

SOME REFLECTIONS ON LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY AGRARIAN POLITICAL ECONOMY¹

Frederick H. Buttel²

ABSTRACT

The “new rural sociology” arguably represented the most significant watershed in the development of North American and European rural sociology during the 1970s and 1980s. I argue, however, that the new rural sociology, especially its dominant traditions of Chayanovian and neo-Leninist Marxism, has now been almost entirely superseded as a theoretical position in agrarian political economy by the international food regimes, commodity chains/systems analysis, regulationist, and actor-network traditions. In addition, Wageningen School research on “farming styles” and the “cultural turn” within rural sociology and rural studies have arisen, in part, as challenges to the more structuralist styles of reasoning within agrarian political economy. Parallel trends in the sociology of development are also discussed. The paper concludes with an appraisal of the strengths and weaknesses of these new late twentieth century traditions in agrarian political economy, particularly in comparison with the new rural sociology.

Key words: rural sociology, globalization, commodity chains, rural studies, peasant studies, sociology of development.

REFLEXÕES SOBRE A ECONOMIA POLÍTICA AGRÁRIA NO FINAL DO SÉCULO XX

RESUMO

A chamada “nova sociologia rural” representou a linha divisória mais significativa no desenvolvimento da sociologia rural norte-americana e europeia durante as décadas de setenta e oitenta. Entretanto, argumenta-se que a nova sociologia rural, particularmente suas tradições dominantes Chayanovianas e Marxista neoleninista, foi agora quase que totalmente superada por uma posição teórica na economia política agrária consubstanciada em regimes alimentares internacionais, cadeias alimentares, análises de sistemas, sistemas de regulação e redes internacionais de atores resultantes da globalização. Além disso, a escola “Wageninguiana” pesquisa sobre “formas agrícolas” e “viradas culturais” dentro de sociologia rural e estudos rurais que surgiram,

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² Department of Rural Sociology and Institute for Environmental Studies University of Wisconsin, Madison 1450 Linden Dr. Madison, WI 53706 U.S.A. fhbuttel@facstaff.wisc.edu

F. H. Buttel

em parte, como desafios para as formas estruturalistas do raciocínio dentro da economia política agrária. Também são discutidas tendências paralelas na sociologia de desenvolvimento. O artigo conclui com uma avaliação dos pontos fortes e fracos desta economia política agrária do final de século, com a chamada nova sociologia rural dos anos 70 e 80.

Palavras-chave: sociologia rural, globalização, cadeias agroalimentares, estudos agrários, campesinato, sociologia do desenvolvimento.

INTRODUCTION

Rural sociology in North America and Northern Europe experienced a dramatic change of course during the mid- to late-1970s and 1980s. Known initially as the “new rural sociology,” a phrase coined by Howard Newby (see Newby, 1980), this collection of new theoretical and empirical thrusts had its most direct impact on the sociological analysis of agriculture. The new rural sociology, however, not only influenced the sociology of agriculture during the 1970s and 1980s. It also profoundly influenced rural sociologists whose interests lay in community studies, labor markets, and so on (e.g., Lobao, 1990; Lyson & Falk, 1993). Indeed, the new rural sociology has arguably been the single most important influence on rural sociology as a whole during the last quarter century.

In this paper I will focus mainly on the various strands of the “critical” new rural sociology of agriculture. My emphasis will be mainly on the new rural sociology of agriculture – or, in other words, on agrarian political economy – in North America, especially the U.S. My rationale for focusing on North America is a pragmatic one of greater familiarity with the literature as well as greater ease in being comprehensive. Nonetheless, I will occasionally bring in European and other literatures when appropriate to discuss influences on U.S. research or to show how U.S. and Canadian agrarian political economy is distinctive. My treatment will thus include the early work in the new rural sociology as well as new lines of theory and research (e.g., globalization studies, neo-regulationist and actor-network studies) which differ quite considerably from the new rural sociology of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Similarly, I will focus on the literature in English for reasons of familiarity, convenience, and coherence. Thus, this paper is mainly intended to be an overview of and commentary on the sociology and political economy of agriculture in the U.S., and to a lesser extent Canada and the U.K. Even so, the approach here is highly selective in that it focuses on

the literatures relevant to structural analysis of change in agri-food systems, and thus ignores certain topics of obvious importance (technological change, gender, nature/environment, agricultural communities/localities, and so on) to the sociology of agriculture and rural sociology/studies more generally. My emphasis will thus be largely on identifying broad intellectual trends in late twentieth century agrarian political economy, and also on making sociology of knowledge-type observations about how and why this rural sociology and related literature changed over time.

It should be noted, however, that the coverage of this paper could extend beyond the traditional confines of North American-style rural sociology in two ways. First, I will make some occasional remarks pertaining to the sociology of development since there has been some common trends in and considerable – but often under appreciated – cross-fertilization between the two literatures. Indeed, I will suggest that there have been so many interchanges between the sociology of agriculture and the sociology of development in the late twentieth century that an intellectual reflection on either field must take these associations into account.³ Second, the paper will encompass the work of a number of scholars whose parent discipline is not sociology or rural sociology but who interact closely with the rural sociology intellectual community and contribute to its scholarship. Thus, my analysis will include a considerable amount of scholarship by political scientists, rural geographers, anthropologists, and other non-sociologists. I will conclude the paper by making some observations about the strengths and shortcomings of the late twentieth century agrarian studies enterprise in the U.S.

THE RISE AND DECLINE OF THE NEW RURAL SOCIOLOGY

Though I am not usually a proponent of the notion of “paradigm,” I cannot think of a better word to portray the process of change that is of concern to us

³ Unfortunately, it is also the case that the links between the sociology of agriculture and agrarian studies, while considerable, have remained underdeveloped in one critical respect: there is relatively little articulation between agrarian political economy and the major overarching theories in the sociology of development (e.g., world-systems, dependency, dependent development, and so on). The Goodman & Redclift (1981) volume and de Janvry (1981) are essentially the exceptions that prove the rule in this regard.

here. Rural sociology, arguably even more so than the larger discipline, can be seen in terms of a succession of “paradigms” involving rapid changes in forms of scholarship. In mainstream Western rural sociology, for example, theoretical reasoning about the foundational or constitutive characteristics of rural communities (e.g., population size, density, settlement types) dominated the field until the 1950s, albeit with a brief interlude of relatively progressive New Deal reformist rural sociology during the 1930s. Sorokin and Zimmerman’s (1929) *Principles of Rural-Urban Sociology*, which was largely an elaboration of Ferdinand Tönnies’ reasoning in his *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, was the formative text in the field (in the U.S.). Rural sociology thus consisted essentially of the sociology of rural communities. From the 1950s through the early 1970s, social-psychological perspectives, such as the diffusion of innovations and the extension of rural-urban continuum reasoning to micro-level processes such as educational and career aspirations, prevailed. These interrelated social-psychological perspectives provided the theoretical grounding for a rapid shift to quantitative research during this time. Then, beginning during the 1970s, rural sociology would undergo a number of further shifts, the most important of which for present purposes was the creation of a sociology of agriculture and the rise of the “new rural sociology” (see Buttel et al., 1990).

Figure 1 provides a schematic of theoretical transitions in the sociology of agriculture and development sociology. We can now see in historical retrospect that the genealogy of the new rural sociology and the new sociology of agriculture was multi-stranded and highly variegated, so that a review of this length must inevitably omit some of the important details. The tributaries of the new rural sociology included a number of relatively obvious social and intellectual trends, including the 1960s and 1970s civil rights and student movements and the growing tide of criticism concerning the equity impacts of the Green Revolution. Of particular importance was the fact that criticism of the Green Revolution, given the social movement context of the early 1970s, led to the influential work of the Agribusiness Accountability Project, including Hightower’s (1973) bombshell, *Hard Tomatoes, Hard Times*. The Agribusiness Accountability Project legitimated a range of studies (e.g., on land-grant biases against family farmers, corporate domination of the farm input and food processing sectors) that had been essentially taboo in rural sociology since the mid-1940s termination of New Deal-oriented rural sociological activism.

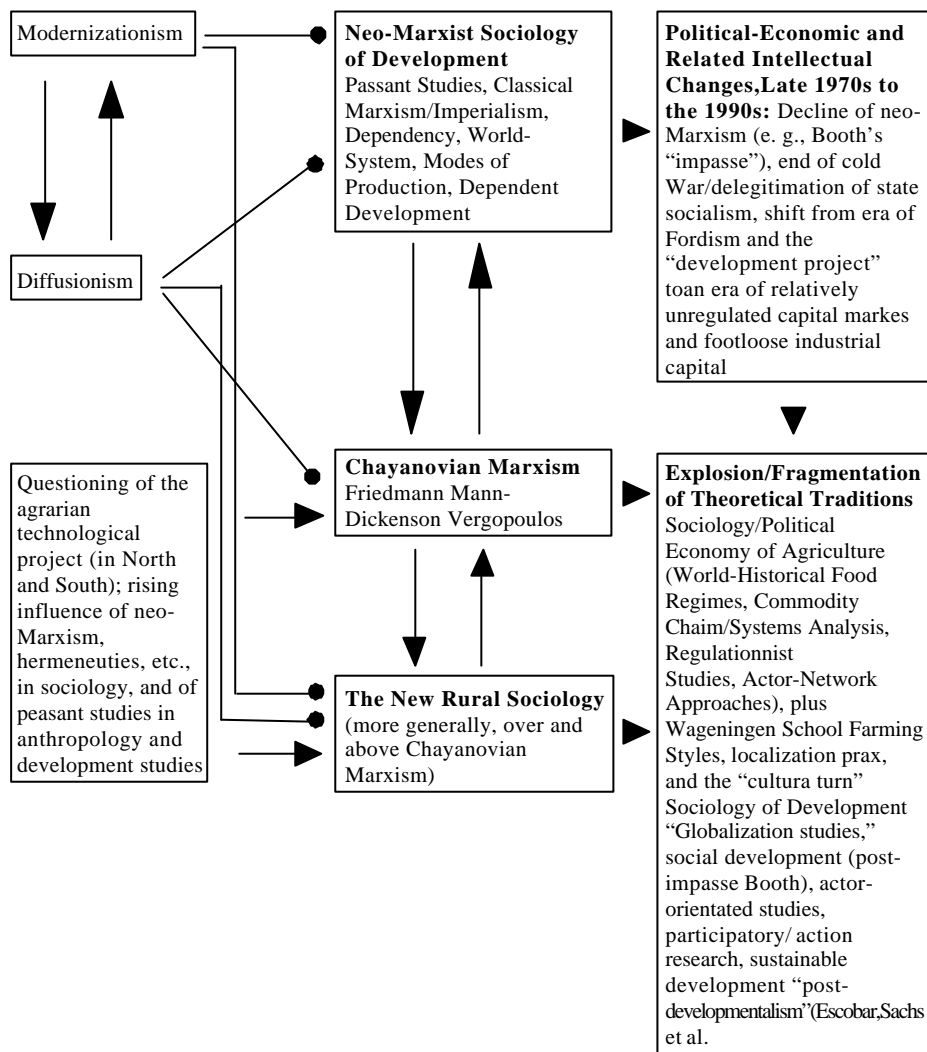


Figure 1. A Genealogy of Transitions in the Sociology/Political Economy of Agriculture and Sociology of Development.

Legend: \longrightarrow = "led to" or "influenced" $\text{---}\bullet\text{---}$ = "supplanted by"

While the Agribusiness Accountability Project's work and the overall political tenor of the times served to open up space for a new kind of rural sociology, the rural sociological communities of North America, Europe, Oceania, and elsewhere did not have readily at hand the intellectual tools to capitalize fully on the opportunity. Thus, the most important early response within rural sociology to the Agribusiness Accountability Project's challenges, the Rodefeld et al. (1978) volume, *Change in Rural America*, contained virtually no literature that would now be considered central to the new rural sociology. Thus, the new rural sociology was largely imported into rural sociology through a variety of passageways. The decisive contributions to the new rural sociology were largely exogenous: the appropriation of theoretical tools from the sociology of development and peasant studies (e.g., Goodman & Redclift, 1981; de Janvry, 1981), the fortuitous "rediscovery" of a very large classical literature in the political economy and anthropology of agriculture (of Kautsky, Chayanov, and Lenin) by persons such as Goodman & Redclift (1981) and Teodor Shanin (1987) (see Buttel & Newby, 1980), and the related fortuitous entry of non-rural sociologists (e.g., Howard Newby, Susan Mann, Harriet Friedmann, William Friedland) into rural sociology and the sociology of agriculture. Also influential were innovations in neo-Marxist thought elsewhere in sociology. Thus, while neo-Marxism is now assumed by a good many to have been consigned to the dustbin of history, it is important to recall that the 1970s were a period in which dozens of path breaking neo-Marxist works, many of which remain influential today, were written. From the U.S.A. one can say that James O'Connor's *The Fiscal Crisis of the State* (1973) literally helped to revolutionize political sociology, while Braverman's *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (1974) did so in the sociology of work and technology, and Wallerstein's *The Modern World-System* (1974) did so for development studies. The *Journal of Peasant Studies* played the same role in its field of study. A second related reason was that neo-Marxist perspectives offered a more satisfying, encompassing structural mode of explanation, which had been lacking in the rural sociological tradition. Third, neo-Marxism was particularly relevant to the rising tide of criticism of and discontent over agricultural and rural modernization policies –that is, over the "technological project" (Hightower, 1973; Pearse, 1980; de Janvry, 1981; Goodman &

Redclift, 1981).⁴ Neo-Marxism never dominated rural sociology per se, but during the late 1970s and 1980s it set the agenda and asked the most important questions of time.⁵

Ironically, the *neo-Weberian* Howard Newby was probably the most influential agent of neo-Marxist infiltration of mainstream rural sociology. Newby was influential because of the impressiveness of his intellectual background and accomplishments, because of his appreciation of and knowledge about the classical sociologists, and because he had strong ties to both U.S. as well as European rural sociology. Newby's agenda was not so much one of creating a "Newby School" or promoting a single specific theoretical view as it was a commitment to updating the intellectual capabilities of the field and spearheading an expansion of the rural sociological viewpoint beyond the narrow world of the agricultural colleges and the agricultural research and extension agencies. Newby was arguably the most influential agent of rejection of the emphases of 1960s American rural sociology: its emphasis on technique, its diffusionism, its lack of attention to rural poverty and deprivation, and its lack of critical imagination with respect to state policymaking and of the role of rural sociology in policy. Newby was a neo-Weberian but respected the explanatory power of the Marxist agrarian classics and the originality of the 1970s neo-Marxists, and recognized that Marxism would have a role to play in bringing rural sociology up to discipline standards in terms of theory and comparative vision.

⁴ Neo-Marxism per se was by no means the only sociological response to the rural sociological crisis of confidence in the technological modernization project, which had been the implicit if not explicit anchor of mainstream rural sociology (the rural sociology undertaken within land-grant colleges and other agricultural research institutes) during the heyday of the diffusion of innovations and related social-psychological perspectives in the subdiscipline. Rural sociological populism (e.g., Rodefeld et al., 1978), critical/hermeneutic theories (e.g., Busch, 1978), and sociological deconstructions of agricultural technoscience (e.g., Busch, 1981) also played important roles at the time.

⁵ As influential as neo-Marxism became in 1980s sociology of agriculture, neo-Marxism's level of influence there still fell short of that in the sociology of development. The rise and decline of neo-Marxism in the sociology of agriculture and sociology of development have some close parallels in terms of causes and timing. Neo-Marxism declined in both subdisciplines during the late 1980s, and in both subdisciplines the causes of decline (real and perceived difficulties of transcending teleology, ideological fashions associated with the end of the Cold War) were similar. The declining persuasiveness of neo-Marxism in the sociology of development, however, was perhaps somewhat sharper than in the sociology and political economy of agriculture. In the sociology of development the still often-cited Booth (1985) paper on the "impasse" in (neo-Marxist) development sociology set forth a trajectory of criticism of neo-Marxism and a search for alternatives. See Booth (1994) and Schuurman (1993) for recent anthologies that discuss the history and current status of the sociology of development.

Several other features of the new rural sociology, several of which are summarized in Figure 1, are worth mentioning by way of historical reflection. First, Figure 1 shows that there have been a number of interchanges between agrarian studies and the sociology of development, many of which are not well appreciated by scholars in the two subdisciplines. In particular, the sociology of development and rural sociology/agrarian studies were strongly influenced by modernizationism and diffusionism from the 1950s through the early 1970s. Further, the rise of neo-Marxist development studies preceded and strongly influenced the rise of the new rural sociology.

Second, it should be noted that the problematics of the early new rural sociology were heavily influenced by the character of agrarian social relations and politics of the time. The 1970s stand out as a distinctive era in the U.S. and much of the rest of the world in terms of the slow pace of de-peasantization and decline of family farming and, in the USA, the rural renaissance (net rural in-migration) of the 1970s, at least relative to the 1950s and 1990s. The 1970s were also generally the last gasp of the farm sector welfare state (protectionist, social-Keynesian, post-World War II commodity programs), which had had the effect of propping up agricultural product prices and helping to sustain household production systems. Thus, it is not surprising that the key problematic of the new rural sociology was explaining the persistence of family farming/peasantries (or, in other words, there was a preoccupation with an [updated] version of “the agrarian question”; Goodman et al., 1987:Chapter 4). Accordingly, as Lehman (1986) has so elegantly put the matter, the dominant tendency within agrarian political economy was “Chayanovian Marxism,” a hybrid of neo-Marxist peasant studies and Chayanovianism. For Lehman, Chayanovian Marxist was typified by the work of Friedmann (1978), Mann & Dickinson (1978), and Vergopoulos (1978). Neo-Leninist agrarian political economy (a la Friedland et al., 1981, and de Janvry, 1981) was the other major strand of the new rural sociology at the time. The essence of the neo-Leninist position was that the hypothesis of a strong tendency toward differentiation and class polarization in agriculture, leading to the formation of the contradictory classes of agrarian capitalists and rural workers. Neo-Leninist agrarian studies, however, was never the dominant position in the new rural sociology.

The Chayanovian-Marxist tradition, to be sure, exhibited some internal diversity. Some Chayanovian-Marxist scholars (e.g., Vergopoulos, 1978; see de Janvry, 1981) stressed a kind of functionalist analysis of peasantries and family farms, arguing that they performed important functions for capital such

as producing cheap food, providing a refuge for surplus labor, and helping to ensure the legitimacy of corporate capitalism. Others stressed the distinctiveness of agriculture vis-à-vis other sectors, and suggested that these particularities of agriculture led to the reinforcement of petty commodity production or household production forms (Mann, 1990; Friedmann, 1978). Still others suggested that independent or petty commodity producers tended to exhibit subsumption to agrarian or industrial capital (e.g., indebtedness, dependence on off-farm wage work), and thus in some sense were disguised wagedworkers (Mooney, 1978) or the functional equivalent of an agrarian proletariat (de Janvry, 1981). Third, the new rural sociology approached agriculture largely by assuming that the nation-state was the self-evident unit of analysis, and by attributing the dynamics of agriculture largely to endogenous phenomena (such as the class structure of agriculture, product prices, changes in agricultural technologies). Fourth, the new rural sociology tended to be an economic-political and anthropological-economic perspective on agriculture, or in other words it tended to give relatively little direct attention to states and politics. This is not to suggest that the new rural sociology saw state policy as being irrelevant; rather, the role of states was largely seen as reducible to the functions states perform with respect to capital and labor (accumulation and legitimation).

Chayanovian Marxism and neo-Leninist political economy have largely disappeared from rural sociology and sociology at large over the past decade. This occurred for several quite distinct reasons. First, and perhaps most important, the fall of the state-socialist regimes of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe had a strong delegitimizing effect on states, ideologies, practices, and ideas that were anchored in Marxism. Second, while the major works of 1970s and 1980s neo-Marxism were as historically and contextually nuanced as the best of non-Marxist sociology, neo-Marxism as a whole could not be readily extricated from the image – and, to some degree, the reality – of being teleological and functionalist (see Booth, 1985, 1994). Third, the social character of the times – the rise of “new social movements,” the declining role of the working class as an historical agent of change, and the extraordinary pace of global diffusion of cultural forms – led to “totalizing metanarratives” such as neo-Marxism tending to pass from fashion as social theory. Fourth, while late twentieth century neo-Marxism had made some impressive strides in understanding the political-economic dynamics of post-War capitalist development – particularly “welfare capitalism” (Esping-Andersen, 1990) and “Fordism” (e.g., Lipietz, 1988) – this perspective had been less successful in explaining the simultaneous patterns of

globalization, the declining centrality of social class, and related features of late capitalism and “post-Fordism.” Fifth, the 1980s and 1990s witnessed the rise of an number of institutionalist – mostly neo-Weberian – alternatives to neo-Marxism (e.g., Evans, 1995; DuPuis & Vandergeest, 1995), several of which have had advantages over neo-Marxism in dealing with the cultural and political trends of late capitalism. Sixth, the 1980s international farm crisis and surge of cross-border mobility of money capital undermined some of the key assumptions of the new rural sociology; the farm crisis cast doubt on the universal validity of the problematic of family farm persistence, and the farm crisis and accelerated movements of capital undermined the assumption of primacy of the nation-state as the unit of analysis. In sum, the conventional “agrarian question” ceased to be a compelling question.⁶ Finally, given that one of the trends in sociology over the past decade or so has been the increased importance of environmental sociology, the anthropocentric and Promethean legacy of Marxism – even if this has arguably been highly exaggerated (O’Connor, 1994; Dickens, 1996; Benton, 1996; Foster, 1999) – has contributed to its demise as a strong contender for theoretical dominance in sociology and rural sociology.

What can we say two or so decades later about the intellectual significance of the new rural sociology? I believe that our judgment about the new rural sociology must be a highly contradictory one. On one hand, there can be little doubt that the new rural sociology was the most significant watershed of late twentieth century rural sociology. The new rural sociology reinforced the establishment of the sociology of agriculture (which had been initiated by R. Rodefeld, W. D. Heffernan and associates in the early 1970s in a limited manner on non-Marxist grounds) and legitimated political economy within rural sociology. The new rural sociology decisively altered the problematics of research in the subdiscipline; not only did the question of family farm persistence vs. social differentiation of agriculture (and the “agrarian question” more generally) come to the fore in the sociology of agriculture, but USA rural sociology in general was induced to take the matter of rural social classes far more seriously than had been the case since New Deal-era rural sociology. But while the influence of the new rural sociology is indisputable, it must also be acknowledged that by

⁶ While most citations to Goodman et al. (1987) focus on their analyses of biotechnology and their concepts of appropriation and substitution, Chapter 4 of their book (on “Rural Social Structures”) was among the earliest critiques of the uncritical embrace of the agrarian question by the new rural sociology.

the end of the twentieth century the new rural sociology had almost entirely been left behind. It is now very seldom that any of the classics of the new rural sociology (e.g., de Janvry, 1981; Friedmann, 1978; Mann & Dickinson, 1978) are drawn upon any more. Perhaps the only literature from the new rural sociology that continues to be frequently cited and drawn on for research hypotheses or guidance in research is the work by Friedland and associates (Friedland et al., 1981; Friedland, 1984), and this is largely because these publications by Friedland and associates are seen as tributary studies to agricultural commodity chain/systems analysis, one of the major emphases of 1990s agrarian studies.

FROM NEW RURAL SOCIOLOGY TO THE POLITICAL ECONOMY AND POLITICAL SOCIOLOGY OF GLOBAL AGRI-FOOD SYSTEMS

Beginning in the late 1980s the sociology and political economy of agriculture began to take a dramatic turn. The extent of the shift in the literature was not entirely apparent at the time because at a superficial level the concepts and vocabulary of late 1980s and early 1990s agrarian studies did not depart sharply from those of the new rural sociology. The lexicon continued to be primarily that of Marxist/class categories. But only five years after the seminal piece – Friedmann and McMichael's 1989 *Sociologia Ruralis* paper on food regimes – was published, the sociology of agriculture had undergone a dramatic transformation.

In one sense, the sociology and political economy of agriculture during the 1990s has the appearance of being essentially a sociology of agribusiness globalization. To wit, the key pieces of scholarship during this time – each of them an anthology (Bonanno et al., 1994; McMichael, 1994; Goodman & Watts, 1997) – all have some form of the word “global” in their titles. Looked at more closely, however, 1990s agrarian studies have less theoretical coherence than did early 1980s “new rural sociology,” which was largely focused around the related issues of the pattern of agrarian structural change and the agrarian question.

The last decade of agrarian political economy has consisted of four major foci of theory and research: (1) world-historical and world-systemic analyses of agri-food systems, typified by McMichael and Friedmann's work on food

regimes, (2) global agri-food commodity chains/systems analysis, typified by most of the papers (those in Part 2) in Bonanno et al. (1994), (3) agri-food political-sociological neo-regulationist studies (e.g., Marsden et al., 2000; Bonanno & Constance, 1996), and (4) neo-Latourian (Latour, 1987) actor-network analyses of agri-food systems (e.g., Goodman & Watts, 1997; Busch & Juska, 1997; Marsden & Arce, 1994; Murdoch & Marsden 1995). The fact that some names (e.g., Marsden and Bonanno) appear within more than one category indicates that the boundaries among the four 1990s categories of agri-food political economy are somewhat permeable, and these areas of scholarship overlap to some degree.

In addition to these four new traditions of work within agri-food political economy broadly construed, there have been several other contenders for scholarly dominance since the demise of the decline of 1970s and 1980s new rural sociology. Each of these contenders for scholarly dominance in the post-Marxist era has been culturalist or subjectivist in some important sense. The neo-Chayanovian “Wageningen School” work of Ploeg (1991), de Haan (1997), and associates based on the actor-oriented perspective of Norman Long (1977, 1997) has been especially important in this regard, though more so in Northern Europe than the U.S. The core postulate of the Wageningen School – that farmers are active, knowledgeable actors, and that accordingly they tend to develop diverse “folk concepts” and “farming styles” which enable them reproduce their enterprises in the face of the homogenizing tendencies of advanced capitalism – has emerged to contest agrarian political economy in general on the grounds of it being overly structural and deterministic.⁷ Wageningen School scholarship thus has some similarities to the work of Salamon (1987), Gray (1996), and the anthropology of agriculture tradition in the U.S. Because the Wageningen School’s work is undertaken, in part, as a critique of agrarian political economy, this scholarly tradition is typically not taken up directly by the political economy community. But it should be noted that scholars interested in the localistic/“conventions” tradition (Allaire & Boyer, 1995) wing of agri-food regulationism are recognizing the affinities

⁷ It should be noted, of course, that there is some kinship between the actor-network perspective and the Wageningen School literature on both theoretical and methodological grounds. The chief difference between the two, however, is that the actor-network-oriented agri-food scholars are generally aiming to reorient political economy, whereas the predominant thrust of the Wageningen School both highly voluntarist and aimed at *supplanting* political economy.

between their work and that of Ploeg and other Wageningen School figures (see especially Marsden, 1999).⁸

Another related contender for intellectual dominance that lies outside the traditional boundaries of agrarian political economy is that of what might be called “cultural-turn” rural studies scholarship. The cultural-turn rural sociologists include a set of sociologists, as well as rural studies scholars from adjacent disciplines such as cultural anthropology, geography, and political science, whose work reflects the late 1980s and 1990s cultural turn in the social sciences (see especially Cloke, 1997). Similar to their Wageningen School colleagues, many of those who have strived to remake rural sociology along the lines of cultural sociology/anthropology, postmodernism, social constructionism, and discourse analysis have tended to be ambivalent about, if not reject, agrarian political economy (see, e.g., Whatmore, 1994, for a preliminary statement, and Whatmore, 2001, for a more comprehensive account). At the same time, the thrust of cultural-turn rural studies has been less to resurrect rural sociological voluntarism or contest the notion that power relations are central to understanding the character of rural and agri-food systems than to add new tools to the analysis of rural power relations. One of the pioneering analyses in this genre was Koc’s (1994) paper on agricultural globalization as a discourse, and Whatmore’s (2001) recent work on hybrid rural geographies employs related discourse-analytical methods to understanding how phenomena such as genetically modified foods reflect the politicization and symbolization of contemporary food system struggles. Like Wageningen School rural sociology, cultural-turn rural studies has been more influential in Europe than in North America (but see DuPuis & Vandergeest, 1995).

As noted earlier, the Friedmann and McMichael (1989) *Sociologia Ruralis* article on food regimes was arguably the seminal piece of scholarship in the abrupt shift away from the new rural sociology, and “regime-type” work has proven to be one of the most durable perspectives in agrarian studies since the

⁸ Wageningen School scholarship also has affinities with the “food system localism/localization” point of view in food studies (e.g., among scholars closely associated with the journal *Agriculture and Human Values*). Food system localization work has virtues as a form of practice, since promotion of projects such as community-supported agriculture, farmer’s markets, local marketing, and so on clearly involves social benefits. As a scholarly tradition, however, food system localism involves a retreat from grappling with the concrete loci of power and restructuring in food systems (see Allen & Kovach’s, 2000, critique).

late 1980s, in large part because it is synthetic and nuanced. The Friedmann-McMichael notion of global (food) regime draws on Wallerstein's world-systems perspective, and on more straightforwardly Marxist (including Gramscian-type) accounts, but it is also anchored in the political science concept of international regime and in the economic sociology/anthropology of Karl Polanyi (1957). Thus, for these theorists, there is a certain world-scale logic of the world-system and capitalism, but in macrosocial context they become salient through national-level practices by state and capital within the framework of extant regimes of state and development. The effect of this is also to emphasize a political logic throughout, rather than seeing politics as a mere exogenous variable in a primarily economic process of struggle over development or dependency.

Food regimes work is solidly within the new globalization tradition in the sociology of agriculture, but it is distinctive because it conceptualizes the logics of world-systems as being as much or more political-epochal rather than mainly economic-cyclical. The Friedmann-McMichael perspective has been directed at understanding how agrarian structures and state agricultural policies developed over time in both the North/center and South/periphery. In so doing they have emphasized that although the capitalist world-economy and national economic systems each represent important dimensions of the world political-economic context, neither the concepts of capitalist world-economy nor that of capitalism as a mode of production can in and of itself explain either specific international production regimes (e.g. international agri-food policies) across time and space. They argue, however, that another global-scale construct – that of global regimes, such as the concrete ways in which food and agricultural politics were represented in “global food regimes” – helps us account for more of the important details of agri-food system changes.

Thus, for Friedmann and McMichael, the essence of the world-system as a globally-influential logic is that it reflects periodic shifts in hegemonic regimes which are anchored in the politics of how commodity chains and production systems come to be constructed and coordinated over borders and boundaries of the constituent political units within the system. Friedmann and McMichael suggest, for example, that the food regime during the era of British imperialism was constituted by the role of Britain as “workshop of the world,” and by the related politics of building and maintaining a global food system consistent with this role (especially accessing imported wage foods from the white settler

colonies, and industrial foods and other agricultural raw materials from the colonial possessions), as well as a global trading system consistent with this division of industrial and agricultural labor across space and social units. With the demise of British hegemony and in the aftermath of the two world wars, there then followed an aid-based food regime. The post-World War II food regime was based on the politics of disposal of overproduced foods in the U.S. and other OECD countries (chiefly by way of foreign food aid), and on the diffusion of American agricultural institutions, technologies, and foods to the South. We are now well into a successor global regime that has followed on the heels of the decline of American hegemony, the breakup of the Bretton Woods system of fixed exchange rates, and the decline of the national type of economy and of social Keynesianism in the early 1970s. The emerging “globalization project” is anchored in a coincidence of interest between dominant states and influential capitals and in a set of institutions – GATT/WTO, globalization of finance and capital mobility, “structural adjustment,” export-oriented production within a “liberal” comparative advantage framework – which have derived from the system of “floating” exchange rates that emerged in the context of international economic disorder during the early and mid-1970s (see McMichael, 2000, for a recent statement).

The second principal tradition of late twentieth century scholarship is that of analyses of agricultural commodity chains/systems. The core feature of this tradition is that it is essentially a global extension of the approach to commodity systems analysis developed in the early 1980s by Friedland (1984). This approach tends to consist heavily of detailed empirical analyses of particular agricultural commodity systems, with an emphasis on the structures and strategies of multinational/transnational firms (both agribusiness firms as well as transnational banks). But in addition to empirical detail on multinationals’ structures and strategies, the literature also consists of more abstract pieces on the nature of transnational capital, the decline (or “irrelevance”; Bonanno, 1994:6-7) of the nation-state, the distinction between transnational firm “adaptation” vs. “imposition” (Moriera, 1996), and resistance to new cross-border commodity chains and divisions of agri-food labor (e.g., Mingione & Pugliese, 1994). This second tradition is typified by most of the articles in Bonanno et al. (1994), a number of the articles in the McMichael (1994) anthology, the bulk of the June 1999 “Antipodean Visions” special issue of *Rural Sociology*, and much of the

content of the RC 40 journal, *International Journal of the Sociology of Agriculture and Food*. In addition, a related branch of agricultural commodity chains/systems work is that of analyses of “agricultural industrialization” (see Welsh, 1995; Heffernan, 1998).⁹

The third tradition of late twentieth century agrarian studies scholarship – agri-food system regulationism – is by far the most heterogeneous of the four categories of late twentieth century agrarian political economy. Moreover, as noted earlier, it is the branch of late twentieth century agrarian studies in which the association with Wageningen School voluntarism is greatest.

The central problematic of agri-food regulationism is how state practices and rules governing food systems are changing, and how these changes in state practices shape agri-food system changes, or are altered as a response to structural trends or crises in the food system. Much of the literature in the regulation category has been inspired by the (initial) French regulation school (mainly M. Aglietta and A. Lipietz) and its work on Fordism, post-Fordism, and so on.¹⁰ The French regulation school was concerned with very broad questions of political economy involving the mode of regulation of capitalist social formations. Much of the 1990s work of Alessandro Bonanno (especially his *Caught in the Net*; Bonanno & Constance, 1996) aimed to apply the mainstream French regulation school literature – especially that on “globalization” and global post-Fordism – to the restructuring and governance of agri-food systems.

The course of regulationist work in agrarian studies would ultimately be altered significantly by the publication of Goodman & Watts’ (1994) provocative and sharply-worded critique of Fordist-type concepts – or, in other words, the core category of 1970s and 1980s French regulationist thought – in the political economy of agriculture. Since the Goodman-Watts paper was published, macro-level theorizing and empirical research on global post-Fordist regulatory practices have declined. In its place has arisen a more micro-level neo-regulationist framework, the heart and soul of which has been the work by several French

⁹ The highly empirically driven nature of agricultural commodity systems analyses has some commonalities with the “post-impasse” (Booth, 1985) transition of the sociology of development toward “social development” (Booth, 1994).

¹⁰ See Peck (1996) for a useful overview of the various strands of literature in regulation studies.

scholars on “conventions” (e.g., Allaire & Boyer, 1995). A crucial claim of this new French regulation school, as its work has been applied to agriculture, is that the agri-food system tendencies toward standardization and homogenization notwithstanding, there are emerging strong countertrends – toward organic food, local food systems, local food labeling, an emphasis on “quality,” and so on – that are leading to widespread restructuring of regulatory practices along the entire span of food chains. The most recent work of Marsden and associates (Marsden, 1999; Marsden, 2000; Marsden et al., 2000) reflects particularly clearly this new, more localistic, consumption-focused regulation tradition in the sociology of agriculture.

The final emphasis of late twentieth century sociology and political economy of agriculture is that of actor-network studies. Actor-network analysis largely derives from the anthropology of science/technology (“technoscience”) of Bruno Latour (1987, 1993). Latour’s work has two virtues which have attracted rural sociologists, and others interested in agrarian studies. First, Latour’s actor-network analysis is in some sense a detour around the impasse of macro- versus microanalysis. Second, Latour’s approach is aimed at questioning often dissolving – binary distinctions (such as science and technology, micro and macro, society and nature). The rise of actor-network approaches has arguably been the most significant trend in agrarian sociology over the last five years.¹¹

I noted earlier that there is considerable affinity between actor-network and neo-regulationist agri-food studies. Marsden, for example, has been committed to an actor-network framework for nearly a decade (Marsden et al., 1993). Only later did he and associates graft the new French regulation approach onto this approach. Nonetheless, I would argue that actor-network scholarship has an identity of its own apart from neo-regulationist analyses because actor-network scholarship is essentially a methodological injunction, rather than a theoretical approach per se. Thus, while Marsden’s actor-network scholarship has a decidedly localistic emphasis – focusing on the roles of consumers, retailers, and local as well as national government agencies – other variants of actor-network scholarship (e.g., Goodman & Watts, 1997) are primarily concerned

¹¹ It is also obviously the case that actor-network studies that are strongly influenced by Latour bear a relationship to a portion of the “cultural turn” scholarly tradition discussed earlier.

with actor-network methods in global-scale analyses.

SOME CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY AGRARIAN POLITICAL ECONOMY

In the concluding portion of the paper I would like to make some general observations on the current status of political-economic agrarian studies.

1. Agrarian studies are now on a stronger theoretical and methodological footing than it was during the age of the new rural sociology. In particular, the contemporary sociology and political economy of agriculture have addressed the major problems of the new rural sociology – the presumption of the national society as the unit of analysis, the largely endogenous-structural causal logic, and the limits of the conventional formulation of the agrarian question as the central problematic – in a reasonably satisfactory way.

2. Earlier I noted that 1990s agrarian sociology has a lower level of theoretical coherence than did the new rural sociology. This observation, however, should not be exaggerated, and in fact the diversification of late twentieth century sociology and political economy of agriculture is largely a good thing. As much as the four categories of 1990s agrarian sociology (or five or six, including the Wageningen School and the cultural-turn tradition) are distinct ones, there are definite patterns of overlap or convergence among them, as noted earlier.

3. Late 1990s agrarian sociology is far stronger empirically than the new rural sociology. There are many more empirical studies and the connection between concepts and data is closer than was typically the case in the new rural sociology.

4. Unlike the sociology of development in the 1990s, the sociology and political economy of agriculture have avoided the more depoliticizing forms of postmodernity that have proliferated in certain quarters of European environmental sociology (see, for example, Eder, 1996; MacNaghten & Urry, 1998) and in development studies (e.g., postmodernist post-developmentalism associated with Arturo Escobar and Wolfgang Sachs).¹²

At the same time late twentieth century sociology and political economy of

¹² To be sure, some of Terry Marsden's work – particularly where he privileges notions of "quality," the "consumption countryside," and the "differentiation of rural space" – is postmodernist in a sense.

agriculture have some problems and shortcomings. In my view, the following issues are most significant.

1. There remains a good deal of casual use of the category of “globalization.” Globalization is too often treated as an exogenous force, as an inexorable trend, or as a “variable” (that one can employ to gauge the extent to which particular societies are implicated in global-scale social forces). Late 1990s agrarian studies needs to be more systematic in its use of the category of globalization (a number of useful comments on which can be found in McMichael, 1996, 2000).

2. Late twentieth century sociology and political economy of agriculture has made advances more at a methodological level than at a theoretical level. Actor-networks, commodity chains, and case studies are the growth areas in scholarship. As much as empirical work – including detailed case studies, thick description, and so on – ought to be highly valued, at the turn of the century there appears to be a trend toward focusing on less ambitious theoretical projects and problems. The sharpness of debate among proponents of frameworks at the comprehensive or macro level (e.g., Goodman & Watts, 1994) may be dampening the impulse to develop the ambitious frameworks of the sort that emerged in the early to mid-1990s.

3. Analytical work on agrarian structures is tending to be conducted in two major ways, both of which are unsatisfactory. On one hand, analytical work on the dynamics of agrarian structures is undertaken as an extension of theoretical claims that the local is important and ought not to be ignored. On the other hand, this type of analytical work is increasingly being done on an ad hoc basis in association with studies of agricultural commodity systems, the selection of which for study usually has little or nothing to do with the importance of the subsector in terms of number of farmers, workers, or value of aggregate production. Put somewhat differently, causal forces such as agricultural policies that affect national agricultural systems as a whole (rather than affecting national agricultural systems through a cumulative series of restructurings having to do with global commodity system dynamics) tend to be given little attention. Production structures, producers, and workers in the “basic commodities” are also tending to receive little attention. In the future our knowledge of production forms could become an ad hoc reflection of the commodity chains and subsectors chosen for study in a global sociology of agribusiness framework.

4. It is telling that one could survey the past two or three years worth of theoretical and empirical work in agrarian political economy and get little idea that the world has for over three years been in a kind of international farm crisis (to borrow the title of Goodman and Redclift's, 1989, volume). This is, in part, a reflection of the de-emphasis on agrarian social and productive structures, and on the de-emphasis on the basic commodities (since the decline in real agricultural product prices has been greatest in the basic commodities, and the institutional changes, especially the WTO-driven decline in commodity programs, have disproportionately affected the basic commodities).¹³

5. Late 1990s sociology and political economy of agriculture have converged to a degree with the sociology of development, largely because of the importance of "globalization" processes in both. At the same time, there is room for far more active integration between the two. Individual sociologists of agriculture largely remain specialists in developed-country or Southern agri-food systems. The bulk of the rural sociology-driven work in agrarian studies is quite Euro-centric or U.S.A.-centric. Little groundwork has been laid for a sociology of agriculture that addresses simultaneously the agrarian change issues of both North and South. This is particularly a particularly discouraging state of affairs given the numerous common trends in and interchanges between the sociology of agriculture and sociology of development.

Thus, late twentieth century agrarian studies have a great deal going for them but still have limitations. Do these limitations hint at the likelihood that these new thrusts in agrarian political economy are destined to decline as the new rural sociology did so rapidly after the late 1980s? My guess is that there was greater continuity in agrarian studies from the 1990s to the 2000s than there was from the 1980s to the 1990s. Late 1990s agrarian studies are more diverse, less deterministic, more nuanced, and more anchored in empirical research than was the new rural sociology. In addition, the most recent agrarian studies literature is squarely addressing some of the key issues – the interplay

¹³ A partial exception that proves the rule is Drummond et al. (1999) on crisis in British, Australian, and New Zealand agricultures. In contrast to the Goodman and Redclift (1989) focus on the global character of the 1980s farm crisis, however, Drummond et al. tend to see agrarian crisis as a conjunctural problem of national (de)regulation. In terms of the typology of late twentieth century approaches in agrarian studies, the Drummond et al. approach is essentially a regulationist one, building on the regulationist variant of Peck (1996).

of the “global” and “local,” the society-nature dualism, homogenization/resistance, and so on – that if anything seem destined to become more important over the next decade.

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