



Social Sciences and Farmers in Switzerland: the Story of a Strange Absence

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Abstract

Switzerland is known to offer substantial support to its national agriculture. However and despite the political importance of agriculture, very few social science research programmes on farming and agriculture exist. Indeed, Switzerland has never had an institutionalized and established “rural sociology”. In a national context where the viability of agriculture depends largely on public money, discussions and criticism of the agricultural policy take different shapes, mainly addressing environmental and economic effectiveness. This paper reviews what work the social sciences have produced on agriculture and farming populations in Switzerland, with the aim of understanding better what should be done now, in a context of deep changes within the political and economic frames of agriculture. These concerns are not limited to Switzerland and have strong echoes in other national contexts. They are related to the understanding of farmers’ role in production and consumption networks, in a context of multifunctionality and neoliberalism. In conclusion, it will be argued that because of some of its characteristics, Switzerland may prove to be an interesting case study for some of the debates in the wider rural social sciences.

Introduction

Switzerland is known to offer substantial support to its national agriculture. Indeed, the federal state dedicates around 6% of its annual budget to agriculture and food. This ranks the agricultural sector sixth among the federal expenses. Like other European countries, agriculture and farmers (or “peasants”) still have an important political role, even if their weight in the national economy has decreased dramatically. Along with this political and financial support, the state has developed a network of research institutions to foster agricultural development. The research developed in these institutions focuses mainly on technical progress in production. Despite the political importance of farmers, very few social science research programmes on farming and agriculture exist (Droz, 2004). Switzerland has never had an institutionalized and established “rural sociology”. While experiencing similar social and cultural changes to other countries in the 1990s, the government and citizens initiated a major shift in the agricultural policy that continues. This change of the political paradigm, generally referred to as the shift from a productivist and protectionist to a multifunctional model (Wilson, 2007), resulted in increased pressure for farmers. Indeed, as the new political paradigm joined neoliberal and multifunctionality logics (Potter and Tilzey, 2005), decreasing prices force farmers to find new strategies to ensure their livelihood. In this sense and despite the high level of state support, it can be argued that Swiss agriculture follows the same path of neoliberalization observed elsewhere (Dibden et al., 2009). In a national context where the viability of agriculture depends largely on public money, discussions and criticism of the agricultural policy take different shapes, mainly addressing environmental effectiveness (ProNatura, 2011) and the necessity of further liberalization (Aerni 2009; Rentsch and Bussy Pestalozzi, 2006). This general situation strengthens the need for more social sciences research

on food and farming issues, in order to better understand the social and cultural processes that are transforming now the agriculture and food systems in this country.

This paper aims to review what work the social sciences have produced on agriculture and farming populations in Switzerland. This attempt faces some difficulties. The first is linked with the absence of an institutionalized rural sociology mentioned above. As a result, both researchers and publications are scattered across various disciplines and scientific networks with no predefined borders guiding the bibliographic search. While this creates problems for the review process, it is this lack of a comprehensive bibliography that makes it so important to conduct the review. This review is structured chronologically through three distinctive periods: the dawn of social sciences, when the Swiss countryside was almost exclusively the field of folklorists while sociologists focused on urban issues and anthropologists focused on “primitive” cultures abroad; the 1970s to 1980s which witnessed a clear expansion of research into “peasant communities” in the Alps; and finally, the 1980s onwards, when “rural sociology” split into various topic-defined research fields.

The main goal of such a review is to explore the fundamentals of the Swiss rural social sciences in order to understand better what should be done now, in a context of deep changes within the political and economic frames of agriculture. These concerns are not limited to Switzerland and have strong echoes in other national contexts. They are related to the understanding of farmers’ role in alternative and re-embedded production and consumption chains and networks (Marsden, 2010). Said another way, the underlying question is as follows: How the social sciences can play their role in enacting “novel realities” in rural and farmed spaces (Lowe, 2010).

In conclusion, it will be argued that because of some of its characteristics – mainly direct democracy and a comparatively strict agri-environmental policy – Switzerland may prove to be an interesting case study for some of the debates in the wider rural social sciences.

At the Beginnings: the « Big Divide » Between Sociology, Anthropology and « Volkskunde »

At the end of the 19th century, boundaries between social science disciplines were essentially based on subject areas. This resulted in the application of a dualistic logic of opposing modern and non-modern forms as the conceptual subdivision of society. Sociologists dedicated themselves to the study of “modern” western industrial societies and, with a focus on modernity, turned to urban areas as its epitome. On the other hand, ethnologists (social anthropologists) travelled to foreign countries and colonies looking for “primitive” societies and cultures (Chiva, 1992).

In Switzerland, – following the Germanic academic tradition (Katschuba, 2003) – folklorists were the first to display an interest in the study of the “non-modern” rural population, looking for traces of ancient traditions, “archaic” practices and beliefs. For a long time, the folklorists remained the sole social researchers in rural areas. Their contributions are invaluable sources of detailed information, based on lifelong fieldwork. However, they approach rural people as witnesses of an almost disappeared world and as the guardians of a way of life condemned to death by the irresistible rise of industrial society. This leaves little room to examine the actual challenges and emergent new social structures. Furthermore, Swiss folklorists generally renounced theory, and chose to indulge in precise and comprehensive descriptive work (Niederer, 1980). According to Hofstee, early European rural sociology shared this inclination to be “descriptive rather than analytic” (1960: 3). This positioning is nonetheless questionable for contemporary social sciences. Of course, “Volkskunde” have now evolved to resemble sociology and/or anthropology; however an examination of the two series published by the Swiss Folklore Society (*Schweizerische Gesellschaft für Volkskunde*) demonstrates their focus on cultural traditions and not on actual farming issues.

The long absence of anthropologists and sociologists from the Swiss countryside is somewhat surprising. Until the 1970s, Berthoud was the only anthropologist to have actually worked on rural issues in Switzerland (Berthoud, 1967). As noted above, this situation can be partly explained by the German influence on academic structures characterized by the separation between *Volkskunde* (folklore) and *Völkerei* (ethnology).

First Steps: Peasant Studies in the Alps (1970–1980)

US RESEARCH AND THE DISAPPEARING COMMUNITIES

The arrival of US anthropologists in Switzerland in the 1970s heralded a new dawn in Swiss rural studies (Centlivres, 1980) and a doubling of dissertations in the subject area. Following Redfield's – and the other founders of peasant studies – calling, they came looking for the Swiss peasant societies and “little communities” (Redfield, 1956). Each one chose a village and proceeded to describe it in a monographic approach. The focus on social structures, and above all the attention paid to the relationships with wider society, opened new pathways for research and allowed them to overcome some of the limitations of the folklorist approach. (Friedl, 1974; Minge-Kalman, 1977; Minge-Kalman, 1978; Weinberg 1975; Wiegandt 1977). US research had a clear influence on rural research in Switzerland, as it had for European rural sociology in general (Lowe, 2010).

The concentration of this research effort in the depths of the alpine valleys was obviously not coincidental. Peasant and community studies researchers were, as was the case with the folklorists, looking for a strong cultural otherness. The theoretical and universal category of “peasant” they were constructing was still built in opposition of modern time and space, and the remote alpine villages fit well with this representation of difference. In the field, the anthropologists found local societies in the process of rapid change as a result of the industrial development occurring in the neighbouring plains and increasing population mobility.

SWISS RESEARCH TAKES OFF?

For many years, Bertoud's dissertation remained isolated in the Swiss research landscape. In the 1970s, Swiss researchers started to develop an interest in rural areas. Windisch (1976) studied the political system of the village Chermignon, while Crettaz (1979) investigated the pastoral system of the Val d'Anniviers.

The similarities between these two dissertations and the American researchers' cited above are obvious. Firstly, they were based in the same area: the alpine valleys of Valais. Secondly, they focus on the past and the disappearance of the village communities. Preiswerk's (1983) work was not an exception, comparing funeral meal traditions in Val d'Anniviers and Les Ormonts. Hainard's (1981) work was a sign of change that straddled two periods of the Swiss rural research: the end of classical peasant studies and the beginning of agricultural sociology. Hainard continues struggling with the concept of peasantry proposed by Redfield and Mendras, without offering any real criticism. His dissertation is, however, the first Swiss research to have addressed “peasants” as a professional group and not as a micro-society. Consequently, it can be considered as a turning point in the short history of rural studies in Switzerland.

Contemporary Research and the Anthropology of Swiss Farmers

The 1980 special issue of the series *Ethnologica Helvetica*, published by the Swiss Ethnological Society, was dedicated to the ethnology of Switzerland. Its chapters were mostly focused on the

rural, and many authors cited above contributed to the publication (Société suisse d'ethnologie, 1980). Ten years later, the society repeated the same exercise. A comparison of the two publications indicates that during this decade, ethnology of Switzerland had evolved and diversified considerably (Société suisse d'ethnologie, 1989/1990) away from the rural peasantry and towards issues such as immigration, national identity and labour. Although some of these contributions continued to focus on cows or villages, the anthropology of Switzerland, as in other countries, came to the western urban world and its modern preoccupations (Gutwirth and Pétonnet, 1987).

In part, this change in focus reflects changes in rural society itself, which could no longer be classified as “peasant”, rendering peasant studies an inappropriate vehicle for the study of social processes in rural areas, as Grignon and Weber (1993) stated clearly in their polemic paper on French rural sociology weaknesses. While this initially reduced growth in the field, it simultaneously opened new niches for research. The result was the splitting of rural studies into various research fields useful to present investigations.

HISTORY SHEDDING LIGHT ON THE PRESENT

Breaching the symbolic border between urban modernity and rural tradition, historians produced some interesting analyses about farming and Swiss agricultural policies in the 20th century. Baumann (1993) studied the founding of the Swiss Farmer's Union and the life of its founder Ernst Laur. Moser (1994) analysed the evolution of farming during the 20th century with a comprehensive gaze including politics, economics and culture. The two researchers have worked together to further investigate the recent history of agriculture in Switzerland (Baumann and Moser, 1999, 2007; Moser, 2003; Moser and Brodbeck, 2007). The most important contribution of these historical works to the understanding of actual agricultural issues is probably the analysis of the constitution of a productivist regime in Switzerland.

SOCIOLOGY/ANTHROPOLOGY OF FARMERS' ADAPTATION

After the decline of “peasant” and “community studies”, a significant component of research in rural areas has focused on farmers as a specific and relevant social group. Weiss and Stucki were among the first to develop this research area, focusing on the impact of political and economic changes on farm families in the Canton of Zurich, in the early 1990s (Stucki and Weiss, 1995; Weiss, 2000). Meanwhile, French speaking anthropologists had started to deal with the same kinds of issues. Droz and Miéville-Ott (2001) edited a book sketching the condition of Swiss farming after the initiation of the new agricultural policy. More specifically, Miéville-Ott (1996a, 2000, 2003) studied farmers' representations of nature and landscape. Droz (1998, 2001, 2002) showed the ins and outs of the strong logic of “self-exploitation” among dairy farmers in the Canton of Neuchâtel and linked it with a specific “peasant ethos”. Schallberger (1998, 1999, 2001) explored how farmers envisage their future. Later, Droz and Forney (2007) published a book that prolonged the discussion about changing policy and its social consequences for farmers. Louw-Prevost (2007) shared Droz and Forney's intention of giving farmers a voice, in her work on farmers' definitions of sustainability.

Other social researchers deal with the farming population through more specific topics such as gender and family farming (Miéville-Ott, 1996b; Ott, 1989; Rossier, 1993, 2005; Stucki, 1998, 2002; Waldis, 1989/1990). Contzen and Rossier explored gender issues through the still uncommon situation of female farm managers (Contzen, 2003; Rossier, 2009;

Rossier and Picard, 2010). In addition, a few studies focused on farm succession (Forney, 2002, 2007; Rossier 2006; Rossier and Wyss, 2006; Rossier et al., 2007).

THE COW, THE PEASANT AND THE "NATIONAL IDENTITY"

Dairy farming has long been the predominant form of agriculture in the Swiss cultural landscape. As a result, the cow has developed as an important symbol of rural Switzerland, with its image distributed throughout Swiss culture – in the tourist and gift shops, in commercials, in artistic production, etc. Social scientists have consequently developed an interest in exploring the symbolism of this animal in the Swiss context (Berthoud and Kilani, 1989/1990; Berthoud et al., 1991b; Crettaz and Preiswerk, 1986; Preiswerk, 1989/1990).

The 700th anniversary of the Swiss Confederation provided an occasion for questioning the symbolic meaning of the cow to the so-called national identity (Berthoud et al., 1991b; Berthoud et al., 1991a). Oester (1989/1990, 1996) applied an interesting approach in this regard. Through the analysis of advertising images, she underlined how international marketing strategies reproduce an idealized representation of the alpine world, applying a psychoanalytical-inspired approach. These descriptions of the symbolic inclusion of farming in the national identity have definitively helped to understand the different political positionings in the debates about agricultural policies. Furthermore, they reflect ambiguous representations of farmers in the national population, which mixes a traditional idyllic valuation and demands of evolution, towards more sustainable and economically efficient farming practices (Forney 2011).

FARMING AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT: THE APPLIED RESEARCH

Up to this point, this review has explored mainly academic research. However, the applied research developed by extension organizations such as *Agridea* has also produced some interesting outcomes. As examples, Roque et al. (2006) published a paper based on the supervision of a local-based sales network of Herens beef meat. The PASTO project aimed to develop a beef production system that combined landscape care with local economic development and included a social component investigating farmers' acceptance of changes in the production system (Miéville-Ott and Hermier, 2009).

Another interesting project is the one developed jointly by the Agronomy and Social Work Departments of the Bern University of Applied Sciences. This interdisciplinary project examined poverty in Swiss farming (Contzen et al., 2009). Crettaz and Forney contributed recently to the same debate by promoting a cross-methodological approach to farmers' poverty (Crettaz and Forney, 2010).

Discussion

The long absence of anthropologists and sociologists from the Swiss countryside is somewhat surprising. In 1980, Centlivres suggested that the striking absence of Swiss social scientists from the countryside was probably linked to a "secret repugnance" (translated from French) that prevents Swiss anthropologists from considering their compatriots as anthropological subjects, as Evans-Pritchard's Nuer or Levi-Strauss' Nambikwara. The "big divide" between "them" (the "primitives") and "us" (western people) was too strongly rooted in the discipline and the Swiss peasants too close to the scholars. Centlivres presented a further brief explanation, referring to the national myths constructing Switzerland as a peasant country with peasant characters, such as William Tell, central to the mythology. Along with the agrarian policies of the 20th century, they formed a "peasant myth" strongly rooted in the Swiss

population (Donnier-Troelher, 1999; Forney, 2011). It is likely that the power of this mythology as well as the sensitivity of the topic left Swiss researchers reluctant to confront these strongly embedded beliefs (which they probably shared with their compatriots). This raises a range of questions and issues that are beyond the scope of this paper. However, to form an understanding of the history of rural studies in Switzerland requires the reader to at least be aware of this crucial element. By the 1970s, rural research was made easier by a weakening of the “peasant myth”.

Beyond the diversity of approaches and disciplines, the Swiss rural researchers cited in this paper have shared one fundamental objective, namely to investigate the changes and transformations in Swiss rural society from the beginning to the present time. In reality, the countryside has witnessed, in Switzerland as everywhere, dramatic transformations throughout the 20th century. However, the same could be said for the whole of Swiss society, and this statement alone does not explain the focus on the past that characterized Swiss rural research. Rather, I propose that the national “peasant myth” has had an important role in directing this focus on change within a dualistic opposition between modernity and tradition. Recent research on the Swiss farming populations has generally overcome this difficulty. However, the focus on change processes has been maintained. Thus, what we called first “Swiss rural sociology” has become unified in the study of social change among the Swiss farming populations.

Such issues are definitively important; however, there are now urgent needs to develop new research on social change with a focus on the future. This is necessary in order to address challenges facing the agri-food landscapes globally, and I would argue, especially in Switzerland.

Firstly, Switzerland has strongly adopted the logic of multifunctionality. Almost every Swiss farm applies demanding agro-environmental schemes in exchange of financial support, which is generally essential for farm survival. If farm practices have evolved quickly, farmers’ appropriation of non-productivist values seems weak, as financial motivations seldom lead to long-lasting acceptance (Schenk et al., 2007). The permanence of productivist values and attitudes within an environmentally friendly agriculture has already been addressed in other contexts (e.g. Burton and Wilson, 2006). In this specific case, harsh economic pressures result in farmers having no choice but to apply “voluntary” AES. The sustainability of such a political design is doubtful. Innovative approaches of agro-environmental schemes show how important the social and cultural dimensions are in implementing long-lasting change in farming practices and values (Burton and Paragahawewa, 2011; Burton and Schwarz, 2012). With the equivalent of 50 000 \$US spent every year on every Swiss farm in the name of multifunctionality, the Swiss agricultural policy should seriously engage these arguments. If the Swiss foodscape has to evolve towards a more sustainable system, it becomes urgent to understand better how farmers could engage in a long-term cultural evolution of farming.

Switzerland’s “direct democracy” model further enhances their role as a potential exemplar. Firstly, important policy change cannot be implemented without a general agreement at the national level, as referendums can always stop unwanted political change. Furthermore, farmers find themselves, through the agricultural policy, exposed directly to the political will of the urban majority who is (arguably) increasingly disconnected from the land. This situation impacts on both sides of the political process. On one hand, farmers have to make special efforts to give a good image of the national agriculture. On the other hand, non-farming citizens share an increased responsibility in the development of the national agri-food landscape. The particular position of the Swiss citizen connects with discussions on the new role played by citizen/consumers in present agri-food systems (Johnston, 2008).

These specificities indicate that there are real needs for more sociological research on agri-food issues in Switzerland. Furthermore, the country appears to be a promising case study to explore pathways towards more sustainable and fair agri-food systems.

Conclusion

Throughout the three periods identified in this review, both the “rural” and the scientific paradigms applied to study it have evolved in parallel: from the peasant to the farmer, from the village to the farm; from the community to the professional group, and so on. Firstly, the folklorists were describing meticulously a disappearing “traditional culture”. Then, the anthropologists and sociologists of the 1970s were analysing the changes that occur when “little communities” meet modernity. Finally, since the 1990s, social scientists have been focusing on farming issues and in particular the present challenges imposed by political and economic changes.

The story told in this paper will probably sound familiar to many. Most of Switzerland’s neighbouring countries have witnessed a similar evolution of rural research (Hervieu and Purseigle, 2008). However, some unique aspects can be identified. Swiss rural research has, throughout its development, straddled two major academic traditions and languages – French and German. This situation has contributed to the scattering of rural research across several disciplines and scientific networks, and hindered the unification needed in order to establish rural studies as an independent and significant field. The absence of an institutionalized rural sociology could be either cause or consequence of this division. Furthermore, social sciences were given no role in the modernization of the Swiss countryside. This contrasts with most of the other western European countries, which have adopted the American rural sociology project based on technology transfer and extension process (Lowe, 2010). The little research that existed remained in an academic “white tower”.

This paper aims to call for renewed social sciences research on rural and agri-food issues. This does not mean to refocus only on farmers in a classical rural sociology way. It has long been demonstrated how important other factors are in the understanding of farming or rural issues. This is even more accurate in the Swiss context where urban and rural are spatially and socially very close. However, farmers and the farm level should not be forgotten in sociological analysis of the agri-food sector. By being at the contact point between social and natural processes, they still play a key role in the shaping of more sustainable futures and “novel realities”.

Short Biography

Jérémy Forney’s research focuses on the adaptation of Swiss dairy farmers to the political and economic changes that occurred since the late 1990s: the progressive liberalization of market and the rise of “multifunctionality-based” policies. This main topic leads to a broad approach of family farming from a socio-cultural point of view, encompassing professional identities, farm management, analysis of political and economic frameworks, and landscape representations. Today, he leads a new research project on emerging alternative networks in the Swiss dairy industry at the Bern University for Applied Sciences. Besides, he is working with colleagues from different countries on the concept of autonomy as a key to understand farmers’ adaptation to processes of neoliberalization. He holds an MA and a PhD in anthropology from the University of Neuchâtel, Switzerland. In recent past, he spent 18 months in New Zealand for a postdoctoral research on farm conversion and dairy farming at the Centre for Sustainability (CSAFE), University of Otago.

Note

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