

## **The Sociology of Agriculture and Food (1950s -2010s): A View from the North**

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### **Abstract**

This article reviews the evolution and salient characteristics of the substantive academic area of Sociology of Agriculture and Food (SAF). Employing the activities of the International Sociological Association (ISA) Research Committee on Sociology of Agriculture and Food (RC-40) as an empirical indicator of the evolution of this sub-discipline of sociology, the article illustrates SAF's origins and growth. It reviews key historical events that led to its current status. It also analyses the theoretical approaches that define this substantive area through the review of the production of salient SAF researchers. Created in the 1970s, SAF evolved from a group concerned with the study of agriculture and rural communities to a network of scholars interested in the analysis of agriculture and food as part of the broader expansion of social relations at the global level. The article reviews the early stages of SAF in the 1950s and 1960s, its establishment in the 1970s and development and further growth in the following decades. A discussion on salient empirical findings and theoretical positions completes the review of the characteristic of SAF. The conclusions point out the sophisticated nature of the research and theories that characterized this substantive area of sociology.

**Keywords:** Sub-disciplines of sociology, Agriculture and rural studies, Agrifood research, Sociology of agriculture and food theories.

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## Introduction

The Sociology of Agriculture and Food (SAF) is one of the most visible substantive areas in Sociology and a field of investigation that has claimed “independence” from the parent discipline of Rural Sociology (Bonanno, 2009; Friedland, 2002; 1982). Moreover, it practices progressive sociology through its support of issues such as food sovereignty, food security, environmental sustainability, and the well-being of agri-food workers. For heuristic purposes, the concept of SAF employed in this essay refers to the academic and organizational activities of the members of the Sociology of Agriculture and Food Research Committee (RC-40) of the International Sociological Association (ISA). This is an international group of scholars that has been active since the 1970s and that includes members from six continents including Latin America and the country of Brazil. Employing the history and analytical contributions of salient members of RC-40, this article opens with an overview of agriculture and food studies in the 1950s and 1960s. It further illustrates the birth and development of the Sociology of Agri-Food in the 1970s and 1980s and efforts to document and theorize the global organization of agri-food that characterized the 1990s and the new century. It continues with a discussion of the three major theoretical approaches employed in agri-food research: Neo-Marxism, Constructionism and Pragmatic Democracy. The article concludes by underscoring the rich empirical tradition of SAF and its concomitant theoretical sophistication.

## **Agriculture and Food Prior to the 1970s: Diffusion Innovation and Modernization Theory**

In the 1950s and 1960s, the study of agriculture and food was synonymous with the study of rural society. Often labeled as rural sociologists and housed in Departments of Rural Sociology, scholars who studied agriculture and food supported the then dominant argument about the uniqueness of rural areas and the relevance of modernization theory (Bonanno, 2009). While functionalism dominated, rural sociologists tended to avoid it in favor of pre-war social-psychological stances. Functionalism was too abstract to be translated into testable hypotheses. Accordingly, the overarching investigative theme was "diffusion-innovation" whereby progress engenders productive innovations that farmers must adopt.

The late 1960s signaled the crisis of the dominance of Functionalism. The emergence of anti-establishment social movements, the resurgence of labor militancy, unmet expectations about socio-economic growth and social justice created conditions that made the tenets of Functionalism difficult to uphold. Introducing novel readings of the classic works of Marx and Max Weber, analyses proposed an interpretation of the evolution of society that clashed with the rosy vision of capitalism presented by. Despite all this, throughout the late 1960s and the mid-1970s, rural sociology lagged behind sociology and remained largely immune from the intellectual and political changes that characterized the sociological community. Dwelling on the goal of modernization and counting of the established approach of diffusing-innovation, the social unrest that defined university campuses, factories and the overall society was hardly felt in departments of rural sociology.

## The Sociology of Agriculture in the 1970s and 1980s

In the second half of the Twentieth Century, the accelerated process of agricultural and food production altered the sector and its relationship with rural areas. By the 1970s, most food items were not produced within the “farm gate.” Simultaneously, rural industrialization, the decentralization of industrial production and the development of other commercial uses of rural space created new conditions whereby the identification of agriculture and food with rural areas was simply no longer tenable (Bonanno; Busch; Friedland; Gouveia; Mingione, 1994). Acknowledging the changed conditions, a number of SAF scholars framed their research away from rural sociology and defined it as sociology of agriculture and food. In North America, the symbolic beginning of SAF coincides with the 1976 annual meeting of Rural Sociological Society held in Guelph, Canada. In that occasion, a group of young sociologists supported the move to study agriculture and food with fresh intellectual insights. In 1978, at the IX World Congress of Sociology, the internationalization of SAF was formalized through the creation of the International Sociological Association’s (ISA) Research Committee on Sociology of Agriculture and Food (RC-40).

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the search for alternative theoretical approaches to Functionalism consisted in the reinterpretation of classic sociological works. In particular, SAF was characterized by the use of the theory of Marx and other classical Marxist authors – such as Karl Kautsky (e.g., 1988 [1899]) and Alexander Chayanov (e.g., 1986 [1925]) – and the contribution of Max Weber (e.g., 1968 [1921]; 1958). This process centered on new readings of Marxist texts moving away from then popular use of Lenin’s 1915 study of American Agriculture (Lenin 1967 [1915]). Simultaneously, the search for alternative theories involved “cultural” explanations that centered on Max Weber’s analysis of the evolution of agriculture and the persistence

of small farms (Weber 1958). For Weber, because of the importance of the culture farmers would tend stay in agriculture despite adverse economic conditions.

The debate on the evolution of agriculture was also supported by a wealth of empirical analyses that documented its dualistic character. Dualism refers to the concentration of land and economic resources in the hands of a small number of large producers and the presence of a great number of small and part-time farmers (Buttel, 1986; 1980; Buttel; Newby, 1980). Empirical work also permitted members of SAF to shed light on processes of capital concentration in agriculture. In particular, they stressed that the evolution of agriculture is linked to capital concentration in the food and retailing sectors (Friedland, 1984; Heffernan, 1984). The shift of food production from the farm to factories meant that changes in the production and consumption of agri-food products were increasingly affected by corporate power in food production and retailing. In this regard, of particular relevance was the creation of the "corporate watch" program in the 1980s. This was an informal program aimed at documenting the actions of agri-food corporations. It was accompanied by the introduction of new methodological tools that allowed a better understanding of the evolution of the sector. This is the case of the "commodity chain analysis" approach. Corporate watch and the commodity chain analysis became fundamental tools in agri-food studies. By the mid-1980s, the analysis of capital concentration in agri-food commodities expanded and included additional analytical tools such as the "commodity conglomerate analysis" (Constance; Heffernan, 1994). Commodity conglomerate analysis documents the structural changes in agri-food commodities, their levels of capital concentration and the social consequences that they generate for family farmers, farm communities and consumers.

### ***The 1990s and the New Century***

The 1980s marked the end of Fordism, or the regime of capital accumulation and social legitimation that characterized post-World War II capitalism (Aglietta, 1979; Bonanno *et al.* 1994). As the crisis of Fordism quickly became one of the most researched topics in sociology, the character of post-Fordism agriculture and food emerged as a focus of investigation among members of SAF. Relevant among these contributions was the adaptation of the regime of accumulation theory to the agri-food sector proposed by Philip McMichael and his associates (e.g., McMichael, 2009; Friedman; McMichael, 1989). Known as the “Food Regime Theory,” it turned out to be one of the most significant contributions to the literature and a proposal that still guides a relevant part of research. Dwelling of the World System Theory pioneered by Emmanuel Wallerstein (1974) and adding an original elaboration of the growth of the agri-food system, McMichael argued that the development of agri-food requires the existence of a socio-economic and political regime that generates social stability and permits capital accumulation and social legitimation. The original Nineteenth Century (1870-1914) First Food Regime involved the delegation of food production to former colonies that provided cheap and abundant food for the working class of core industrialized nations.

Affected by insurmountable contradictions, this system was replaced by the post-World War II (1940-1970) Second Food Regime that – coinciding with Fordism – accelerated food production through the introduction of massive technological innovations. It involved the emergence of the USA as the world hegemon and the “regulator” of the food system. The collapse of the Second Food Regime in the 1970s promoted the creation of the contemporary regime that McMichael defines as the Corporate Food Regime or a food regime that promotes global development through processes of

accumulation through dispossession and the growth of debt, dumping, environmental crises, the global displacement of peasant cultures and land grabbing.

Food Regime theory, however, was accompanied by theorizations that proposed different understandings of agriculture and food. A particular relevant debate initiated with the adoption of the term Globalization that indicated that the end of Fordism was the result of projects designed to create new patterns of development. Paralleling debates that unfolded in sociology, SAF scholars showed that the revival of capital accumulation that occurred in the 1980s and escalated in the 1990s was the outcome of the acceleration of the mobility of capital or "capital hypermobility" designed to bypass nation-state regulation (Bonanno et al., 1994; Bonanno; Constance, 2008). Breaking the Fordist equilibrium, corporate groups began processes that reduced the power of organized labor and local communities and made the nation-state increasing unable to regulate global flows of human and natural resources.

Agri-food corporations decentralized production processes by creating production chains that involved a variety of locations and labor pools. Accordingly, food was transformed from a local product into a global commodity. SFA scholars documented the creation of these global agricultural commodity chains and the implications that they had for local communities, socio-economic development, labor, the environment and democracy (Bonanno; Cavalcanti, 2011; Constance, 2002; Heffernan, 1990). They showed that commodity production chains are based on the process of global sourcing or the global search for the most convenient factors of production and conditions of production that include less expensive natural and human resources and political and social climates that are favorable to corporate designs (Bonanno; Cavalcanti, 2014).

In this context, particularly relevant was the work of Latin American members of SAF (e.g., Arce; Marsden, 1993; Bendini, 2011; Cavalcanti; Bendini; Mota; Steimbregger, 2011; Cavalcanti; Bendini, 2014). They documented the insertion of local agri-food production into global circuits and the subordination of local producers and labor to the designs of global food and retailing corporations. Simultaneously, they illustrated the mobilization and exploitation of the local labor force that was transformed into of migrant labor. Circuits of temporary migration, these SAF scholar contended, were essential for the functioning of global agri-food as they provided reliable and cheap labor to the sector. Moreover, they also gave voice to these migrants by documenting their personal struggles and adaptation to the harsh conditions of circular migration and work in global agri-food.

SFA scholars further illustrated the restructuring undergone by the state under Globalization. This change involved the rolling back of many of the provisions that constituted the Fordist welfare system and the elimination of barriers to the free circulation of capital and labor. Justified under the assumption that the establishment of free market conditions is beneficial to all, the restructuring of state intervention has often resulted in the worsening of the conditions of members of the working class and the poor and, in the case of agriculture and food, the worsening of the conditions of small and part-time farmers (Bonanno; Busch, 2015). SAF scholars also showed that the globalization of agri-food is resisted. Stressing the limits of traditional and labor union-based forms of opposition, they illustrated the emergence of alternatives in the production and consumption of agri-food products.

Since the end of the Twentieth Century, SAF scholars have analyzed but also promoted alternative forms of agri-food production that include local producers — local consumers links (civic agriculture), alternative market outlets (farmer's market), common forms of local production

(community agriculture), alternative ways of producing and trading food (organic agriculture and fair trade) and a variety of similar initiatives. Simultaneously, SAF scholars have also been critical of the actual emancipatory power of these new ways of producing and consuming food. Stressing the corporatization of resistance, some among them showed that resistance has become increasingly co-opted by the very corporations that it tries to oppose (Bonanno; Wolf, 2018).

## **Theoretical Approaches**

Through its evolution, three distinct schools of thought have characterized SAF scholarship: Neo-Marxism; Constructionism and Pragmatism or Pragmatic Democracy. A review of these theoretical approaches follows.

### ***Neo-Marxism***

The neo-Marxist approach to the study of agri-food is the primary theory of SAF. As in the case of debates within sociology, neo-Marxism includes a variety of revisions of classic Marxism. A prominent representative of the neo-Marxism in SAF was the late William H. Friedland. He documented the concentration of capital and power occurring in farming and was concerned with applying Marxist theory to the new socio-economic conditions of mature capitalism. While he was careful in acknowledging the peculiarities of agri-food, Friedland's thesis contends that processes of capital accumulation tend to be homogenous across economic sectors leading to further concentration of capital and marginalization of labor. He further showed the proletarianization and exploitation of migrant workers. Under Friedland's intellectual leadership, a number of second generation SAF Structural Marxists emerged. Relevant among these contributions are those of Philip McMichael –reviewed above – and Geoffrey Lawrence.

Lawrence's work paved the way for the growth of a very prolific and visible group of SAF scholars from Australian and New Zealand. Applying the commodity chain approach and class analysis, Lawrence illustrated processes of concentration of capital in Oceania and its consequences on the region's farming structure and labor relations (Lawrence, 1987). Moreover, he and his associates explored the global neoliberal restructuring of agri-food and its impact at the local level (e.g., Burch; Lawrence, 2009), the relationship between food production and the environmental question (e.g., Wallington; Lawrence, 2008), the question of food security and alternative food systems (e.g., Lawrence; Burch, 2011), the financialization of agri-food (e.g., Lawrence, 2014) and the role that supermarket chains play in the restructuring of agri-food production and consumption (Lawrence; Dixon, 2015).

### ***Constructionism***

The Constructionist approach in SAF took at least three distinct currents. The first refers to the adoption of the theories of Max Weber and Alexander Chayanov. In Europe as well as Latin America, the popularity of these theories was the result of significant levels of dissatisfaction with the use of Structural Marxism and these readings' dismissal of the roles of ideology and culture. Constructionists argued that the characteristics of the evolution of farming cannot be correctly understood without assigning significant roles to culture and human agency. They contended that farmers and food producers in general employ culturally and ideologically based readings of reality that clash with the utilitarian rationality employed in neo-Marxists and other structuralist approaches.

The second current of this school is represented by the combination of Phenomenological, Interactionist and Post-Structuralist approaches. Symbolized by the work of Lawrence Busch, it demonstrated not only the social

construction of agri-food practices, but also their undemocratic nature (1978; 1981). Busch's work on the institutional evolution of agri-food research and biotechnology showed the class nature of contemporary agriculture but also the limits of positivist approaches to the study of the intersection of science, technology and agri-food. Employing a hermeneutical approach, Busch criticized the positivist views of agri-food by offering an impressive critique of diffusion innovation theory and its assumption of objectivity in the creation of knowledge. This approach further contemplates a critique of the modern scientific method. As illustrated in Gadamer's primary work, *Truth and Method*, the "truth" cannot be known with the scientific method as argued by positivism and modern science. Additionally, the application of the scientific method to the human sciences has had the deleterious effect of objectifying conditions that are not objective. For Busch and following Gadamer, therefore, meanings and understanding are not entities that can be found through the application of methods. They are inevitable phenomena that are part of the ontology of humans. Yet, the possibility of understanding a text is possible, because both the text and its interpreters are engaged in a dialogue, belong to a historical period and participate in the construction of language.

The third constructionist current refers to Post-modern SAF scholars. This constructionist group is well-represented by members of the Wageningen School. Predominantly European, the Wageningen School, however, influenced the research of a number of SAF scholars worldwide. Symbolized by Norman Long and Jan Douwe van der Ploeg's use of the Actor-Oriented approach (Long; van der Ploeg 1989) members of the Wageningen School (Arce; Marsden 1993) produced important sociological studies that stressed the relevance of social agency and the analytical "limits" of Structuralist and Neo-Marxian approaches. The actor-oriented critique of both Marxist and Functionalist versions of Structuralism centers on anti-foundationalism. Anti-foundationalism rejects the idea that action

can be ultimately linked to any underlying structure. Therefore, these authors criticize accounts that attribute to economic (i.e., the logic of capital) and social (i.e., the satisfaction of functional needs) structures the ultimate capacity to shape the evolution of agri-food. In their view, this “rigidity” of Structuralism prevents the understanding of the relative position of actors in regard to other elements that form the networks (contexts) within which action is performed. According to the Actor-Oriented approach, understanding action is not about understanding its essential dimension, but it is the process of learning from actors the features of their actions (what they are doing) and the reasons behind their actions (why they are doing it).

### ***Pragmatism and Pragmatic Democracy***

The Pragmatist and Pragmatic Democracy approach is employed worldwide, but its origins and primary use are North American. A representative of this approach is William Heffernan. Heffernan began his work by studying the structure and organization of agriculture, the well-being of farmers and farm workers, migrant agricultural labor, and the quality of life in rural communities (Heffernan, 1972; 1982). Following the SAF tradition, his research agenda centered on the democratization of agri-food and the illustrations of the contradictions of capitalism including the negative consequences of power concentration, distorted patterns of development and limits to the establishment of food security and food sovereignty (Heffernan; Constance, 1994, p. 48). Neo-Marxism and Constructionism undoubtedly affected the work of Heffernan and his associates. Yet, Heffernan’s scholarship transcended the broad umbrellas of these schools as his emphasis on a) teaching and research as components of political action; b) fact gathering as a starting point of the construction of knowledge and political statements; and c) substantive democracy as the desired outcome of science placed him within the tradition of *Pragmatic Democracy*.

Symbolized by the work of John Dewey (1975 [1922]), Pragmatism sees full democracy as an aim achievable only by securing the active participation of a fully informed public. Democracy cannot be obtained when elites control society. Accordingly, the public should be fully informed and have the tools necessary to understand this information. Like for Dewey, Heffernan's research and teaching did not originate from the search for invariable truths but were inspired by the desire to address the problems affecting "farming communities." For Heffernan, the concentration of capital and the power of corporations limit the ability of farming communities to freely operate in society and participate in democratic decision making. Dewey contends that the method for solving social problems and related moral questions (justice, freedom, and above all democracy) rests on the elimination of the difference between the approach to solve social and moral problems and that of solving practical problems. In his view, solving practical problems should be employed to address moral and social problems. This method is empirically-based and designed to gather relevant facts leading to the identification of the roots of the problems at hand and the creation of possible alternatives.

Fact gathering and the application of a practical method constitute two of the most distinctive features of Heffernan's research. The importance of carefully documenting the actions of agri-food transnational corporations through the application of "commodity conglomerate analysis" engendered a wealth of knowledge that has always been directed at illustrating the problems with contemporary agri-food. This knowledge has also always been applied to create resistance and develop alternatives. As with Dewey, Heffernan's approach to studying agri-food has never been abstract. Conversely, it has always been applied to the creation of political statements aimed at the establishment of new and emancipatory social relations.

Democracy, for Dewey, is substantive as it is not merely confined to democratic forms of governance and institutions, but it is extended to the practical existence of society and the individuals that form it. Three items can be employed to summarize Dewey's position on democracy: anti-elitism, active participation of members of society in decision making processes and social interdependence. Dewey was primarily an anti-elitist. He argued that the ability of a few to identify the public interest can never be effective because it is distorted by their individual interests. The remedy to this problem is democratic participation. The active involvement of community members is a guarantee against the particularistic views offered by elites. Democracy also mandates the centrality of social interdependence as he maintained that it is through the "collective" social life that freedom is achieved. Heffernan's work is equally centered on the notions of anti-elitism, active participation and social interdependence. He concurs with Dewey that current capitalism is not a "free market" society. But it is a system dominated by large corporations. In Heffernan's analysis, the most significant danger of today's agri-food is the overwhelming presence of transnational corporations and their ability to affect markets and by-pass democratic forms of social participation. He stresses that farmers, consumers and their rural communities should be allowed actual participation in decision-making processes and should also be informed about the actions of these corporate conglomerates. For both of Dewey and Heffernan, unless democratic pronouncements are translated into actual practices, the establishment of good and fair social relations is not achieved.

## Conclusions

The trajectory of the evolution of SAF indicates a three-way pattern. The first refers to the dedication to empirical research. Members of SAF developed sophisticated analyses of the organization, actors, institutions and social relations of agriculture and food and were able to identify fundamental trends and features. Second, SAF is not only the source of information to address the problems that affect agri-food, but it is also a component of the many initiatives that promote alternatives forms of agricultural production and food consumption. Research on sustainable and equitable ways to produce and distribute food occupies center stage in the activity of members of SAF. The third component is the sophisticated use of sociological theory. The wealth of empirical works generated by SAF members is complemented by equally sophisticated theorizations that cover both the micro and macro levels. The net results of all these intellectual activities is the establishment of an area of investigation that has identified many of the characteristics and conditions of today's agriculture and food and is poised to deal with future events and patterns. As the crisis of family and peasant farming continues along with the expansion of large agri-food corporations and the mounting environmental crisis, the wealth of knowledge generated by SAF remains one of the solid foundations upon which a better future can be built.

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