

Zeitschrift: Agrarwirtschaft und Agrarsoziologie = Économie et sociologie rurales [1980-2007]
Herausgeber: Schweizerische Gesellschaft für Agrarwirtschaft und Agrarsoziologie
Band: - (2004)
Heft: 2

Artikel: Rural sociology in the Netherlands : past, present and future
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-966634>

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Rural Sociology in the Netherlands: Past, present and future

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1. Introduction

Rural sociology is to be understood as an applied scientific discipline, which operates at the crossroads of two scientific disciplines: the social sciences and the agricultural sciences. Rural sociology is to be regarded as a social science (i.e. broader than just sociology) in terms of its theoretical framework and methodological approach. Regarding its research domain rural sociology clearly belongs to the agricultural sciences. “*Operating between two ‘academic giants’, rural sociology is a ‘dwarf’*”, who’s right of existence needs to be legitimised time and again (Van der Ploeg, 2001: 41). According to Van der Ploeg (ibid) rural sociology’s right of existence is legitimised by two key words: *locus* and *focus* (cf. Brunt, 1996). In general the *locus* of rural sociology can be described as the (socio-economic) dynamics of agriculture, rural areas and food production and consumption. However, the specific *locus* has changed in the course of time as agriculture, rural areas and food production and consumption have undergone dramatic changes in the past decades. In addition to this *locus* rural sociology also has its own particular *focus*, i.e. its specific theoretical concepts and methodologies. Also these have changed and evolved over time.

In this paper I will discuss the specificity and the evolution of the *locus* and *focus* of rural sociology in The Netherlands. I will do so by describing and reflecting upon the development of the research programme of the Rural Sociology Group of Wageningen University and its theoretical concepts and methodological approaches. The reason for focussing on Wageningen University has to do with the simple fact that this is the only Dutch University with a rural sociological research and education programme.

The overview of the past, present and future of rural sociology in The Netherlands will start in 1946, when E.W. Hofstee was appointed as the first Professor of Rural Sociology, resulting in the establishment of the Department of Sociology several years later.¹ In the development of Dutch rural sociology since its start, four episodes can be distinguished of which each represents a specific combination of *locus* and *focus*:

1. Modernising agriculture and farmers
2. Questioning the effects of modernisation
3. Criticising the agricultural modernisation model
4. Developing an alternative development model

In this paper I will discuss these four episodes as four separate sections. I will conclude by outlining the future *locus* and *focus* of rural sociology in the Netherlands.

2. Modernising agriculture and farmers

Embedding rural sociology in the agricultural sciences

The initial objective of rural sociology in the Netherlands is to be understood against the background of its academic setting, i.e. the agricultural sciences. In 1946, when Wageningen University was still an Agricultural College, the technical and applied economic and natural sciences dominated the academic scene. In his inaugural lecture Hofstee (1946) discussed the causes of inter-regional diversity in Dutch agriculture. The then prevailing agricultural sciences explained diversity in terms of differential physical-geographical conditions, differential distances vis-à-vis markets and differences in the general economic conditions of the region. According to Hofstee (ibid: 24) *“the structure of agricultural life in a particular region cannot just be seen as a sum of attempts ... to adapt oneself to the conditions one is facing. This structure can to a large extent, sometimes even decisively, be determined by consciously or unconsciously shared (within a specific social group) ideals, images and thoughts, which in their origin are detached from economic considera-*

¹ Formally Hofstee was appointed as Professor of Social and Economic Geography and Social Statistics. The name of the department was initially Sociology and Social Geography; later this changed into Sociology of the Western Areas, Sociology and finally Rural Sociology.

tions” (my translation). To conceptualise this sociologically based inter-regional agricultural diversity, Hofstee introduced the notion of farming style: *“a general accepted opinion, shared by a more or less coherent group of persons, about the way farming ought to be carried out”* (ibid: 21; my translation). With this concept and the thorough empirical analysis on which it was based, Hofstee clearly demonstrated the added value of a social sciences approach for the agricultural sciences. In his first years Hofstee’s efforts focussed on institutionalising sociology within the university, resulting in the establishment of the Department of Sociology and Social Geography several years later. Another achievement of Hofstee was that it first became possible for students to major in Rural Sociology in 1956 (Anonymous, 1997). These milestones are to be seen as a general recognition, by the university, of the value of rural sociology for the agricultural sciences.

Dutch agricultural policy (1950 – 1972)

In 1950 the Dutch government launched its post Second World War national agricultural policy, which was characterised by the following goals (Anonymous, 1950):

1. Self sufficiency in food supply at a low price for consumers;
2. Enhancement of the export of agricultural products through increase of production (per animal, per unit of land and per unit of labour) to improve the national balance of payments;
3. A reasonable income and social life for those working in agriculture (through price guarantees for agricultural products).

Initially the government introduced a set of instruments aimed to support the intensification of production. As self sufficiency in food supply was already achieved by the mid 1950's the second goal of the Dutch agricultural policy gradually became dominant and began to overrule the third goal (Wiskerke, 1997). Agricultural modernisation, characterised by increasing productivity, mechanisation, specialisation and bulk production, constituted the corner stone of agricultural policy, science and technological development from the mid 1950's onwards. This is, for instance, illustrated by a remark made in 1954 by the Dutch Minister of Agriculture, Sicco Mansholt, who stated that the goal of Dutch agricultural policy is *“to create the economic conditions that enable agriculture to contribute as much as possible to domestic prosperity. If agriculture is to continue this contribution, then a reasonable living for those working on well-managed farms needs to be ensured. The desire that agriculture*

creates as much employment as possible may never hamper a healthy mechanisation of the agricultural labour process" (Schaap 1983: 28; my translation). By the end of the 1950's the Dutch government was of the opinion that the process agricultural modernisation had to be intensified. Therefore the government launched its structural development policy. Structural development of the agricultural sector was to be realised through scale enlargement, intensification, specialisation and 'farm simplification' (i.e. externalisation of tasks). For this the following policy instruments were introduced:

- Land reallocation and reconstruction measures;
- Development and reconstruction funds;
- Support policies for closure of small farms.

Within this structural development policy the role of farmers' unions and the extension services was to remove the mental obstructions (of farmers) against the 'necessary and inevitable' modernisation of Dutch agriculture (ibid: 105). Farmers' unions encouraged their members to invest in the improvement of the farm structure: *"Agricultural entrepreneurs (with the exception of horticulturalists) are hesitant to obtain credit. This proves to be a barrier for doing in itself responsible investments. By means of intensified socio-economic extension a more commercial attitude towards financial investments will have to be achieved"* (Anonymous, 1961: 22-23; my translation). In addition to this, the farmers' unions also, albeit gradually, became convinced that the number of farms had to be reduced in order to modernise Dutch agriculture: *"Farm enlargement should remain the central policy objective. The viable farm of the future will require a larger size than the current average farm size. ... Participation of farmers in the growing domestic prosperity is only possible if the number of farmers and farms decreases and the production per labour unit increases"* (Anonymous, 1970: 9; my translation). In retrospect one can conclude that the Dutch agricultural modernisation policy has been extremely successful in terms of achieving some of its objectives: for instance, the average farm size doubled between 1950 and 1970 (and even quadrupled between 1950 and 2000) and the number of farms decreased by 60 % between 1950 and 1970 (and even by more than 75 % between 1950 and 2000) (Wiskerke, 1997, 2001a).

On traditional and modern-dynamic cultural patterns

The Dutch agricultural policy, as briefly discussed and outlined above, constituted the background and framework for the *locus* and *focus* of

rural sociology between the early 1950's and the early 1970's. Departing from a sociological interest in inter-regional agricultural diversity (i.e. different farming styles) Hofstee became increasingly interested in the agricultural modernisation process, in particular in the question why certain farmers were willing (or able) to modernise, while others seemed unwilling or unable to do so (Oosterveer & Spaargaren, 2001). To understand and analyse the modernisation process in agriculture, rural sociology developed the concepts of *traditional cultural pattern* versus *modern-dynamic cultural pattern* (Hofstee, 1960; Benvenuti, 1962; Bergsma, 1963). A cultural pattern is to be understood as "*the mental heritage of a specific social group, its norms, ambitions, ideals, opinions and images, etc...*" (Hofstee, 1960: 8; my translation). Following this dichotomy, also labelled as differential sociology, the past is the norm for judging the behaviour of oneself and others in the traditional cultural pattern, while in the modern-dynamic cultural pattern change is generally perceived as positive (Oosterveer & Spaargaren, 2001). According to Hofstee (1960) the level to which farmers had internalised the modern-dynamic cultural pattern depended on a range of variables. However, the degree of socio-cultural isolation and the level of interaction with the outside world (i.e. the more urbanised world) appeared to be decisive. These parameters could be measured and quantified, as was demonstrated by the empirical studies of Benvenuti (1962) and Bergsma (1963).² Hofstee (1960) explained the relevance and importance of the differential sociological approach for Dutch agricultural policy by showing that, within a particular region characterised by similar physical-geographical conditions for all farms, the annual labour productivity on farms of modern-dynamic farmers was 30 to 40 % higher than on farms of traditional farmers.

Towards the production of expert knowledge

In the course of the 1950's and 1960's rural sociology gradually shifted from analysing the modernisation process aimed at understanding its socio-cultural dynamics at farm level towards producing expert knowledge to be used in the policy-making process aimed at facilitating the transformation from traditional to modern agriculture (Oosterveer & Spaargaren, 2001). The role of rural sociology in this modernisation

² An illustrative example of this is for instance the distance (in meters) between the farm family's house and the paved road as an indicator for the level of socio-cultural isolation. Benvenuti (1962) showed that this distance was positively correlated with the degree to which farmers were still traditional.

process was to produce empirical facts and findings on how to effectively modernise Dutch farmers and thereby Dutch agriculture. In this, a thorough understanding of the conditions constituting the different cultural patterns was considered to be indispensable, especially for actors such as extensionists, spatial planners and agricultural policy-makers (Hofstee, 1960). If Dutch agriculture was to modernise, then these actors had to remove the barriers (as identified by means of empirical sociological research on cultural patterns), which prohibited the transformation from traditionalism to modernity. This vision on the role of rural sociology implied an intensification of the interaction between rural sociology on the one hand and agricultural modernisation and agricultural policy-making on the other hand. Rural sociology thus became part and parcel of agricultural modernisation and succeeded in producing expert knowledge that was increasingly considered *“as relevant as that produced by the technical agricultural sciences. In fact so well had rural sociology done its job that, in the early 1970s, Hofstee concluded that its task was virtually concluded”* (Anonymous, 1997: 2). The fact that Dutch agriculture had, to a large extent, become modern as well as the establishment of new university departments as Extension Science and Spatial Planning, which had emerged from rural sociology, contributed to Hofstee’s conclusion. In the remaining years of his professorship Hofstee turned to historical sociology and most of his staff dispersed to the newly established departments and other universities (ibid).

3. Questioning the effects of modernisation

Rural sociology in crisis

The ‘golden age’ (Anonymous, 1997) of Dutch rural sociology (the 1950s and 1960s) was followed by a period of disarray and misery, characterised by confusion and conflicts about the *locus* and *focus* of rural sociology (De Haan & Nooij, 1985; Oosterveer & Spaargaren, 2001; Van der Ploeg, 1995a): should rural sociology continue to study, build upon and contribute to the modernisation process or should new directions be pursued? This state of crisis was not just characteristic for Dutch rural sociology but for European rural sociology in general. According to Benvenuti *et al.* (1975) this was due to:

1. The close relationship between rural sociological research and governmental and agricultural agencies, resulting in a situation whereby

the object of research was defined “*for the rural sociologist by these agencies rather than by him for the theoretical progress of the discipline*” (ibid: 8).

2. The strong emphasis on empiricism, leading to a situation in which fact finding dominated. This implied that rural sociology had become a deductive empiricist discipline, producing “*a multitude of facts, but little knowledge of what they mean*” (ibid: 9). Again, this was due to the close liaison with the above mentioned agencies, as these preferred standardised data.
3. The positivist stance of rural sociology, characterised by a strong reliance on the survey method. As a consequence the outputs of rural sociology were mainly “*descriptions of rural social organisations and membership participation, the diffusion of innovations, and attitude data*” and hardly interpretations of social interaction and social structure (ibid: 9).

De Haan & Nooij (1985) added a fourth reason for rural sociology’s crisis in the 1970s: methodological individualism. Due to the close liaison with governmental and agricultural agencies, the emphasis on fact finding and the dominance of the survey method the cultural pattern theory became individualised: “*without taking into account the social context, every farmer was assessed to which degree he participated in the modern-dynamic cultural pattern*” (ibid: 13; my translation).

The thorough self-assessment of its state of disarray and misery, resulted, after some years, in a reorientation of the *locus* and *focus* of Dutch rural sociology. New issues, such as the growth of the agribusiness and its subsequent impact on farmers’ autonomy and dependence, social cohesion and liveability of rural areas, the role of women on family farms and environmental concerns appeared on the rural sociological agenda (De Haan & Nooij, 1985; Oosterveer & Spaargaren, 2001; Van der Ploeg, 1995a). Characteristic for these new issues is that they all questioned, in one way or the other, the impact and consequences of agricultural modernisation. With this shift in *locus* also a shift in *focus* occurred. In the next section I will discuss one prominent example of this shift.

From empiricist individualism to theoretical institutionalism

The developments in Dutch rural sociology in the late 1970s and early 1980s can best be described as a shift from empiricist individualism to a more theoretically based institutional sociological approach (De Haan &

Nooij, 1985). This shift in *focus* is most profoundly illustrated by Benvenuti's TATE-theory (Benvenuti, 1975, 1982). TATE is an abbreviation for Technical and Administrative Task Environment. It refers to "*the whole of institutions that increasingly structure and (de)legitimise the management of individual farms*" (Benvenuti, 1982: 112; my translation). The institutions constituting TATE are amongst others the agricultural industries, banks, traders and the extension services. According to the TATE-theory, TATE expropriates parts of the farm, resulting in an important reallocation of the decision-making power (from the farm to the TATE institutions). As such TATE, according to Benvenuti (ibid: 117), increasingly structures the development of individual farms. In this the technologies developed by TATE play a crucial role. In this respect Benvenuti (ibid: 122) developed the concept of *technology-as-language* to explain how farm development is being structured by TATE: "*technology is an ordering principle. Technology is an explicit language as it specifies the conditions under which it should be deployed. It is also explicit regarding the goals at which its use should be aimed*" (my translation). In other words, the technologies (i.e. artefacts and services) developed by TATE contain prescriptions specifying how they should be used by farmers. In retrospect the TATE-theory has been criticised by rural sociologists (De Bruin, 1997; Wiskerke, 1997) for being too deterministic as it *a priori* assumes the structuration of farm development by TATE. Faced with this criticism, Benvenuti (1997) responded that in the late 1970s and early 1980s he perceived TATE as an "*emerging reality despite its invisibility. Analytically spoken, to me TATE was a conceptual tool for understanding and answering the question: how is the room for manoeuvre of individual farmers being restricted? The reason for posing this question – I realise now – was embedded in the somewhat simplistic assumption that this was the most relevant rural sociological question in those days*" (my translation). In other words, the TATE-concept was first and foremost a research program that gradually transformed into a theory in which a certain degree of *a priori* determinism started to prevail. Nevertheless, Benvenuti's TATE-theory has been a major contribution to rural sociology, particularly due to its institutional sociological approach (De Haan & Nooij, 1985). Until today it still inspires rural sociologists and economists, especially because of its many resemblances with theoretical concepts developed by neo-institutional economists and sociologists of science and technology (see e.g. Ventura & Milone, 2004; Roep & Wiskerke, 2004).

4. Criticising the agricultural modernisation model

The actor-oriented approach

In the course of the 1980s the *locus* of rural sociology shifted towards a more reflexive analysis of the agricultural modernisation process. That period of time was characterised by vivid theoretical debates about actor, agency and structure (Oosterveer & Spaargaren, 2001). The Wageningen position in this debate was characterised by the development of a new *focus*: the actor-oriented approach (see e.g. Long, 1997). According to the actor-oriented approach *“farmers define and operationalise their objectives and farm management practices on the basis of different criteria, interests, experiences and perspectives. That is, farmers develop, through time, specific projects and practices on how their farming is to be organised”* (Long & Van der Ploeg, 1994: 70). The actor-oriented approach also made a strong plea for a definitive *“adieu to structure as explanans”* (ibid: 80), however, without neglecting the effects of social, technical, economic and political factors on the practice of farming.

The labour process approach

An important building block for the actor-oriented approach was the incorporation of the labour process approach in rural sociology (Van der Ploeg, 1995a). This was perceived by other authors (e.g. Marsden, 1990) as a crucial step forwards, resulting in a revitalisation, demarcation, specification and theoretical foundation of rural sociology. The labour process approach combines three elements which were considered to be indispensable for a thorough understanding of agriculture as a heterogeneous and highly diversified social practice (Van der Ploeg 1991):

1. The production and reproduction process in agriculture;
2. Farmers as knowledgeable and capable actors;
3. The socio-technical relations farmers engage in, maintain and transform and which shape their daily life and work.

The specificity of agriculture is, according to Van der Ploeg (1991, 1995a) situated in the unique nature of the agricultural labour process. First, the agricultural labour process is an artisanal process, characterised by a close interaction between mental and manual labour (in contrast to the industrial labour process). Second, the agricultural labour

process involves the transformation of living matter (animals, plants, ecosystems) into products. Van der Ploeg (1995a: 253) states that the crossroads of artisanal production and the transformation of living matter explain the superiority of the family business as well as simple commodity production as the dominant organisational form (see also Long *et al.*, 1986).

The farming styles research programme

With the reflexive analysis of agricultural modernisation as overarching *locus* and the actor-oriented approach, and more specifically the labour process approach, as *focus* Van der Ploeg, who was appointed as professor of rural sociology in 1992, launched a new research programme at the beginning of the 1990s. This research programme, which became known as the farming styles research programme, aimed to explore, describe and analyse diversity in farming practices and agricultural development. At the same time the farming styles research program implied a critique of the agricultural modernisation model. The latter assumed that agricultural modernisation would lead to a uniform way of agricultural production, disconnected from locality (Oosterveer & Spaargaren, 2001). Inspired by neo-classical economy the modernisation model was based on the assumption that markets and technology determine the shape, contents, direction and pace of agricultural development. Furthermore, vis-à-vis markets and technology there is, according to the neo-classical approach, only one optimal position. Different positions vis-à-vis markets and technology can, from that point of view, therefore be classified in terms of 'good' and 'bad' agricultural entrepreneurship (Wiskerke, 1997). Van der Ploeg (1994: 9) however argued that markets and technology constitute a room for manoeuvre, in which different positions are the result of strategic action: *"Farmers themselves, as social actors, are able to define and influence the way they relate their farming activity to markets and technology. Distantiation from and/or integration into markets and technology ... is the object of strategic reasoning, embedded in local history, ecology and prevailing politico-economic relations"*. These different positions were conceptualised as different farming styles, a concept which was developed by Hofstee, the founding father of Dutch rural sociology. While Hofstee developed this notion to explain inter-regional diversity in agriculture, Van der Ploeg re-introduced it to explain intra-regional agricultural diversity. Farming styles, according to Van der Ploeg (1994: 18) represent a specific unity of farming discourse and practice (i.e. a specific unity of mental and manual labour), entail a specific organisation of the labour proc-

ess and represent a specific set of interlinkages between the farm and its techno-institutional environment. In the course of the 1990s numerous farming styles studies were conducted in the Netherlands to explore and analyse diversity in dairy farming (e.g. De Bruin, 1997), horticulture (Spaan & Van der Ploeg, 1992), intensive livestock husbandry (Commandeur 2003) and arable farming (Wiskerke, 1997). The farming styles research programme demonstrated that notwithstanding the fact that Dutch agriculture had, in general, developed along the guiding principles of agricultural modernisation, this development had been far from unilinear and uniform. On the contrary, diversity in Dutch agriculture had increased significantly over the years (Van der Ploeg, 1995b). Furthermore, by adopting a Chayanovian approach³ to the analysis of farm economic accounts, the farming styles research programme led to the conclusion that there are different strategies to earn a good income. In addition, the research programme also demonstrated significant differences between farming styles regarding environmental pressure, regarding the (im)possibilities to combine primary production with other functions (e.g. nature conservation and landscape management), etcetera. I will illustrate this by elaborating briefly on the results of my PhD study on farming styles in arable agriculture in the Dutch province of Zeeland (Wiskerke, 1997).

Farming styles in arable farming

Farming styles in arable agriculture represent different patterns of organisation of the agricultural production and reproduction process. In this process, three phases can be distinguished:

1. *The mobilisation of resources* such as soil, nutrients, seeds and planting materials. Resources can be mobilised in two different ways:
 - Autonomous mobilisation through the on-farm reproduction of soil fertility⁴ and seeds and planting materials;

³ Van der Ploeg (1995b) states that a Chayanovian approach complies much better with the strategic notions and associated practices of family farming than the neo-classical approach as the first takes real costs and interests into consideration while the latter is based on calculated costs and interests, thereby obscuring relevant differences.

⁴ For instance by means of an extensive crop rotation scheme, the cultivation of *Leguminosae* due to its capability to fix nitrogen and/or mixed farming systems (i.e. combining crop and livestock production) enabling the use of on-farm produced manure.

- Market-dependent mobilisation through the purchase of nutrients, seeds and planting materials.
2. *Conversion of resources* by means of labour and technology. Labour and technology can, according to Bray (1986), be deployed in two different ways:
 - Re-valorisation of labour through the use of skill-oriented technologies;
 - Reduction of labour through the use of mechanical technologies.
 3. *Commercialisation of products*. This third phase refers to the relations between the farm and the outlet. Again, two different patterns are feasible:
 - Production for specific transparent niche markets;
 - Production for the mainstream anonymous bulk market.

These three phases constitute a three-dimensional room for manoeuvre in which different positions (i.e. farming styles) are possible. Empirical research demonstrated the existence of six coherent though mutually distinctive patterns of organising the (re)production process, in other words, of six different arable farming styles (see figure 1). These farming styles were labelled according to the folk concepts used by arable farmers. Table 1 gives a brief overview of the characteristics of each farming style. Together, figure 1 and table 1 clearly demonstrate that farmers deliberately organise the (re)production process in a particular manner, based upon a specific set of norms and values on how farming ought to be carried out.

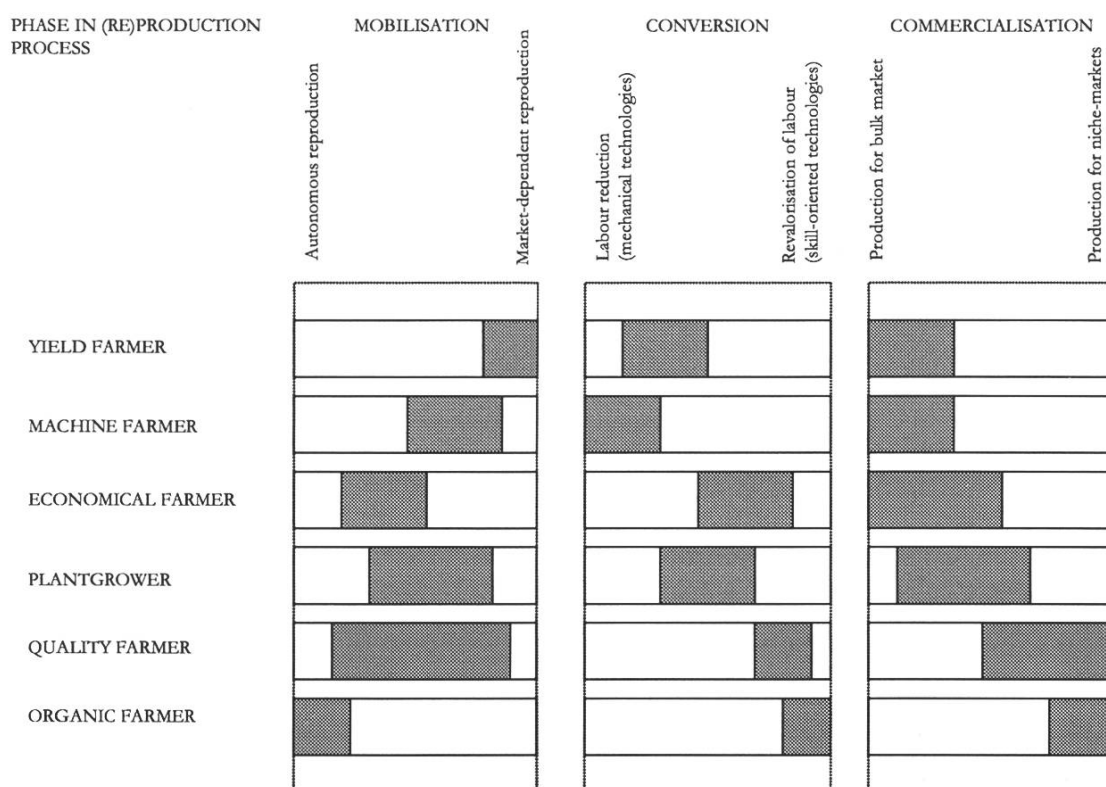


Figure 1: Social map of the diversity in arable agriculture in the province of Zeeland (source: Wiskerke, 1997).

Table 1: Characteristics of farming styles in arable agriculture in the province of Zeeland (source: Wiskerke, 2001a)

Farming style	Characteristics	Illustrative farmers' discourses
Yield farmer	High share of potatoes, sugar beets and unions in crop rotation scheme; high yields per hectare; high input of fertiliser and pesticides	"I always aim for the highest possible yields."
Machine farmer	Minimise manual labour; high degree of mechanisation; specialised in typical arable bulk crops (wheat, potatoes, sugar beets); production for bulk markets	"Our farm management is primarily aimed at reducing manual labour as much as possible". "The key issue is to keep the cultivation costs as low as possible."
Economical farmer	Low costs for mechanisation, fertilisers and pesticides; high share of cereals in crop rotation scheme; high share of own property	"We follow the principle of first earning money and then spending it. Borrowing money is a very last remedy." "We don't mind to do a lot of manual work on weed control, especially because it saves us money on herbicides."
Plant grower	Craftsmanship; focus on soil management; high technical efficiency	"Knowing your soil and taking care of it, that is what farming should be based upon." "Inspecting your crops regularly is crucial. Based upon this, you should decide on the activities to undertake."
Quality farmer	Labour intensive crops; high demand for manual labour; production for niche markets; high added value	"The more labour intensive a crop is, the more you can earn." "First of all you should focus on the quality of your product. This is time consuming, but it pays off."
Organic farmer	No use of chemical fertiliser and pesticides; labour intensive; production for niche market.	"We refuse to produce for an anonymous surplus market. That is why we converted to organic."

The different farming styles not only represent different practices and discourses, but also a specific distribution of costs and revenues (see table 2). Table 2 gives an overview of the farm economic results of typi-

cal representatives of each farming style⁵ compared to the average economic results of all farms from which economic data were obtained.

Table 2: Farm economic results (in Dutch guilders) of different arable farming styles in the province of Zeeland in 1991 (source: Wiskerke, 1997)

	Yield farmer (n = 7)	Machine farmer (n = 4)	Economi- cal farmer (n = 3)	Plant grower (n = 7)	Quality farmer (n = 6)	All farms (n = 50)
Costs (per ha)						
Labour	1255	805	1488	1063	1144	1204
Contract work	603	211	399	270	413	473
Machines	1030	1193	902	1213	1145	1060
Total cultivation costs	2887	2209	2790	2545	2702	2736
Fertiliser & manure	416	320	266	253	325	332
Seeds & planting materials	538	512	223	487	790	521
Pesticides	585	403	271	391	518	450
Variable costs	249	244	156	234	283	272
Total costs	6311	5089	5265	5396	6200	5882
Financial results						
GVP per labour unit	262.146	341.903	180.084	288.836	311.800	270.519
GVP per hectare	5788	4986	4557	5422	6493	5452
Net result	-21.470	-10585	-22.580	1646	20.224	-27.950
Yields per hectare (index)	111	97	103	108	98	100
Price per kg (index)	95	94	102	102	110	100

⁵ The organic farmers were not represented in the set of farm economic accounts. The farming styles were constructed using principal components analysis. Farms with a relative score > 1 on a particular component were considered to be typical representatives of a particular farming style (Wiskerke, 1997).

Table 2 indicates that in all farming styles an above average net result can be achieved as long as the style is optimised according to its rationale. Van der Ploeg (1995b) reached a similar conclusion for the different dairy farming styles in the province of Friesland. At the same time table 2 demonstrates that each style is better than the others regarding its own optimisation criteria. For instance, yield farmers aim to maximise their yields and do so, to a large extent, through a high input of fertilisers and pesticides. This strategy results in the highest yields of all farming styles but also in high costs for fertilisers and pesticides. An economical farmer will assess this negatively as he aims to keep these costs as low as possible, and does so partly by means of a high (manual) labour input. This way of working will, in its turn, be rejected by machine farmers as they aim to keep labour costs as low as possible. Of all styles the machine farmers do realise the lowest labour costs per ha. The plant growers aim for a high technical efficiency, i.e. realising relative high yields with relative low inputs. Finally the style of the quality farmers is characterised by retaining as much value added on the farm as possible, which is illustrated by the highest price per kilogram product and by the highest GVP per hectare of all farming styles.

The farming styles research programme has had a major impact on Dutch agricultural sciences. Although its findings were strongly criticised at first by technical and economic scientists, the underlying notion of meaningful diversity gradually was accepted and used by other scientific disciplines (see e.g. Almekinders *et al.*, 1995). The conclusions of the research programme also had, according to rural sociologists, implications for agri-environmental policy-making: policies should focus on the goals to be realised and not prescribe the means to realise these goals. Instead, farmers should have the freedom to choose those means most suitable to their own farming style. Finally the farming styles research had an important emancipating effect on the farming community. Farming styles that were considered to be irrelevant or outdated within the modernisation paradigm, such as the economical farmers, were made visible and given the scientific recognition of their merits.

5. Developing an alternative model

The farming styles research programme in the Netherlands provided the onset for a European research programme, which focuses on describing and analysing the diversity, dynamics, impact and potentials of rural development practices in Europe by means of a multidisciplinary comparative approach (Van der Ploeg & Van Dijk, 1995; Van der Ploeg & Long, 1994; Van der Ploeg *et al.*, 2003). This research programme was launched at a time of vivid and at present still ongoing, scientific and political debates about the future of Europe's agriculture and rural areas. According to Marsden (2003) these debates centre around three different models, which are currently competing in shaping agriculture and rural space:

1. The *agro-industrial model*: an accelerated modernisation, industrialisation and globalisation of standardised food production characterised by high levels of production, long food supply chains, decreasing value of primary production and economies of scale.
2. The *post-productivist model*: the countryside as a consumption space characterised by the marginalisation of agriculture (due to its low share in Gross National Production), the provision of private and public rural services and the protection of rural nature and landscape as a consumption good to be exploited by the urban population.
3. The *sustainable rural development model*: the integration of agriculture, nature, landscape, tourism and private and public rural services, characterised by re-embedded short food supply chains, multifunctional agriculture, rural livelihoods, new institutional arrangements and economies of scope.

By examining models and strategies alternative to the pattern and internal logic of agricultural modernisation, Dutch rural sociology has clearly positioned itself in these debates and has thereby again developed its specific *locus* and *focus*.

Rural development is conceptualised as the radical transformation of the three sides of the agricultural enterprise: 1) its resources (knowledge, animals, plants, capital, land, etc...), 2) its socio-cultural and ecological environment (the rural area) and 3) its outlet (the food supply chain). In and through rural development practices these sides are being transformed. Rural development is then characterised by three mutually reinforcing development trajectories (see also figure 2):

1. *Regrounding*, which refers to new (compared to the modernisation approach) ways of mobilising resources, predominantly by building upon the endogenous development potential of the local area.
2. *Broadening*, which refers to the incorporation of other functions (nature, landscape, water, tourism) and activities into the farm enterprise, thereby transforming its relation with and position in the rural area.
3. *Deepening*, which refers to the transformation of the relation between the farm enterprise and the food supply chain aimed at retaining more value added at farm level.

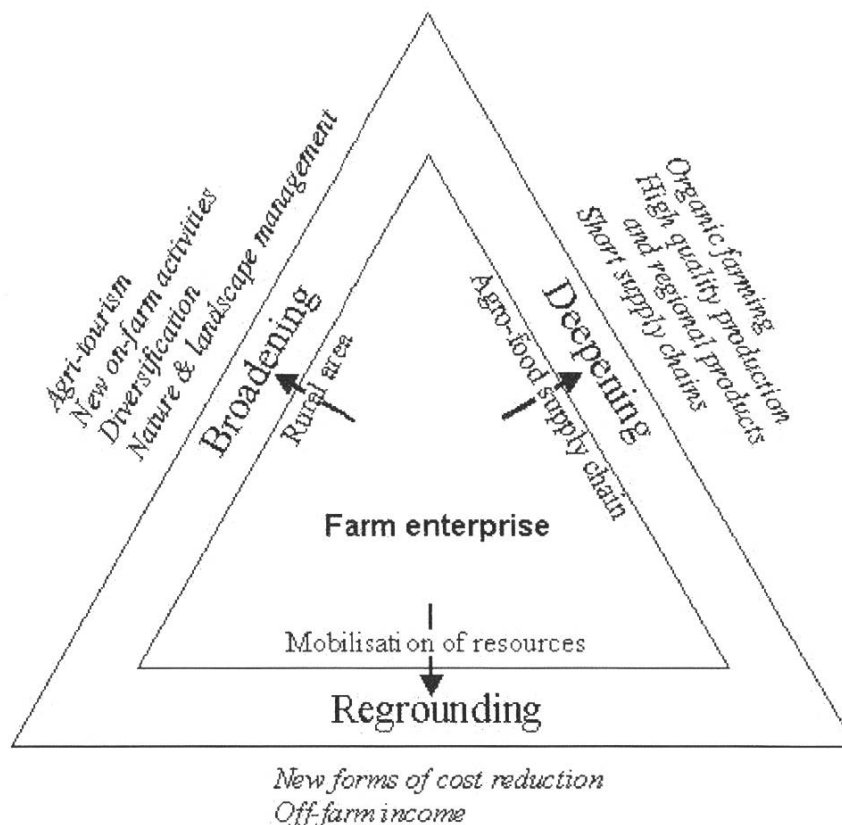


Figure 2: The structure of rural development at farm level (source: Van der Ploeg et al., 2003).

Taken together these three trajectories reshape the farm into a multi-functional enterprise delivering a much broader range of products and services than before (Van der Ploeg et al., 2003). And as impact analyses demonstrate this broader range of products and services is also of

economic importance (see figure 3). At the same time the striking diversity between EU-countries and between regions within EU-countries demand a better understanding of the social, economic, technical and institutional factors driving and hampering rural development practices and subsequently of the promising strategies for enhancing rural development processes in Europe. Particularly as, according to Fischler (2003) in his closing speech at the conference on rural development in Salzburg, rural development is increasingly becoming the new focus of the Common Agricultural Policy: *"Future EU rural development policy must promote the sustainable development of our rural areas. And it is the development of the broader rural economy and rural communities which is essential for a living countryside. This will be essential to increase the attractiveness of rural areas, promote sustainable growth and generate new employment opportunities, in particularly in the new Member States but also in the old Member States. To achieve this we must build upon the full range of development potential of our rural areas and communities and take into account their specific needs. We will need to think at the level of the Commission, the Member States, regional and local authorities as well as local groups about how we can do more and do better in the next programming period. ... The sustainable development of over 80 % of the EU's territory is, of course, not possible without the essential contribution of agriculture and forestry. ... Our farmed areas are not a theme park, or a nature reserve, they are places where men and women work the land. ... They will have to continue to make a vital contribution to our rural landscapes and we will have to provide the right incentives that they continue to deliver this service to the society as a whole and that they take into account the ever growing environmental concerns. ... In both new and old Member States the opportunities for growth will come increasingly through diversification and the production of the high quality products demanded by society. ... Finally, our goal must be to see the sustainable development of all rural areas. Society expects all farmers regardless of where they are to take on new roles and responsibilities. The on-going restructuring of the agricultural sector, the effects of CAP reform and changing patterns of agricultural trade affect all rural areas across the EU. Rural development policy is the key Community instrument to help all farmers and other rural actors face these challenges."*

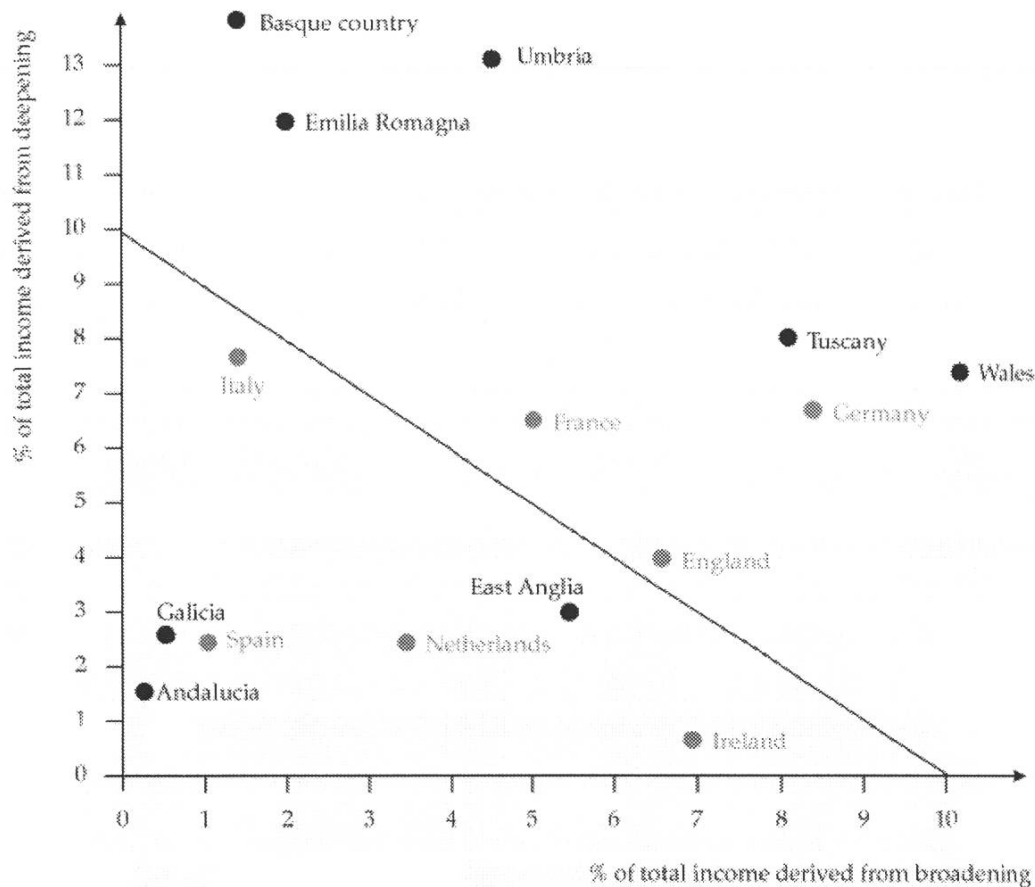


Figure 3: Percentage of farm family income derived from broadening and deepening in different EU-countries and regions (source: Van der Ploeg et al., 2003).

6. Towards a future research agenda

The closing speech of Fischler at the Salzburg conference entails the building blocks for the future *locus* of Dutch rural sociology. Research activities in the near future, which will increasingly be carried out as part of European projects, will therefore need to address the following three key themes:

1. *Multifunctional agriculture*: the socio-economic dynamics, impact and potentials of multifunctional agriculture at farm and regional level, with special attention for the social, economic, technical and institutional factors supporting or hampering multifunctional agriculture.

2. *Food production and consumption*: the organisation and co-ordination of food production and consumption in food supply chains, with special attention for the social construction of food quality, food safety, sustainability and trust.
3. *Liveability of rural areas*: the role and impact of non-agricultural actors and counter-urbanisation processes on the use, governance and liveability of the countryside, with special attention for the changing social structure and cultural identity of rurality, the role, interests and perceptions of non-agricultural residents and changing rural-urban relations.

The future *focus* of Dutch rural sociology will on the one hand be inspired by theoretical and methodological issues arising from these three research themes and on the other hand from new theoretical and methodological debates within the social sciences (Wiskerke 2001b). For the near future I expect that the following theoretical perspectives will to a large extent characterise the *focus* of Dutch rural sociology:

1. *Steering and institutions*: issues of policy, government and interest promotion, with special attention for changing relations between state, civil society and private actors (i.e. governance perspective).
2. *Gender*: different forms of participation of men and women in rural transformation processes as well as the gender-specific effects of these processes.
3. *Techno-institutional co-evolution*: the nature and dynamics of innovation and transition processes in the European countryside, with specific attention for a sociological analysis of the co-evolution of technical and institutional transformation and design processes.

However, regardless of its evolving *locus* and *focus* there remains a firm and well grounded continuity in the research programme of Dutch rural sociology. That is the well known character of the Wageningen School of Rural Sociology: comparative research, empirically grounded theoretical development and a research output renown for its scientific as well as for its political and practical relevance.

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