWOOF directors. The conference report mentions the discussion notes concerning the question ‘Why federate’, listing: To ensure a common philosophy and cohesive standards for the WWOOF exchange, and uniformity of WWOOF organisations, to improve communication between groups and provide mutual support and solidarity, and help emerging WWOOF groups, and finally, to promote the organic movement, create a “reference point” at the top, a united voice that would provide more credibility, and an “ethical council controlling WWOOF associations” (Conference Report 2000:14). Several directors objected to the idea of uniformity and the introduction of a political authority “at the top” holding the

power to control and interfere with individual WWOOF groups. These directors did not see such an association as a small, egalitarian group of democratically organised directors, based on decentralised decision-making processes. Instead, they perceived the proposed association as a hierarchical super-organisation with a bureaucratic centre, a centralised authority with a distinct group of leaders. This difference in perspective remained unresolved.

The final phase of Turner's social drama typology leads either to re-integration or separation of the opposing sides, meaning that "the nature and intensity of the relations between parts, and the structure of the total field, will have changed" (1974:42). Contrary to this theory however, there was neither re-integration or separation among the WWOOF directors. At the first WWOOF conference an initial attempt was made to seal the breach by finding solutions to the conflict of the two lists. A tentative agreement was reached between WWOOF-UK and WWOOF-Australia that both their transnational host-lists would be united under the name 'WWOOF-Independents', and distributed by an international body called the International WWOOF Association (IWA). The IWA would also take over the website 'WWOOF.org' (Conference Report 2000). This arrangement, the directors hoped, would put an end to the development of hierarchical structures within WWOOF. Yet the agreement remained at this basic level; the conference report states: "We also did not agree any sort of structure beyond establishing the principles of equal representation - irrespective of size of organisation or financial contribution to the Association" (Conference Report 2000:21). Nonetheless, the members felt that the conference had achieved important goals, not in solving the conflict, but rather on a personal level in establishing personal relationships and "airing grievances". The breach was sealed with symbolic actions of unity and with the conference report ending on a positive note (quoted in the previous section).

The solution to sealing the conflict, the establishing of an umbrella organisation, was never implemented. For those hoping for a formalisation of relationships and international policies this came as a disappointment. Nancy, a former WWOOF-UK director, remembered how the plans fell apart:

So there was supposed to be, getting the lists unified and the original idea was that WWOOF-Australia was then going to produce a paper booklet from the information [and] that the [WWOOF-International], which has grown out of the

*UK, was going to do all the leg work of checking up with the hosts, produce computer listing, send the information to Australia, and Australia could send the list out. But the will to co-operate wasn't there enough; the excuses were that they couldn't read each other's documents, that they were incompatible with their office systems.*²⁸⁵

The relationship between the operators of the two lists was strained, or as Nancy put it: “*they certainly didn't get on*”.²⁸⁶ The “lack of will to co-operate” was the result of the far older and personal conflict between Neil, the IT consultant for WWOOF-UK, and Ryan, the WWOOF-Australia director.

The international network of WWOOF directors became a detached “coexistence” (Hood 2000, also Warren 2001). For the community of WWOOF directors, the initial breach of setting up a supposedly representative homepage on ‘WWOOF.org’ had dramatic consequences, introducing questions of authority and leadership. However, the actual conflict between UK and Australia remained unresolved and the international network of WWOOF directors quickly returned to (or maybe never really left) the state of undefined relationships. During the second drama, “interpersonal grudges” (Turner 1968 [1957]:144) and what was deemed inappropriate behaviour by members revived the conflict. The ideal of harmonious relationships and the taken-for-granted shared values were contested. Likewise, it became clear that the ideal of deliberative democracy, decision-making processes based on consensus and equal opportunity for participation, were not the reality of the international network of WWOOF directors.

Drama II: Who needs the IWA? (Japan conference 2006)

Despite the fact that the directors never implemented the solution of the conflict (the formalisation of WWOOF), the WWOOF movement continued to exist. National groups continued to operate as they had done before, and new and existing friendships among individual directors remained. However, the question of leadership among the international network was not resolved and continued to cause tensions. Will, the WWOOF-NZ director, remembered what happened soon after the first conference:

²⁸⁵ Interview with WWOOF-Italy director and former WWOOF-UK director, England: 2011.

²⁸⁶ Interview with WWOOF-Italy director and former WWOOF-UK director, England: 2011.

Together we got some consistent guidelines for WWOOFers and how it should operate. And we agreed to have an association for WWOOF organisations, called the International WWOOF Association and the UK offered for 'WWOOF.org' to be the website for the association... And after that meeting I guess, we went back home and we sort of talked to our own hosts about the meeting and what was talked about but soon after that meeting WWOOF Ltd. was launched.²⁸⁷

WWOOF Ltd. was the new umbrella organisation managing both WWOOF-UK and WWOOF-Independents UK (formerly WWOOF-International), still owning the website 'WWOOF.org'. Anna, the WWOOF-NZ director, reflected on this new development and its meaning for the wider WWOOF movement:

[P]eople who have started before 2000 which is actually before the website, before they started to call themselves 'the council', or WWOOF Ltd., all that kind of stuff and before there was this central website, all those people are fairly independent, that's my observation, because we started on our own, done it ourselves, we had no help from anyone.²⁸⁸

It is a limitation of the internet that the website 'WWOOF.org' cannot be divided between groups; it must be shared or removed. Some directors believe that the name wrongly suggests to the public that all WWOOF groups are represented by WWOOF Ltd. The conflicts and disagreements among the directors, and the tensions around the IWA, remain concealed.

The next breach was what Leon, the WWOOF-Italy director, called "a series of vicious e-mail attacks". It was considered a break with the morally right behaviour of the WWOOF philosophy, of harmonious relationships and respect:

I went to represent WWOOF-Italy [in Japan]. Shortly before, well, hang on...should we wash the dirty laundry? I think so...there was a round of really vicious anonymous e-mails that were sent to all WWOOF organisations and WWOOF-hosts, criticising WWOOF-UK...making all sorts of accusations.²⁸⁹

Many directors were shocked at this behaviour of one anonymous person. The members of the WWOOF movement value intimate and face-to-face relationships, and anonymity does not comply with this ethos. But it was the hostility that appalled the directors most. Doris, the WWOOF-Austria director, pointed out that the WWOOF ethos was based on the ideals of peaceful and respectful relationships; an ideal that did not just address WWOOF-hosts

²⁸⁷ Interview with WWOOF-NZ directors, New Zealand: 2010.

²⁸⁸ Interview with WWOOF-NZ directors, New Zealand: 2010.

²⁸⁹ Interview with WWOOF-Italy director and former WWOOF-UK director, England: 2011.

and WWOOFers, but also the directors of the WWOOF groups. For Doris, this was the end of her involvement with the international network of directors; she considered their general behaviour as not acceptable in regard to the “spirit” of WWOOF.

Ryan, the WWOOF-Australia director, believed the attack originated within WWOOF-UK, by someone who was “frustrated” with the internal operations. Leon, the WWOOF-Italy director, on the other hand, implied where he thought the attacks came from:

That’s when Doris said I am not interested anymore, it was really horrible. And after this nasty, anonymous e-mail attack, up came the Pacific crowd: “Let’s have a meeting to sort all of this out, we think there should be an independent WWOOF association...come down to Japan.” Only about three or four countries could actually pay the airfare down to Japan. Hmm, there was an awful lot of ill feeling about it, really, many European countries didn’t like it, there the attitude was: “I am not going to this, this is nonsense, this is rubbish, I am not paying the money to go.”²⁹⁰

More than four delegates attended the Japan-meeting; what Leon’s comment implied was that the Japan conference was not as legitimate as the first conference in the UK, since only a very few groups were represented. The choice of a site for an international meeting features strongly in many narratives of the members. Wherever a conference is set up, those who live the furthest away might see it as a deliberate attempt to exclude them from attending because of expensive airfares. Likewise, the same argument was used as an excuse by some directors who did not actually wish to attend the meeting.

The breach and the following crisis again focused on the perception of the UK-group as trying to establish a centralised WWOOF-authority. Seymour, in her report for the WWOOF directors, reflects: “The history is that WWOOF Ltd (the UK based organization) has been accused of purporting, on their WWOOF.org website, to represent WWOOFing world wide whilst preferentially directing enquirers to their own WWOOF enterprises” (2007a:15). The plan was to again try and establish a representative international WWOOF federation. This should put a stop to the UK’s aspirations as some directors perceived it, or put an end to the accusations against the UK, as others saw it.

A concern was raised at WWOOF Ltd. making international decisions on behalf of WWOOF as a whole. It was pointed out that, with no IWA formed and no one else to turn to, WWOOF Ltd. had become the default organisation to contact for new

²⁹⁰ Interview with WWOOF-Italy director and former WWOOF-UK director, England: 2011.

national organisations and that with the advent of the IWA this would no longer be the case. (Conference Report 2006: no page number)

Because of the specific development of this conflict, the maintenance of 'WWOOF.org' had for many directors become the crucial function of an international WWOOF association. Concerning this, Seymour writes: "Creating a formal IWA specifically to solve this difficulty is undeniably comparable to using a sledgehammer to crack a nut" (2007a:15). Seymour was a former UK-director herself who became increasingly critical about the establishment of the IWA. However, those who did not accept WWOOF-UK as the default representative body felt that the conflict over the homepage was a legitimate grievance.

The second conference was again a positive experience for the directors, meeting face-to-face and finding consensus. Will remembered:

So that was good, we met two, three days, we went and visited a WWOOF-host in Japan, had a nice lunch. It was really good to meet, like, other people, from USA, and [pause] who else came [pause] Germany, to meet them, so we know who we're working with, to make us stronger, sort of network.²⁹¹

However, more than at the first gathering, it became obvious that the claim of being "open and accessible to all" (Fraser 1999 [1992]:118)²⁹² did not apply in reality. While directors understand their relationships with each other as egalitarian, there are obvious differences between them that prevent their equal participation in the politics of WWOOF. Only delegates from wealthy, industrialised countries visited the second conference. Many of the smaller groups and directors of less wealthy backgrounds lack the financial resources to attend international gatherings. Many have regular jobs besides working voluntarily for WWOOF, unlike WWOOF directors who own their groups. In addition, not all directors have the same possibilities to leave their regular work, farms, and families in order to attend international conferences. The most obvious difference, however, are their language skills. While the English speaking directors are easily observed as the most active members on the international scale, others are practically mute.

Mansbridge (1973) similarly observes how groups committed to equality have to negotiate inevitable differences on a personal level. "In groups committed to the ideal that all

²⁹¹ Interview with WWOOF-NZ directors, New Zealand: 2010.

²⁹² Reflecting Habermas's description of the bourgeois public sphere (Fraser 1999 [1992]:118).

members have an equal influence on decisions, continuing inequalities can be disastrous. Yet each individual brings to the group different levels of expertise, personal attractiveness, verbal skill, self-confidence, access to information, and interest in the task” (1973:361). Inequalities among WWOOF directors were rarely and reluctantly acknowledged. This does not foster participatory parity in deliberative processes, but supports the dominant groups (Fraser 1999 [1992]:120). The conversation quoted in the narrative in the beginning of this chapter continued with Nancy reflecting on the language barriers between groups that had led to the misunderstanding: “*It was in English, we were only talking in English. We are not the EU with simultaneous translation.*”²⁹³ Inequalities are accepted by the leading groups as an unfortunate reality. The marginalised directors might be reluctant or embarrassed to draw attention to the fact that their lack of resources, skills, and talents prevents them from adequately engaging in the political processes of the WWOOF network of directors. This leaves the elite in charge of decision-making processes.

In Turner’s sequence of the social drama, he assumes a hierarchical order as the basis of the group. Turner notes that “[I]n order to limit the contagious spread of breach certain adjustive and redressive mechanisms, informal and formal, are brought into operation by leading members of the disturbed group” (1982:70). While WWOOF assumes to be an egalitarian organisation, it is the “leading members” who organise meetings. It did not escape the attention of the delegates that the Japan-meeting was a representation of wealthy and well established WWOOF groups. Seymour states: “[t]he coordinators present represented, by and large, the richer, English speaking established WWOOF groups but they hoped to design an umbrella association which could include all WWOOF groups” (2007a:3). Coming from a UK-director critical of the IWA, the comment seems derogatory. In regard to the egalitarian nature of WWOOF it was agreed that the non-attending groups should be consulted on their opinions regarding the establishment of an international WWOOF association.

It was Seymour’s report, which I have previously quoted, that investigated whether the other WWOOF groups were in favour of the establishment of the IWA. In her report she discloses about her own process of rethinking the necessity of the IWA:

²⁹³ Interview with WWOOF-Italy director and former WWOOF-UK director, England: 2011.

I think the nine delegates in Japan were unanimously of the opinion that a formally constituted IWA was a 'good thing' for WWOOF world wide. The consultation exercise which actually provided a real opportunity for alternative and dissenting voices to be raised was, on reflection, aimed at getting everyone on board...some of the suggested additions and amendments...are so contradictory it is hard to see how opinions could be reconciled in a way which would succeed in keeping everyone on board. I, however, found myself no longer agreeing with the majority. A couple of the dissenting voices had spoken strongly to me and they, along with my deepening understanding of the ethical stance of WWOOF, caused me to reassess my opinion on the desirability of a formal IWA. (2007a:5-6)

Seymour critically observes that her report, intended as a tool of deliberative democracy, was really supposed to confirm consensus and not to display dissenting voices.²⁹⁴ She received 23 responses from current and aspiring WWOOF directors, five of which did not fully support the establishment of the IWA.²⁹⁵ Since the network of directors operated on consensus, the establishment of an international WWOOF association came to a halt.

Seymour bases her judgement on the ethics of WWOOF, concluding that it is the morality and values of WWOOF that stand against the establishment of a formal umbrella organisation, placing her findings thereby beyond criticism. She concludes:

[A] formally constituted IWA, requiring funding, rules and regulations is an unnecessarily bureaucratic solution to achieving the proposed purposes. A loose network of WWOOF managers (which as [the director] of WWOOF Switzerland, and [the director] of WWOOF Austria, pointed out already exists) communicating honestly and willing to share resources and knowledge would be in keeping with the spirit of WWOOF and would not risk suppressing any of the innovation and creativity that has characterised the first 35 years WWOOF worldwide. (2007a:4)

Autonomy, communication, and sharing are stated as the essential values for WWOOF. But while the conference again was an experience of community for the delegates, reassuring their shared values, Seymour's report blatantly pointed out the glaring differences. In her questionnaire, reprinted in the report, Seymour asks the directors whether they thought that honest communication, trust, respect, and sharing were "WWOOF values". The WWOOF-Mexico director answered: "No. I did not know these were WWOOF values" and furthermore, did not see any necessity that an international WWOOF federation adopts them as their values (they also did not see the necessity of an international WWOOF federation (Seymour 2007a:33)).

²⁹⁴ Fraser (1999 [1992]:119-120) discusses deliberative processes and coercion.

²⁹⁵ Austria, Bulgaria, Germany, Mexico, and Switzerland (Seymour 2007a).

The conference, as ritual, is a risk. Instead of finding common ground the differences might come to the fore and break the group apart. Nancy Fraser observes:

In general, there is no way to know in advance whether the outcome of a deliberative process will be the discovery of a common good in which conflicts of interest evaporate as merely apparent or the discovery that conflicts of interest are real and the common good is chimerical. (1999 [1992]:130)

Differences in opinion, as well as cultural differences and particularly the assumptions of Western WWOOF groups in regard to the WWOOF values, were made painfully obvious in Seymour's report. How would the international network of directors proceed from here? Egalitarian organisations are prone to drawn out conflicts, as Hood (2000) states, where everyone can have a say, a vote, the right to veto, and there is neither an incentive or threat of punishment to enforce cohesion.

Seymour's report could have been a major obstacle for the formation of an international WWOOF association. Yet it was not. Other directors found her report faulty and decided to dismiss the findings. Anna and Will, the WWOOF-NZ directors, stated:

Will: So WWOOF groups are quite supportive of what we, of the association. But then the UK came out and said we don't need the association. That all sort of fell apart again. They wrote a very long report saying why we don't need the association.

Anna: That was quite sad, because it wasn't her job to give her opinion on...

Will: She was supposed to be doing the consultation for the meeting not for the...

Anna: Not why she thought we should not have one [the association].²⁹⁶

They dismissed the report on the grounds of misconduct. Seymour, in her role as a representative for WWOOF-UK and a director of WWOOF Ltd. at the time, writing a negative report about the IWA, caused a breach. Seymour had to pay dearly for her actions: "*Nobody spoke when I sent the report out which said I don't think we should have an international association; nobody spoke to me since.*"²⁹⁷ She left WWOOF shortly after this incident, but a new crisis of undefined relationships remained. The final social drama that I will describe here brought about a drastic change in the make-up of the international network of directors, when the ideals of deliberative democracy were transformed into pragmatic decision-making processes by the elite.

²⁹⁶ Interview with WWOOF-NZ directors, New Zealand: 2010.

²⁹⁷ Interview with Sue Seymour, England: 2011.

Drama III: The end of deliberative democracy (South Korea conference 2011)

The IWA was formally established in 2007, a ‘public company limited by guarantee’, setting up their own website on ‘WWOOFinternational.org’. The IWA was established by four groups: Australia, France, Japan, and New Zealand. Ryan, the director of WWOOF-Australia, however, emphasised that he joined as an ordinary member of the IWA, not as a founding member. The legal document was set up in a way that would give the founding members a veto over any other group applying to join, effectively establishing an oligarchy who, by consensus, held the decision-making authority.²⁹⁸ Ryan refused to join as a founder under these conditions. Mansbridge (1973) observes:

Behind most efforts to run institutions as participatory democracies lies a fervent idealism, the belief that if an institution makes its members feel powerless or discourages them from participating in decisions, if it makes them feel unequal or allows inequalities of influence, if it makes people feel disrespected or forces them to conform to norms and actions they do not believe in – then it is not worth their commitment. (1973:353)

Based on a constitution of unequal relationships, the IWA never gained any members except the initial four. However, it continues to exist, and WWOOF-Australia gifted its “Worldwide List” to the IWA, re-named “WWOOF Independents (Assoc)”.

A second incident of non-consensual action took place during this third phase of crisis and unclear relationships between the groups. WWOOF-Italy set up WWOOF as a trademark within the EU.²⁹⁹ This caused much controversy and confusion among the directors. Will, the WWOOF-NZ director, expressed how the lack of transparency increased mistrust between the groups: *“I think, to announce we are applying for a worldwide trademark, in Sue’s name, but then [do it] for some international body that we don’t know about, I don’t think that’s WWOOF.”*³⁰⁰ Again, actions were taken without the consent of the other directors who believed that their equal rights were overlooked. European WWOOF groups have their own informal network, organising co-ordinators meetings every two years since 2005. The directors of non-European groups, like WWOOF-NZ, felt excluded from this

²⁹⁸ http://www.WWOOFinternational.org/office/iwa_charter_proposals.rtf [17/06/2010].

²⁹⁹ The Trade Marks and Designs Registration Office of the European Union: http://oami.europa.eu/CTMOnline/RequestManager/en_Result_NoReg, [18/1/2012].

³⁰⁰ Interview with WWOOF-NZ directors, New Zealand: 2010.

closed sub-group. While the European directors met in Sweden, a “counter-conference” was set up in Nepal where everyone was welcome. Anna, the WWOOF-NZ director, remembered: “*the one in Nepal we did because they had the one in Europe. If they are gonna do them in Europe and not invite [us]...*”³⁰¹ However, not all European directors favour a WWOOF-EU, like Doris.

In 2011 the third international conference was organised by the new WWOOF-Korea, in association with the IFOAM conference. Again, attempts were made at establishing an umbrella organisation. However, some directors refused to support the establishment of an international WWOOF association as an unnecessary bureaucratic super-organisation, believing that it would mean losing the personal and intimate character of the individual group. Doris firmly believed that an international association would violate the basic ideals and goals of WWOOF: “*I don't want an umbrella organisation that regulates everything. Everyone is independent and manages according to their own country. Because we can all see what happened with the EU, all those things that were just forced on us and I want to prevent that.*”³⁰² Her doubts were of a political nature that reached beyond WWOOF. Doris was not alone with her opinion. At the conference in South Korea many attending delegates supported the proposal of a new WWOOF assembly, but not all. It was WWOOF-Czech Republic and WWOOF-Ireland who raised concerns about “corporatizing WWOOF”. The delegate for Ireland was quoted in the minutes that she “would like to see WWOOF remain at the grass root level” (Conference Report 2011:15).

Despite this opposition it was agreed that if an international assembly should be formed it would be “a not for profit democratic body which all WWOOF groups could join with equal rights” (Conference Report 2011:3). The website ‘WWOOF.org’ would be transferred to this body, and it would establish WWOOF as an international trademark. The conference report notes that the proposal had the support of the founder (2011:3). Sue’s approval was not necessary to reach a decision, but her opinions were highly regarded as in line with, or simply being, the WWOOF philosophy. Just after this conference, Anna from New Zealand wrote an e-mail to me:

³⁰¹ Interview with WWOOF-NZ directors, New Zealand: 2010.

³⁰² Interview with former WWOOF-Austria director, Austria: 2009.

*I have just returned from the International WWOOF Conference in Korea and it was a fantastic experience. As you know we strongly believe that getting together in this way helps with relationship building and understanding between the WWOOF organisations. I had heard that WWOOF Italy had taken the European trade mark and now want to do the rest of the world. The issue was discussed at the meeting in Korea and it was generally felt that it would be more appropriate for a representative body to hold the trademarks.*³⁰³

The face-to-face meeting facilitates understanding among people where appeals to moral obligations have more effect than when communicating via e-mails and one is not directly engaged with the other person (Orgad 2005). Schwartzman (1989) suggests that what meetings are “really” about is not what is on the agenda: “as a social form, it brings people together and creates the possibility for them to assess each other as individuals and to generate as well as comment on their relationships with each other, and all of this is framed as the ‘business’ of the group or organization” (1989:125).

This time the conference included a special public performance that had not occurred before. Representatives of the opposing sites of the long running feud between UK and IWA set up a private “small group meeting in-camera”: “The...representatives met in camera and discussed the issue of an International body for WWOOF. [Three] are members of the International WWOOF Association (IWA) and [three] are members of WWOOF Ltd., which owns and manages WWOOF UK, WWOOF Independent and Woof.org [sic.]” (Conference Report 2011:17). The conference report states that the group emerged from their private meeting announcing their willingness to co-operate and unify their organisations into one international body. This was a public declaration of the re-integration of the WWOOF community. The in-camera meeting was a risk that could have led to a schism between the two sides, contradicting the purpose of the conference as celebrating the community of directors. The narrative of the protocol however describes it as a success that enabled the reconciliation between the two sides. Myerhoff describes ‘ritual drama’ as “an occasion that transcended many contradictions, fused disparate elements, glossed conflicts, and provided a sense of individual and collective continuity” (1978:105). It does not, however, necessarily solve conflicts by providing ultimate solutions.

³⁰³ E-mail conversation with WWOOF-NZ director, 2011.

At the conference another major change of the relationship dynamics of the network of WWOOF directors took place. A new “Mission Statement for all WWOOF groups” was agreed on, this time not by consensus, but through majority vote. Majority vote was a new mechanism introduced at this conference and might point to a change in perception among the directors, from participatory democracy to adversary democracy. The original small group of friends base their decisions on consensus, accept each other as equals, and regularly meet face-to-face. The growing group of strangers, however, becomes more heterogeneous, with divergent interests that need to be protected (Mansbridge 1980). To avoid the disaster that occurred after the 2006 meeting, when the IWA was expected to be established consensually, this time majority vote was invoked to decide on a universal mission statement.

The ideals of engaging with each other as a group of likeminded friends proved impractical for the actual decision-making-processes. The basis of the relationships among directors had fundamentally changed. Turner critically points out that, after the conflict is restored, relationships might be different to what they were before:

The new equilibrium is seldom a replica of the old. The interests of certain persons and groups may have gained at the expense of those of others. Certain relations between persons and groups may have increased in intensity while others may have diminished. Others again may have been completely ruptured while new relationships have come into being (1968 [1957]:161).

What Turner observes in his ethnographic study of Ndembu village life, on which his theory of the social drama is based, also applies to the network of WWOOF directors to some extent. What the members experience as the social group of directors is not always the same. It belongs to a specific time and space, and is based on numerous and changing alliances and fissions among the members.

The members might not perceive the change in democratic procedure as a significant development. Mansbridge differentiates between the ideal of “equalizing power” in alternative groups (1980:247), or “equality of respect” among members (1973:366), and “complete equality” that is actual organisational reality and hardly ever achieved in alternative organisations. The most interested members evaluate their own objectives (which might very well be perceived as the organisation’s objectives) against the ideal of

complete equality. Jürgen Habermas (1999 [1992]) suggests that ideal procedural democracy needs

preconditions of communication required for fair negotiations and free debates. These idealizing preconditions demand the complete inclusion of all parties that might be affected, their equality, free and easy interaction, no restrictions of topics and topical contributions, the possibility of revising the outcomes, etc. (1999 [1992]:449).

These are ideal preconditions that are rarely possible and indeed were not met by the WWOOF gathering, as in reality decisions were made by those who physically attended a meeting. Alternative groups, Mansbridge (1980) states, justify this with the fact that everyone could attend the meeting if they wanted to, and thereby be part of the decision-making process. However, as discussed above, gaining access to these international gatherings is not equally possible for all directors, regarding time and resources, skills, and information about the issues, whether or not the meeting is open to all, and environmental considerations regarding long-distance travel. The previous chapter also mentioned how some directors could not obtain visitor visas, preventing them from attending international conferences.

Anna from New Zealand, who was a strong advocate for the establishment of the new federation, told me about the progress concerning the new mission statement: *“Everyone who responded agreed with the mission statement. I am not sure how many groups replied though. Usually only those who are interested in such things take the time.”*³⁰⁴ What Anna observed was the opposition’s strategy to “not participate”. Alternative organisations that make decisions by deliberative processes and cohesion depend on the members’ participation for legitimacy. Other researchers have noted how refusing to participate is used as a strategy in conflict (Myerhoff 1978, Schwartzman 1989). Members who felt they could no longer influence the decision-making process lost interest in attending. A lack of information or interest in the issues discussed, or a lack of personal skills and charisma can result in waning commitment to the group. Some members, like Doris, stopped attending international meetings and to give their opinion, since they felt their voices were not heard. In contradiction with the taken for granted values of the dominant WWOOF groups, the international network of WWOOF directors does neither provide equal opportunities for participation or give equal weight to all opinions.

³⁰⁴ E-mail conversation with WWOOF-NZ director, 2011.

Sue, the founder, was asked to become patron for the international WWOOF federation. After considering this, and with some reservations regarding the possible difficulties to find the next patron after she “drops off the perch” (Conference report 2011:18), Sue agreed: “If, after reading my reservations, folks are still keen to have a Patron (me), I’d suggest Patron and Founder for my handle” (Conference report 2011:18). Her position is largely considered by the members as unbiased, as she is no longer involved in the operations of WWOOF-UK. With the support of the founder the new federation gains credibility among the community. Sue has always given her support to the establishment of an umbrella organisation. However, her reflections in our conversation shortly after the conference were ambiguous:

It probably has less hassle in it, if everybody does their own thing but helps and co-operates...I think it really boils down entirely to the individual characters of the organisations, running each different WWOOF. They all got their own slant on life and they develop their WWOOF the way they see it; probably more realistic than try to get everybody [in] one line and having rows about it.³⁰⁵

Olaveson (2001) points out that “periodic effervescent assemblies” (2001:99) can act to constrain or encourage the members to conform to the norms, values, and ideals of the larger group. Back from the conference in South Korea and in the comfort of her own home in England, Sue’s thoughts seemed to differ from what they were then. She considered a more informal network of directors, emphasising their cooperative character.³⁰⁶ Seymour’s report after the second conference, and the UK’s and Australia’s “lacking will to cooperate” after the first conference, reflected similar reactions. While the “collective effervescence” (Durkheim 1915) of the conferences was experienced as positive by the delegates, developing new and closer relationships, the commitment towards conformity was only temporary.

The original conflict of the two lists remained unresolved for more than a decade. At the same time, WWOOF groups continue to work well on the local level, organising the WWOOF exchange between host and WWOOFers, largely unaffected by the conflicts between national directors and their difficulties of establishing a representative WWOOF body. Different to what Turner’s theory of social drama suggests the conflict remained unresolved while the social network among directors continued. However, where Turner’s

³⁰⁵ Interview with the founder of WWOOF, England: 2011.

³⁰⁶ See Chapter Four.

theory was based on a spatially bound field site WWOOF is a dispersed group of independent directors, operating their individual organisations, who can indeed decide to have no contact at all with the international network of WWOOF directors. However, the establishment of an international WWOOF federation holding the trademark rights for WWOOF would fundamentally change the power relationships within the WWOOF movement.

Concluding remarks

In this chapter I have illustrated how the internet has fundamentally changed WWOOF. Firstly, the internet became a new platform to spread the knowledge about WWOOF, with more exposure to the public through homepages and easy access to information about the movement. New groups were established and large numbers of new members joined the organisation. Directors, hosts, and WWOOFers could now communicate quickly with each other via the internet. This, along with cheaper long distance travel (Castells 2001), has changed the dynamics of the WWOOF movement. Secondly, the internet significantly changed the relationships among the directors of WWOOF. While an international WWOOF movement existed before, the network of directors emerged only when the internet became widely available to the public. International communication quickened; directors who previously hardly knew each other now could constantly exchange ideas, knowledge, and opinions. This process also initiated the idea of an international WWOOF association. For the first time questions emerged regarding issues of authority and centralisation within the WWOOF movement, as the narrative in the beginning of this chapter demonstrates.

In order to gain insights into this development I chose Turner's sequence of the social drama (1968 [1957], 1974) to study the political processes of WWOOF. The analysis illustrates the tension between ideal ways of relating to each other among the members of the WWOOF community and making decisions within an international WWOOF federation. For many a green utopia implies egalitarian leadership structures, participatory democracy, equality, and consensual decision-making processes in face-to-face meetings.

These ideals, however, do not easily translate to decision-making processes of an organisation (Mansbridge 1980). Pragmatic decision-making processes were often applied, exposing ideal of consensus as a myth of the movement. As this analysis has illustrated, it is the “big-interest members” (Douglas and Wildavsky 1982) – largely the English speaking directors – who work towards a formalisation of an international WWOOF federation.

The democratic ideals of the directors were based on deliberative processes, to include marginal voices and offer equal opportunity to participate (Smith 2003, Sargisson 2012). The inability to acknowledge the shortcomings of the real political processes meant that no mechanisms were put into place that could ensure egalitarian practices. Several directors expressed their opposition through non-participation, as their voices were not heard, and therefore stalling the formation of a WWOOF federation. However, the ‘Federation of WWOOF Organisations’ was eventually established in March 2013 – while consensus was still thought to be paramount for the members of the new organisation, its founding was not dependent on an unanimous agreement of all existing WWOOF groups. The international conferences indicated this development towards pragmatic decision-making processes, where descending opinions were largely ignored and not deemed an obstacle for the main actors to proceed with the formation of an international association.

I utilise Schwartzman’s idea of the ‘key meeting’ (2007 [1987]) as performance to specifically analyse the international WWOOF conferences as ‘redressive action’ in Turner’s (1968 [1957], 1974) sense of the social drama. The agenda of the international gathering of WWOOF directors is about establishing an international representative body for WWOOF. However, there are more layers to a meeting than the official agenda, as Schwartzman (1989) points out. Beyond the quarrel over the homepage, and the formalisation of WWOOF, lies the attempt to bring the network of WWOOF directors together. Despite the assumption of the members that they all adhere to the same ecotopian ideals, there are (cultural and personal) differences that fuel the conflict. At the conferences, and in particular in the representation in the conference reports, however, these differences are represented as minor concerns, while the shared history and WWOOF philosophy is emphasised. The attending delegates experienced a temporary “collective effervescence” (Durkheim 1915), leading to transitory commitments to the group. The international conferences are a chance for the members to re-invoke face-to-face

relationships and confirm their commitment to the aims and ethos of WWOOF. However, face-to-face meetings can also act to constrain through social pressure, encouraging participants to conform to the norms (Olaveson 2001).

I conclude that the three international WWOOF conferences were each an attempt at reintegrating the group in Turner's sense of "redressive action". However, the various conflicts, which seem to exist simultaneously rather than as a sequence, and arising from older and often personal conflicts, remained unresolved. The reality of a social group is more complex than a sequence of social dramas and there is not necessarily a solution to them. Harmonious relationships are the goal for the members who continue to engage with each other, but what these organisational relationships should ideally entail remains contested. The analysis of the sequence of conflicts within WWOOF reveals these tensions in the social structure of the international network of WWOOF directors, the contradictions in their value systems, and their attempts to overcome the disharmony within their social group.

Conclusion

In this ethnography I analyse the WWOOF movement and how the members try to implement and encourage alternative lifestyle ideals of an organic philosophy and “green utopian thinking”. The reoccurring theme throughout the thesis is the constant tension between ideals of an ecotopia and the lived world of the participants. They continuously need to negotiate how to implement their ideals into practice in order to make a green lifestyle possible for them. In this constant negotiation, as I have argued in this thesis, they develop alternative environmental, socio-economic, and political practices that do realise their ecotopian dreams at least to some extent. Thereby, members feel they succeed in achieving the aims of WWOOF, as well as their visions of a greener, more sustainable lifestyle and an “ecocentric” society.

For many members these ideals include moving to the country, living off the land, in harmony with nature and humanity, living self-sufficient and sustainably, avoiding the “alienating forces” of money and capitalism, and merging the spheres of home and work place. The intrinsic moral order of this utopian lifestyle also translates to the organisational life of WWOOF, which members expect to be non-profit and un-bureaucratic, affordable, simple, inclusive, and egalitarian. However, the implementation of these ideals within contemporary, urbanised, industrialised societies leads to conflicting situations, necessary compromises, contradictions and inconsistencies in the alternative lifestyle of the members.

The movement and its members are often pragmatic in their attitude and willing to compromise. Yet this is not considered a shortcoming or failure. Ecotopia, as mentioned in the introduction to this study, is not a blueprint for the perfect society; rather it is a constant “work in progress” – a process of negotiating alternatives to the existing socio-economic and political systems (Sargent 1994, Sargisson and Sargent 2004, Sargisson 2012). The members find that pragmatic decisions are often necessary to survive within mainstream society and economy. Similarly, in order to reach decisions in an alternative organisation pragmatism is often the preferred course of action for many WWOOF directors. With various levels of commitment and success the participants attempt to

realise their personal dreams of a better life, engaging with others in the movement, constantly learning and exchanging ideas, as well as challenging differing opinions.

The existing literature on WWOOF demonstrates the diverse range of topics which are part of this phenomenon. However, research on WWOOF, so far, has also been very limited, failing to consider the connections between these aspects. This thesis is the first PhD conducted on the international WWOOF movement, with a far broader scope than has been attempted previously. It is a comprehensive ethnographic study that investigates the roots of the WWOOF movement within organic, counter-cultural, and back-to-the-land movements, the non-monetary exchange between hosts and WWOOFers, and the extended household as an alternative lifestyle, challenging mainstream attitudes towards nature and the rural space, market economy and profit-orientation, and the nuclear family as the ideal Western household form. This analysis of WWOOF is also the first to include the organisational level of WWOOF groups as a significant aspect of the WWOOF movement, the WWOOF directors and their relationships with each other, and their attempts to establish an international WWOOF association.

As I have demonstrated, WWOOF is influenced by the counter-cultural back-to-the-land movement and bourgeois counter-urbanisation trend. The members are from among the eco-conscious urban consumers and organic farmers, and others who engage in endeavours in sustainable living. WWOOF incorporates the values of these trends, such as ‘organic’ and ‘sustainability’, reconnecting with the land, and imagining harmonious relationships with nature and a rural community. However, WWOOF is also a largely middle-class movement with a fairly homogenous membership base, excluding those who are not of the “right mind-set” of what I have described as ‘green utopian’ or ‘ecotopian thinking’.

WWOOF was conceptualised from the perspective of the urbanite seeking to return to the land, and this is what WWOOF still offers its members. WWOOFers can try out counter-cultural and communal living in the country, learn about organic food production, and have an alternative traveling experience; a “working weekend retreat” from their busy urban lifestyles, where the country seems to be the more desirable living space. Yet it remains a temporary “return” where the ties with urban life never have to be cut; a temporary green utopia on weekends and holidays. Still, hosts and WWOOFers engage in, teach and learn about alternative environmental practices (from “radical” farming methods

to spiritual concepts), which they may incorporate into their everyday lifestyle, urban or rural. As my two case studies, Austria and New Zealand, have demonstrated, there is a great variety to the alternative lifestyle, depending on different (historic) developments and the social context. Nonetheless, there are also many similarities concerning the members' morality and vision of an alternative society, which demonstrates the transnationally located ideals of WWOOF. In this sense, the members of WWOOF feel they achieve the aims of WWOOF, of "reconnecting" urbanites with country life, and spreading knowledge about the organic philosophy, while the volunteers fulfil their dreams of (temporarily) returning to the land. The hosts, it would seem, profit in particular from the non-monetary WWOOF exchange.

At the heart of WWOOF is the WWOOF exchange, an alternative economic practice based on the ideal of non-monetary exchange, avoiding capitalist notions of profit-making. This form of informal economic activity, as I have argued, is best described as householding, the merging of the spheres of production and consumption, aiming to support the self-sufficient and sustainable alternative lifestyle of the WWOOF household. It is based on the ideal of sharing, where everyone is meant to benefit equally, without exploiting either nature, or people. In its practical implementation by the members of WWOOF, this economic alternative has many variations, depending on the subjective perspective of the members. At the same time, hosts must ensure their economic survival within the capitalist societies they live in. The non-monetary WWOOF exchange is indeed one way to ensure the profitability of such endeavours of an alternative lifestyle by providing affordable, voluntary help for hosts.

Hosts and WWOOFers engage in a multitude of economic activities, none of which can be clearly defined as only commodity or gift-exchange. Even the concept of householding, the pooling of skills and resources, can entail personal relationships, gift-giving, and sharing, while at the same time be part of the market economy. The alternative economic practices of hosts and WWOOFers (that include but are not restricted to the WWOOF exchange), blur ecotopian ideals with the reality of mainstream market economy. Nonetheless, they fulfil the members' ideas of alternative market practices. It is an economic concept involving production within the household, supporting more people than the nuclear family, and (regarding the ecotopian ideal) extending its benefits to the environment, local community, and wider society. This notion of self-sufficiency and

sharing is connected to the ideals of an alternative household structure of the WWOOF members.

The incorporation of the WWOOFer into the household of the host, as well as the merging of home and work place, are expressions of alternative socio-economic practices. The ideal of the 'open house', the inclusion of "additional" people into the household, creates relatedness among the participants through the sharing of home and work life. For many members of the WWOOF movement the fictive kinship of the extended household fulfils their dreams of an alternative lifestyle, bringing together the spheres of production and consumption, home and work life, and the extension of the nuclear family to incorporate more people, in particular likeminded peers. It is also a sphere of teaching and learning, spreading the knowledge of the alternative sustainable lifestyle between hosts and WWOOFers through first-hand experience, possibly challenging existing attitudes, and exploring cultural differences between the participants of the exchange, thereby living up to the aims of the WWOOF movement. However, as the discussion in Chapter Three has also demonstrated, this concept of the shared household also creates room for exploitation, dependency, and patron-client relationships of unequal power dynamics.

Through participant observation I was able to observe these strategies first-hand, how they develop between ecotopian ideals and the reality of implementing a green lifestyle in contemporary mainstream society. Following the method of 'lifeworld ethnography' (Hitzler and Honer 1988, Honer 1989, Knoblauch 2003) I fully immersed myself in the field of research, sharing my participants' (physical) experiences and exchanging knowledge and opinions. By living and working as a participant in the WWOOF exchange, I gained insights into the members' understanding of these ideals and the struggles, inconsistencies, and compromises when trying to practically implement these alternative environmental and socio-economic practices.

The emerging alternative practices of the members of the WWOOF movement are the temporary country escape that fulfils the dream of reconnecting with the land, the extended household supporting the sustainable lifestyle of hosts, the non-monetary exchange and gift-relationships. They are solutions between ecotopian ideals and mainstream reality, allowing the members at least to some extent to realise their aims of a green utopia, as well as achieving the aims of the WWOOF movement. Participant observation was also

possible, to some extent, on an organisational level, as a voluntary organiser and while living with WWOOF directors. Adding to this method by including document analysis and e-mail interviews, I gained detailed insight into the organisational structure of WWOOF groups, as well as the international relations among the directors.

The values that form the basis of the WWOOF exchange derived from an ecotopian attitude towards rural space, use of resources, alternative exchange and household structures also, I argue, translate to the organisational level of WWOOF groups. Directors, administrators, and voluntary organisers try to engage in a range of socio-economic and political processes that reflect the philosophy of the WWOOF movement. These practices are the non-profit character of WWOOF groups, cooperation, un-bureaucratic ways of organising WWOOF, inclusiveness for some, remaining small-scale and grassroots for others, and the decentralisation of independent WWOOF groups. All these ideals are, however, in their actual implementation contested and many directors accept compromises in order to assure the continuous operation of the WWOOF group. Many members of the WWOOF movement remain doubtful whether all WWOOF groups do in fact live up to the aims of WWOOF and their vision of an alternative, green society. As the case studies of WWOOF-Austria and WWOOF-NZ have demonstrated, both organisational forms (the non-profit association and the privately owned business) can cause tensions. The ideal of un-bureaucratic ways of organising WWOOF has led to stratification, and the non-monetary nature of WWOOF groups has been compromised, some members believe, because of private ownership. These contradictions and tensions remain largely unresolved, causing conflicts among members.

As a result of how WWOOF developed internationally as a movement, all WWOOF groups are independent and considered equal to one another by the members. Egalitarianism became, as a concept, the basis of all relationships among WWOOF directors. Therefore, when the question emerged of whether and how WWOOF should be governed internationally, the directors engaged in deliberative democratic decision-making processes, where all voices should ideally carry equal weight. However, as this ethnographic study has demonstrated, the attempts to practically implement these ideals uncovered unequal access to participation, as well as inequalities regarding decision-making powers. The contrary positions of the WWOOF directors of Austria and New Zealand in regard to the establishment of an international WWOOF association have

illustrated the complexities of the political processes. Not all directors possess the same language, technical, or rhetoric skills and resources. The international WWOOF conferences were carried out as rituals, bringing together the directors, and reasserting their (supposedly) shared values. Yet, these were also occasions that demonstrated the differences between the groups, of who would and could participate in these events, and of social pressure encouraging conformity among the delegates.

This ethnography has illustrated that by engaging in green ecotopian environmental, socio-economic, and political practices the members of the WWOOF movement feel that they, at least to some extent, achieve the aims of WWOOF and realise their visions of a green lifestyle. The thesis also demonstrates how a moral order connects these alternative practices, thereby contributing to and illuminating the connections between an anthropology of rural space, economic anthropology, kinship studies, and anthropology of organisations. A multi-sited research approach (Marcus 1995) allowed me to study WWOOF as an international movement and global trend, illustrating the many layers and complex relationships and connections within this movement. In addition, the research is also multi-positioned (Mosse 2005), studying many levels of engagement among the members, from the grassroots level, the national organisational level, to the international relationships among directors. By applying a combination of these methods I provide a comprehensive ethnography, presenting insights into the WWOOF movement, and thereby into a significant and growing social trend.

I introduced the WWOOF movement with the narrative of the founder to illustrate how the original idea of the WWOOF exchange belongs within the back-to-the-land movement (Marsh 1982) of the 1970s in England. This is the ideological context of the WWOOF movement, connected to a longer history of industrialisation and urbanisation, and the dream of the country escape and “rural idyll”. The idea of the WWOOF exchange, volunteers helping on organic farms, fulfils the eco-conscious urbanites’ dream of returning to the country. It reflects the image of the rural space as the “better life”, close contact with nature, and producing one’s own food. Green utopianism (Sargisson 2012), ecological utopia (deGeus 1999), and an ecocentric philosophy (Wearing 2009) are part of a social trend of imagining alternative, sustainable lifestyles, reconnecting with the land and social processes based on close relationships.

The aims and ethos of the WWOOF movement, as I have demonstrated, derive from the back-to-the-land movement, as well as the organic movement. The morality of 'sustainability' evolved as part of the rhetoric of the organic movement over the last few years (Tomlinson 2008, Isenhour 2011) and became synonymous with the concept of 'organic philosophy'. This is one of the basic values of the WWOOF movement, and the green utopianism of its members. It is a broad and inclusive concept, referring to caring for the environment and other people (in the sense of social justice and equality) and the sharing of resources. Not to exploit neither nature, animals, or other human beings for personal profit but to share with the less fortunate (developing nations) and to save for future generations. Sustainability, organic, and green, as I have argued, are shared metaphors of green utopianism, and for the WWOOF movement; ambiguous symbols (Cohen 2000 [1985]) that provide a common language and moral order for the members of WWOOF. WWOOF is part of this alternative lifestyle trend, as well as a way of realising the aims of a green utopia, supporting a self-sufficient lifestyle in the country by providing organic farmers with help, while facilitating the temporary rural experience for WWOOFers.

'Sustainability' as a concept of an ecotopian world view influences the way the WWOOF exchange between hosts and WWOOFers is constructed by the members. This non-monetary exchange between host and WWOOFer is rarely thought of by the members as barter, but rather, it resembles a gift-exchange relationship between the participants in this exchange. Most members of WWOOF display a strong anti-capitalist, anti-consumerist attitude, believing that money is a destructive force that alienates people and that private profit can only be made at the expense of others. The ideal of sustainability, however, emphasises sharing as creating prosperity for humanity and the world at large. Therefore, members of WWOOF engage in alternative forms of exchange in their everyday lives, challenging mainstream assumptions about the necessity of economic growth, profit-making, and consumption. The ideal of sustainability demands a simpler lifestyle where resources have to be carefully managed. deGeus (1999) refers to 'utopias of sufficiency', "where happiness is achieved by limiting needs and the implementation of a relatively austere lifestyle" (1999:21). This utopianism is not the utopia of abundance, excess and growth, but of voluntary simplicity.

The ideal form of economy for the members, as I have argued, is the WWOOF exchange as householding (Polanyi 1957 [1944]). Instead of this being an economic form of the past (Gregory 2009), I have argued that this is indeed the ideal of a green lifestyle in 21st century Western societies. The members of the WWOOF movement aim for the ideal of a self-sufficient household, uniting the spheres of production and consumption, where no member of the household takes away personal profit, but contributes to and shares with the rest of the household. In this way, the participants try to counter-act what they perceive to be an “unnatural” divide of the spheres of production from their living space and sphere of reproduction and consumption (Hann and Hart 2011:171).

The merging of the spheres of production and consumption is based on the model of the extended household, which the members call the ‘open house’. It is a form of alternative living that, while older, is often associated with the rural communes and experiments in alternative living of the counter-cultural movement of the 1970s (Bunce 1994, Sargisson and Sargent 2004). It also resembles a conservative nostalgia for the extended farm household that includes related and non-related members as one family (Riehl 1856 [1854], Brunner 1956). This means that the household incorporates non-related people, living together communally or as extended families, sharing household facilities and resources to various degrees. This sharing of everyday practices, as I have demonstrated, creates forms of “relatedness” (Carsten 2000), challenging the categorisation of ‘real’ and ‘fictive’ kinship. It is a form of kinship that develops within a space that is both home and workplace at the same time, where household members work and live together on a daily basis. It is, as I have argued, a ‘kinship of support’ (Fischer 2010) and a ‘family of choice’ (Maddy 2001). However, my findings also demonstrate that this is often a choice of peers.

An economy of householding, living self-sufficiently off the land in extended households of fictive kin, reflects many members’ ideas of green utopianism, avoiding the alienating forces of modern life, that “unnaturally” separates the spheres of work from the spheres of the home, the public from private, production from consumption, and isolates people in their nuclear families (Sargisson and Sargent 2004). These alienating forces go against a green utopianism that promotes the supremacy of close relationships not only between human and nature, but also between the community of people, based on the ideals of “sharing and caring”. However, I have questioned whether these forms of householding and extended household do not actually perpetuate social structures of unequal power like

those of patron and client (land owning farmer and servants), and unequal gender relations, in particular regarding the question of work and non-work (Narotzky 1997, Lyon 2010). From this perspective, the green utopianism of a better future resembles a romanticised pre-industrial past of unequal relationships and a reality of exploitation.

The morality of green utopianism and the WWOOF philosophy that governs the ideals of the WWOOF exchange led me to question if and how this moral order influences the organisational life of WWOOF groups and the politics of the international network of WWOOF directors. The independent WWOOF organisations, as I have demonstrated, are expected by the members to operate in a particular way, based on the ideals of sustainability, through sharing their profits (keeping membership fees as low as possible), social justice (treating employees fairly and providing job opportunities), and environmentally sound practices (such as using eco-friendly resources and technologies). The alternative organisation is an “organizational manifestation” (Schwartzman 1989:91) of the counter-cultural movement. I argue that the organisation of WWOOF groups is likewise an organisational manifestation of the values of the WWOOF movement, suspicious about “the market” and trying to avoid intermediary bureaucracy.

Yet the reality of operating WWOOF groups can be distinctly different than the ideal. As the examples of the WWOOF groups in the UK, Austria, and New Zealand have illustrated, inequalities existed regarding the opportunity of regular members to participate in decision making-processes, be elected into the group of directors, or become the owner of a group. However, as other researchers have also found (Rothschild 1979, Mansbridge 1980, Newman 1980, Baker 1982, Schwartzman 1989), these inequalities were widely accepted among the members as inevitable. Controversial was the organisation of WWOOF groups as privately owned businesses, such as WWOOF-NZ and WWOOF-Australia. Many members perceived this as morally concerning. Profit-making has no part in the ideals of the alternative organisation (Rothschild 1979, Mellor et al 1988, Schwartzman 1989), where sharing and mutual support are emphasised as the organisational goals. Private profit making, and growth for more private profit, is equally rejected. Therefore, like the commercial organic farmer who is under the suspicion of working for private gain, WWOOF groups operating as privately owned businesses are regarded as morally concerning. Much more than stratification and elite-building, the

profit-making capacity of WWOOF groups causes tension among the members, leading to factions among the WWOOF directors.

Many WWOOF directors engage with each other, meeting in international WWOOF conferences, and attempting to establish an international WWOOF federation. The international relations among the directors of WWOOF groups are largely dominated by the English speaking WWOOF groups, as this ethnography has demonstrated. Among this group a conflict developed between the UK and Australia/New Zealand over the question of authority and leadership within the WWOOF movement. Over the past twelve years negotiations have been on-going regarding the question of how an international umbrella organisation should operate. While directors seem to largely agree on the policies of such a federation (the question of how to relate to and engage with each other as equals), the actual establishment continuously failed. Typical for “green utopias”, the members favoured deliberative democratic processes (Dryzek 1995, Smith 2003, Sargisson 2012). This demands equal opportunity of participation, the acceptance of divergent opinions, and non-hierarchical egalitarianism. However, as the debates among the international network of directors have demonstrated, these ideals do not easily translate to decision-making processes. Equal opportunities of participation and communication (like language and rhetoric skills) are not in reality achievable (Mansbridge 1973).

After a series of conflicts, or social dramas (Turner 1968 [1957], 1974), among the directors, debating the establishment of an international WWOOF federation, the ideal (idealistic) democratic processes were abandoned in favour of a majority vote by the attending members of the third WWOOF conference. However, as I have argued, non-participation is a form of protest. While decision-making on an international level stagnates, the relationships among the directors are continuously renewed. The three international WWOOF conferences have each served as “redressive actions” (Turner 1968 [1957], 1974), leading to a temporary, “collective effervescence” (Durkheim 1995 [1915], Olaveson 2001), reviving their common bonds and shared ideals.

This thesis set out to provide insights into the processes of the international WWOOF movement, and thereby into the social trend of a green utopianism. It illustrates the conflicts and discrepancies, tensions and inconsistencies between the ideals of rural living, non-monetary exchange and non-profit, the extended household, avoiding anonymous

bureaucracy, and deliberative democratic processes, and their incorporation into everyday practices. Yet this ethnography also demonstrates the connections between these spheres, how ideals of a green utopia are incorporated into all aspects of the lifeworlds of the participants. By paying attention to the narratives of the participants, this ethnography has provided insights into the members' interpretations of an alternative lifestyle, their ideals and the reality of their often complicated implementation.

This ethnography provides the first comprehensive study of the international WWOOF movement and, through the lens of WWOOF, illuminates the world views and alternative social practices of green lifestyles in contemporary, although predominantly Western, societies. It thereby provides a sense of a social trend based on ecotopian ideals that transcends national borders and influences all aspects of everyday life. In the way of presenting the voices of my participants, I conclude with a quote from Seymour, a former WWOOF-UK director, who writes how WWOOF

reaches deep into the human psyche and demonstrates that things can be done very differently to the accepted practice of the 21st Century; work can be a joy, the people involved in production are more important than the goods, cooperation is more satisfying than competition and to share ones possessions is a gain rather than a loss. (2007a:4)

The members of WWOOF imagine alternatives to the world they live in, challenging mainstream concepts of how to live in contemporary societies. WWOOF is based on utopian imaginings and shared metaphors, an ambiguous social group with negotiable boundaries. Yet this ambiguity of its ideals allows the group to continue and grow, adapting to new contexts in changing times and places.

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