Enacting Rural Sociology:
Or what are the creativity claims
of the engaged sciences

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ESRS Congress 2009
• what constitutes (European) rural sociology as a common enterprise?

• what broader role should it perform?

• what are its creativity claims? And, more generally, the creativity claims of the engaged sciences?
The Creativity of the Engaged Sciences

The engaged sciences work with the mess of the world.

The history of rural sociology shows that its creativity does not largely stem from the application of ideas from ‘pure’ science.

The creativity is located instead in ‘the pursuit of ideas in action’
How can the social sciences enact novel realities?

Discursive creativity, through the circulation of their ideas

What...?

How....?

Methodological creativity, through the circulation of their research methods, tools and techniques
How can the social sciences enact novel realities?

• public opinion is taken as a classic case of an artefact of the technical procedures that capture it.

• the social sciences create phenomena through the procedures they establish to discover them.

• How does rural research make real rural worlds?
Early US Rural Sociology

• A product of Progressive Era (1900s/1910s)
• Country Life Commission led to:
  - USDA’s Division of Farm Population and Rural Life to investigate rural conditions
  - a nation-wide Extension Service based on the land-grant colleges, to offer community instruction in agriculture and home economics
• A demand for rural sociologists
• Influenced by the philosophy of pragmatism, they saw themselves as service intellectuals
US Rural Sociology in the 1930s/1940s

- The nexus of land-grant colleges, extension services and USDA massively mobilised in the New Deal

- USDA’s Division of Farm Population and Rural Life at its peak employed 57 professional staff, budget $0.5 million, supported by hundreds of researchers and extension workers across the U.S.

- Social scientists became influential in farm politics
US rural sociology: an antecedent of European rural sociology

Fields of research established in US by the 1940s

- community studies
- rural social structure
- rural demography
- sociology of agriculture
- rural institutions
- rural values and attitudes

Research methods established in US by the 1940s

- community survey
- sociometric techniques
- participation indices
- representative sampling techniques
- regional analysis
- participatory planning techniques
- opinion polls
- standard of living scale
- attitude surveys
- service catchment analysis
- residence histories
- participant observation strategies
- census projections
- family life cycle analysis
Mid-Century US Rural Sociology

- Not derivative of sociology
- Other formative intellectual relationships
- Identification with sociology implied commitment to an intellectual and social mission, not a mode of abstract reasoning
- New Deal provided opportunities for large-scale experimentation
- Engaged social scientists perform expertise, not theory

“Doing research while operating under the white heat of imminent and imperative action is a hectic and sometimes precarious undertaking. Administrators can’t wait. The research worker is, therefore, asked for judgments of which he is not sure. But if our science has a body of knowledge and understanding, built up over years, all that knowledge can and should be brought to bear on a moment’s notice” (Taylor 1941)
US Rural Sociology in the 1950s

- 1953 – “the political purge of rural sociology from the government”

- It continued to exist in very localised and often conservative contexts

- Rural sociologists emphasised the technical rigour of their work and associated themselves with the technological success of American agriculture
Professor of Sociology, Wageningen Agricultural University (1946-80)
Founder President, European Society for Rural Sociology (1957-70)

“European rural sociology is heavily indebted to American rural sociology, and perhaps in the end this mental Marshall aid will be as effective as the material one has been” (1963)
Key Assumptions in the Trans-Atlantic Transfer of Rural Sociology

• The Nature of Modern Science: Empiricism

“Sociology nowadays is primarily an empirical science” (1964)

“by careful gathering of data by means of fieldwork and by an equally careful processing of these data by statistical methods, the Americans introduced a new type of research which changed the face of sociology drastically” (1963)
Key Assumptions in the Trans-Atlantic Transfer of Rural Sociology

• The Nature of Modern Society: A Mass, Progressive Society

“American rural sociological research is based on the assumption of a mass society” (1963)

The focus is on “the adjustment of citizens to the existing social order … the adjustment of the farmer to the existing technical and economic possibilities” (1968)
Key Assumptions in the Trans-Atlantic Transfer of Rural Sociology

- The Nature of World Order: Liberal Internationalism

“If rural sociology is to develop as a science in Europe, cooperation is essential, especially international cooperation” (1960).

ESRS formed in 1957 committed to “international cooperation and exchange of experience”

ESRS in 1964 convenes the first World Congress of Rural Sociology. Leading Americans attending declare it “an index of the concern of the rural sociologists in the Western world for the growth of the field elsewhere”
Marshall Aid Propaganda
“Although American work can be of great value to us, conditions and problems in America are different from those that we have to face” (1960)
European Difference

• **Modernisation the priority**
  “our backward farmers are backward not only socially and culturally, but also economically and technically” (1960).

• **Non-acceptance of Technological Determinism**
  “in contrast to American rural sociology, it is an unavoidable necessity for European rural sociologists to take into account culture as an important and independent variable” (1963).

• **A Pluralistic View of Modernity**
  “In Europe, between an infinite number of regional groups within every country, there are differences in culture, which influence the behaviour of those groups considerably” (1963).
“Will rural sociology in Europe follow the same line as in America? Partly it will, partly it will not … I am thinking of a possible, somewhat deviating, development of rural sociology in Europe” (1963).

“Rural sociology in Europe will be greatly aided by an international comparison of the problems studied, the research methods used, the scientific findings and the practical results. Comparative studies in different countries will furnish a broader and deeper understanding” (1960).
## American/European Differences

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<th>The responsiveness of individuals</th>
<th>The functioning of the social group</th>
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<td>Technological progress of farming</td>
<td>Modernisation of rural society</td>
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<td>Assumed cultural homogeneity</td>
<td>Cultural heterogeneity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Statistical generalisation in pursuit of positivistic knowledge</td>
<td>Qualitative description in aid of comparative understanding</td>
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The Creativity of European Rural Sociology in 20th Century

ESRS/Sociologia Ruralis provided:

- a platform for exploring oppositional perspectives towards technological determinism

- a supporting rhetoric for an active rural social, structural and regional policy within EC

- evidence for a heterogeneous rurality (taken up through e.g. Leader or European Model of Agriculture)

- a dialectical relationship with US rural sociology, leading to the “new rural sociology” of the 1980s/1990s
Methodological Creativity in the 21st Century
Re-Inventing the Rural: Between the Social and the Natural

1. Mobilities and Stabilities in Rural Space

2. The Rural Bites Back

3. Animal Farm

4. Sustainable Ruralities

5. The Sciences of the Rural
The Sciences of the Rural
Social Sciences and Technical R&D

- **1950s-1970s** – Technological optimism: ‘end of pipe’ facilitation

- **1970s-1990s** – Technological opposition: detachment and critique

- **2000s** – **Upfront engagement** in the design of socio-technical change?