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*Research article*

**Rural studies: A new paradigm that integrates previously separated disciplines**

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**Abstract**

Rural studies are the theoretically informed and empirically grounded integration of disciplines that, until recently, were widely separated. This separation came with different grammars, mutually contrasting problem definitions and different methodological instruments that together resulted in a scattered understanding of countryside, farming, and the processing and distribution of food. The article discusses the main features of rural studies and especially explores the theoretical, institutional and historical backgrounds of these features. It argues that the specificity of agriculture strongly impacts its study and theoretical representation - as much as the resulting theories contribute to shaping the unfolding of agricultural activities over time.

**Keywords:** Neo-institutional Analysis, make-or-buy, rural development, rural studies.

**JEL codes:** Q19

**Highlights:**

- Neo-institutional analysis played a central role in the emergence of rural studies.

- Perugia University developed into the cradle of neo-institutional analysis of farming and agricultural markets. This was due, mainly, to being located at the intersection of agricultural practice, policy and science.
- The heterogeneity of Italian agriculture contributed to neo-institutional analysis, becoming the backbone of rural studies.

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## **1. Introduction: the rediscovery of the local as theoretically relevant**

Rural studies emerged from many different sources and many people have been involved in its construction and development. This article focuses on one of these sources – an important one: the loosely structured but widely recognized network of, mainly, Italian academics who developed the neo-institutional analysis of agriculture and rural development. Several of these academics also became engaged in agricultural policy making and in the organization of new practices. Grounded on this involvement, Vito Saccomandi (chair holder at the University of Perugia and later Italian Minister of Agriculture) and Flaminia Ventura (one of his gifted collaborators) played an important role in the making of rural studies. Here I will try to substantiate their contribution and its relevance, focusing especially on the work of Flaminia Ventura. She was undoubtedly one of the pioneers of what we now know as rural studies.

In a convincing PhD thesis, built on empirical research undertaken in Umbria throughout the 1990s and defended in Wageningen in 2001, Flaminia Ventura delved deeply into the specificities of two local farming systems: Chianina cattle breeding and tobacco cultivation. Her research was located at the interface of two, at that time, newly emerging academic traditions: the analysis of ‘districts’ (as exemplified in the work of e.g. Becattini, 1989; Iaconi, 1990; Becattini, Rullani, 1993; Garofoli, Mazzoni, 1994) and the application of neo-institutional analysis to the production and marketing of food and other agricultural products (Saccomandi, 1991 and 1995). Districts are characterized by localized, combined and mutually interdependent economic activities that, together, produce synergies and thus create competitive advantage. Neo-institutional analysis represented a new way to understand how economic activities are embedded in wider sets of relations that structure their organization and development. Both traditions were, in a way, a reaction to the then-dominant neo-classical paradigm that represented economic activity (agriculture included) as a meeting point of technology and market relations. It viewed an enterprise as just a non-specific point in time and

place. It was simply the locus of the function of production, but otherwise it was empty, and lacking agency. Equally, spaces were considered as only consisting of atomized units of production and consumption – except for possible irregularities and noise that could disturb the functioning of the markets. This particular theoretical perspective was associated with, and equally contributed to, an undeniable trend towards the standardization of agricultural practices.

Nonetheless, diversity never disappeared. In as far as it ‘remained’ it was far from just being a remnant of the past but, instead, a permanently (re)produced phenomenon. While old forms of diversity withered away, new forms were actively constructed. All this was amply documented in a range of new, and often groundbreaking, studies that focused on rural districts and newly emerging ways of farming (see e.g. Iacoponi *et al.*, 1995; Ventura, Milone, 2005 and 2012). In the meantime, the neo-institutional analysis of agricultural production (and marketing) proposed a language that opened questions about *why* and *how* such diversity was produced and reproduced.

Thus, a new agenda emerged. This was aptly summarized by Ventura in the first pages of her dissertation: “There are two elements that [bring] the local to the centre of studies of economic development. The first [is] a renewed understanding of economic spaces as being far from homogenous. Instead, they have different characteristics, which are rooted in the local specificity of resources, history and social relationships. The second [is] the multi-dimensional nature of economic development that includes, alongside the economic aspect, the surrounding ecological and socio-institutional dimensions” (2001:1; 2023:15).

At the same time, multi-dimensionality and the associated diversity assume normative frameworks. In this respect Ventura talks of “the ethics of development”<sup>1</sup>. “Different development models perform differently against the criteria of equity and sustainability” (*ibid*:15). The combination of these elements allows for questions that concern “the relevance of local communities having control or influence over development processes”. More generally speaking, they point to “differences between endogenous and exogenous models” (*ibid.*).

## 2. The local as the core of rural studies

This is, in a nutshell, what we now perceive as constituting the core of rural studies, i.e. studying, understanding and representing agriculture as a localized expression, as well as an integral part, of both society and nature. Local farming practices are shaped by social, economic, cultural, geographic, historical and ecological processes and parameters. This core insight was central to the work of Saccomandi, Ventura and their colleagues. Through pursuing this path their work contributed strongly to the emergence and unfolding of rural studies. Agriculture came to be understood as a *bricolage* of ever-so-many locally shaped practices, networks and trajectories. Each practice, network and/or trajectory represented a *specific combination* of economic, ecological and social parameters and processes. Unravelling these

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<sup>1</sup> See also Pulina, 2007: 304

combinations, that is introducing the local and the specific as practically and theoretically meaningful categories, thus became the stronghold of rural studies.

Instead of being *determined* by reigning price relations and evolving technologies, each agricultural reality emerges as a specific choice out of many *possibilities*. Markets and technologies provide a more, or less, extended space for manoeuvre that allows farmers different choices. In turn, each specific practice entails a wider set of developmental trajectories, one (or more) of which will become a reality in the years to come. Thus, past, present and future are connected through the strategic choices of the involved actors. Consequently, heterogeneity enters the analysis, *not* as an aberration but as the outcome of many different but interlinked processes of development and change. At the same time rural and agricultural policies were rethought: how could they interact with the overwhelming heterogeneity and adequately deal with the possibility of differential development tendencies? For if the dialectics of the real and the possible (Kosik, 1976) become central in the understanding of agriculture, then policies can no longer be an extension of the ‘iron laws’ entailed in the markets. Rather, policy too becomes a specific choice (that precludes or marginalizes other options). Policy both assumes and represents agency.

In this panorama, rural studies had to ask why things are as they are and explore the possibilities contained within them. This means that the inquiry needs to embrace both the general and the specific, the exceptions and the rules, just as it needs to ponder on continuities and discontinuities, similarities and dissimilarities. Analysing existing realities also needs to consider *what else* could have been realized.

Agricultural actors constantly face a series of dilemmas, each of which has to be properly resolved *at the local level* and integrated into a well-balanced constellation that can smoothly function locally but also in relation to the macro level. These dilemmas include:

- 1) Whether to construct a relatively autonomous resource-base or acquire considerable amounts of needed resources from upstream markets?
- 2) Whether to specialize on the production of one competitive product or aim for a broad portfolio of products and services to be offered to the downstream markets?
- 3) Whether to opt for labour-driven intensification or for a technology-driven process of intensification (often associated with spurred scale enlargement)?
- 4) Whether to develop the farm enterprise in a step-by-step way or organize the farm development process as an ongoing series of ruptures?
- 5) Whether to organize internal labour relations (and the associated gender and intergenerational relations) in hierarchical or in more open, negotiable and equal ways?
- 6) How to link farming to wider society and the surrounding ecosystem: through progressive disengagement or various forms of re-integration?
- 7) How to best defend property rights in times of market volatility, generalized insecurities, and unequal power relations?

Most often such dilemmas go unnoticed. They are hidden behind the routines of everyday life and the implicit choices they contain. They are also clearly linked – one having implications for others. Nonetheless, each of them needs to be resolved in its own way – and any solution needs to be coherent and enduring (that is to say one cannot repeatedly jump from one extreme

to the other). Together the different choices need to constitute a well-balanced whole. The definition of the most adequate balances cannot be derived solely from market relations and tendencies. On paper, the market may well be translated into an ‘organizational plan’ and ‘optimal development trajectory’, but in practice (i.e. in real life) this is impossible, for one reason because the chosen balances also need to meet the needs, prospects, expectations and capacities of the actors involved<sup>2</sup>, just as they need to be, more or less, in line with local ecology and history, town-countryside relations, local and regional networks, market agencies, etc.<sup>3</sup>

Of course, resolving the different dilemmas and constructing an adequate balance would be a too daunting task – especially if this needs be done on a daily basis. Hence, farming families, rural communities and the professional layers around agriculture rely on normative frameworks to help them navigate through this sea of questions and uncertainties. Such frameworks (or ‘institutions’ as I will later describe them) specify what is to be done, how, when, why and by whom. People will explain and justify their (institutionalized) practices by saying; ‘this is because we have always done this; it is our custom/practice/habit’. Or they argue: ‘this is the best way’ (which means: it fits well with our needs, prospects, criteria, insights, whatever). Such (often informal) institutions are relatively stable and mostly go uncontested. They indicate the best (proven) way to proceed. And they do so until slow changes or sudden crises introduce cracks, frictions and even despair. Then it is observed that ‘things are not functioning properly anymore’. Such moments precipitate an urgent need to delve into the institutional routines and begin the exploration of new ones.

In this text I will argue that the *combination* of neo-institutional economics (NIE) and rural sociology (RS) make rural studies well-equipped to identify and analyse the institutions that guide farming communities to deal with the dilemmas outlined above. By doing so I will underline how NIE offers, with nearly mathematical precision, the points where the social and the economic (and consequently agrarian economics and rural sociology) meet and mutually strengthen one another. These points are evidently the institutions that govern agriculture, rural life and food markets. For it is precisely these institutions that specify how to *read* the markets, how to *relate* to agricultural policies and how to *develop* one’s own farm.

### 3. The genesis of rural studies

Variety, diversity and heterogeneity<sup>4</sup> are intrinsic to farming. The point, though, is whether they are recognized and considered as being theoretically and practically relevant: reflecting, and revealing, underlying structural patterns<sup>5</sup>. In neo-classical agrarian economics it was *not*. Variety, if considered at all, was basically due to distortions (of whatever kind).

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<sup>2</sup> Here it is worthwhile considering the work of Chayanov (1925/1966).

<sup>3</sup> It goes without saying that here political economy and political ecology have much to offer.

<sup>4</sup> Variety refers to differences within specific systems; diversity refers to differences between systems; heterogeneity cross-cuts systems: it is both within and in-between different systems.

<sup>5</sup> This raises yet another important theoretical consideration: there is no *single* structure that drives or can explain agricultural practices. There are, instead, multiple structures that simultaneously co-exist, each being part of complex actor-structure dynamics (Giddens, 1997; Long, Ploeg, 1994)

Neo-classical economics undoubtedly contributed to the specialization, scale enlargement and spurred intensification of growing parts of European agriculture between the 1950s and 1990s. It did so by making prices, costs, the functions of production and expected profitability central to the analysis. Rural sociology did the same by juxtaposing the ‘*traditional* peasant’ to the ‘*modern* agricultural entrepreneur’ and designing methods to transform the former into the latter (Hofstee, 1946; Mendras, 1971). This undoubtedly contributed to the rhythm of technological change (the ‘diffusion of innovations’) and simultaneously encouraged farmers to take on debts.

However, to the initial surprise of many, the making of the single European market did not standardize European agriculture. Although there were unifying tendencies there were also trends towards further differentiation. Even *within* apparently homogeneous agricultural systems, remarkable processes of differentiation could be identified, as noted for instance by Saccomandi in his authoritative work on institutions that govern agricultural markets (1991: 489-503). In short, farming could *not* be understood and represented as textbook-application of neo-classical agrarian economics. Saccomandi resolved this by incorporating key concepts of the neo-institutional approach (initially developed for industrial economics) into agrarian economics. It is not the markets as such, but an understanding of the *differential interrelations* between agricultural markets and farm enterprises that allows for a theoretically well-grounded explanation of (at least considerable parts of) the empirically existing variety, diversity and heterogeneity. With this shift, neo-classical economics lost much of its credibility.

Something similar occurred in rural sociology. After having strongly contributed to the modernization of European agriculture, this discipline appeared to lose its relevance. With the emergence of a new class of agricultural entrepreneurs, completely integrated in the markets and planning according to general accountancy principles (see especially Mendras, 1984) the ‘social’ was thought to have lost its importance in shaping agriculture. Thus, exit rural sociology. It was thought that modernization would turn agriculture into just another sector of the economy.

It turned out differently. The pioneering works of Constandse (1964), Benvenuti (1982a; 1982b; 1983), Osti (1991) and Brusco (1979) (among many others) made this increasingly clear. The definitive change came with the incorporation of fundamental insights from other scientific traditions. In this case especially from the sociology of labour (Braverman, 1974; Mok, 1994, Marsden *et al.*, 1992). The rediscovery of the labour process as being the heart of the (agricultural) process of production was decisive. Labour was (re-) discovered as a creative process (i.e. as far more than simply ‘putting the means of production in movement’ as Marxists of that time would have it). Simultaneously, the process of production was (re-) conceptualized as a process of *construction*. That is to say, the labour process not only aims for, nor just results in, the making of *end-products* (such as milk, meat, wine or whatever). It also embraces the (enlarged) reproduction of the *resources* used. This results in improved land, enlarged and improved herds, increased farmers’ knowledge, new and well-functioning networks, etc. Above all, however, the labour process moulds *specific styles of farming*, each style being a distinctive and strategically informed way to organize and develop agricultural production. Together such styles give rise to the inter and intra-regional diversity of agriculture.

In short, the ‘social’ can no longer be understood as residing mainly, or exclusively, *outside* the spheres of production and circulation, that is to say in families, communities, villages, cultures, or whatever. Instead, it is increasingly understood as also being present *at the place of work*. The ‘social’ adjusts and interlinks the many balances inherent within farming: the balance between labour input and economic size; drudgery and benefits; size of the herd and available acreage; internal and external resources; scale and intensity; short- and long-term prospects; family and enterprise; etc. (Benvenuti, 1982a; Ploeg 1994; Ventura, 1995; Ventura, Meulen, 1995). Thus, rural sociology came to conclusions similar to those elaborated by neo-institutional agrarian economists.

Both disciplines (NIE and RS) converged through the focus that they started to share from the 1990s onwards: their mutual interest in, and the theoretical importance attributed to locality, heterogeneity, multiple causation and differential relations between context and farm (or more specifically: between farm enterprises and markets). Thus, both the ‘social’ and the ‘economic’ entered, in renewed (i.e. reconceptualized) ways, into the then-emerging field of rural studies.

The integration of NIE and RS into what is currently identified as rural studies coincided with the end of modernization as the hegemonic politico-economic discourse in agriculture and the subsequent rise of new rural development policies (as e.g. outlined in the Declaration of Cork, 1996). Agricultural development is no longer understood (and practiced) as a sectoral process, but more as a territorial process that needs to take into account interests, prospects and points of view other than purely agricultural ones. From the 1990s onwards, new developmental tendencies started to take shape all over Europe (and beyond). These included multifunctionality at the farm level, the construction of new markets and increases in levels of self-provisioning which all became important features that started to reshape the contours and dynamics of Europe’s food systems. Initially these phenomena were not very well understood – ‘old-fashioned’ agrarian economics and rural sociology found it difficult to come to grips with the ‘end of modernization’ and the ‘beginning of rural development’. In an article co-authored with other European scholars, Ventura tellingly referred to rural development as a set of newly emerging practices and policies *that urgently needed a corresponding theoretical approach*. As yet it was “a practice without theory” (Ploeg *et al.*, 2000; see also Saccomandi, 1994, who referred to the notion of rural development as “*not yet very clear*”<sup>6</sup>).

In the end, what we now know as rural studies became both a significant driver and an important theoretical expression of rural development processes. It is solidly grounded in neo-institutional economics and those parts of rural sociology that went beyond the modernization paradigm. The emergence of rural studies closely interacted with, and supported, the newly emerging practices and policies. Rural studies developed the capacity to understand ‘what was happening’, indicating why this was important and proposing how these new trends could be supported and strengthened through agricultural and/or rural policies. Rural studies were able to help develop new answers to dilemmas that had been lying dormant for a long time, and which re-emerged in the 1990s and the following decades. Initially, there was some resistance

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<sup>6</sup> Later on Saccomandi elaborated a theoretically grounded definition of rural development. This is discussed in Ventura, Milone, 2007 and in Cecchi, 2007.

to such explanations but increasingly the performativity of rural studies proved to be far stronger.

Although rural studies emerged from many cradles, spread all over Europe, there was a very strong impetus in Italy. This is not surprising. Italian agriculture is strongly localized: it is, to paraphrase a well-known Chinese saying, an agriculture where one thousand localities blossom. These are reflected in, and represented by, the many regional specialties and high-quality products, and in the many visible, and sometimes nearly invisible, districts. It is an agriculture of many novelties: new products, practices, techniques, insights and networks developed by farmers themselves (Scettri *et al.*, 2001).

Against this background Italy became a fertile ground for the early genesis and prosperous unfolding of rural studies. But there is another and extremely important feature that has to be taken into account: Italy contains a far wider range of agricultural faculties and research institutes than other European countries. In such a situation every faculty and/or research institute looks for, and actively develops, *distinction*. Even if they are involved in networks of mutual cooperation, they seek to be distinctively different from each other. In this vein Portici stood out for its Marxist orientation; Parma and Bologna for their strong and well-developed neoclassical orientations; Milan and Padua for combining technological and economic approaches; Trieste and, on the other side of Italy, the University of Calabria both focused on issues of peripherality; and the Universities of Rome paid particular attention to agricultural policies. They all had their own distinguishable positions and expertise.

A well-known insight from biology and evolutionary theory is that the best possible condition for the emergence of *new* life resides in the *absence* of life. To consider such a dictum as applicable to economics would be somewhat cruel. Nonetheless it is not too hazardous, I think, to argue that the presence of a well-developed and institutionally rooted school of economic thought does not favour the emergence of a new, and competing, theoretical approach. In the academic panorama of the 1980s and 1990s Perugia was, at least as far as agrarian economics was concerned, the proverbial exception. Precisely because it was somewhat at the margin of the well-vested schools of thought it could become the cradle for the then completely new neo-institutional analysis of agricultural production and marketing<sup>7</sup>. Here Saccomandi developed his “*Istituzioni di Economia del Mercato dei Prodotti Agricoli*”<sup>8</sup>. Flaminia Ventura closely cooperated with Saccomandi in working on this approach. Beyond that, she was the first to systematically apply the newly elaborated theoretical insights in empirical analysis.

#### **4. The contribution of NIE to rural studies**

In this section I will discuss three important themes located at the interface of markets and farms. By focusing on these themes Ventura not only introduced NIE into rural studies but also made a strong contribution to the further development of NIE itself. She helped to move

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<sup>7</sup> This point of view is supported by the essay of Giuseppe Saccomandi, son of Vito (see Saccomandi, 2007).

<sup>8</sup> It was first published in 1991, reworked and translated into English (1998) and finally republished in (1999).



the latter from a mere extension of the neo-classical approach (by introducing the concept of transaction costs as additional determinant of choice) to a fuller understanding of the dynamic role of institutions and agency (Milone, Ventura, 2012).

#### 4.1. 'Make or Buy?'

One of the strengths of NIE resides in its analysis of the relations between markets and enterprises. Here two key questions emerge: to what degree do enterprises *use* the market in order to compose and recompose their resource-base, and to what degree do enterprises themselves seek to *produce* the factors of production and non-factor inputs they need? This dilemma is synthesized by NIE as 'make or buy', and the discipline developed the concepts of *transaction costs and governing costs* to analyse this problem. Ventura and her colleagues were among the first to systematically apply this analytical approach to farm enterprises and agricultural markets and this soon turned out to be a most fruitful exercise (see e.g. Ventura, Meulen, 1994 and 1995; Ventura, 2001).

Farming enterprises and agricultural markets are a magnificent showcase of the 'make or buy' question: the question pops up in a myriad of ways and the consequences of the choices made are often far-reaching.

The process of agricultural production can be grounded on an ample, relatively autonomous and historically guaranteed resource-base that makes the farm – as a productive unit – into a largely self-provisioning constellation. What is needed is available *because it has been made* (directly or indirectly). This applies to hay, horses, heifers, hemp seeds, hands, whatever. But they can also be acquired (bought, leased, or hired) on the market. Such choices depend on the perceived transaction and governing costs and the control over property rights. Where can good hay be bought? Can its quality be trusted or has it been harvested from a vineyard after the vines have been sprayed? Will there be a regular supply? What if something goes wrong? Or, to take another everyday-life issue (that was dear to Ventura): the pruning of olive trees. If others are contracted to do the job, will they be youngsters from the village who know how to do the job (and will be careful not to lose their reputation) or will they come from an employment agency using low-paid and less knowledgeable people from elsewhere?

The point is clear. The perception, valuation and equilibration of transaction and governing costs is highly dependent on (informal) institutions; the 'rules' that shape and guide actions (including economic ones). These institutions are closely aligned with the norms, values and the organizational patterns of communities, just as they are informed by collective memory, class relations and the emancipatory aspirations of the social groups involved. Some of them are short-lived, they come and go; other institutions are strongly rooted in the materiality of social life: in landscapes, irrigation systems, cooperative structures, eco-systems, intra and inter familial obligations and dependencies, etc.

Thus, by bringing in, and centring on, *institutions*, NIE creates an incisive instrument that allows for a mutual understanding and, in the end, maybe even a fusion of agrarian economics, rural sociology and other disciplines, such as agrarian history, social geography, etc. This is because it opens the doors for an open-minded inquiry into *whom* and *what* shapes economic life, and *how* and *when* this constitutive process operates and unfolds.

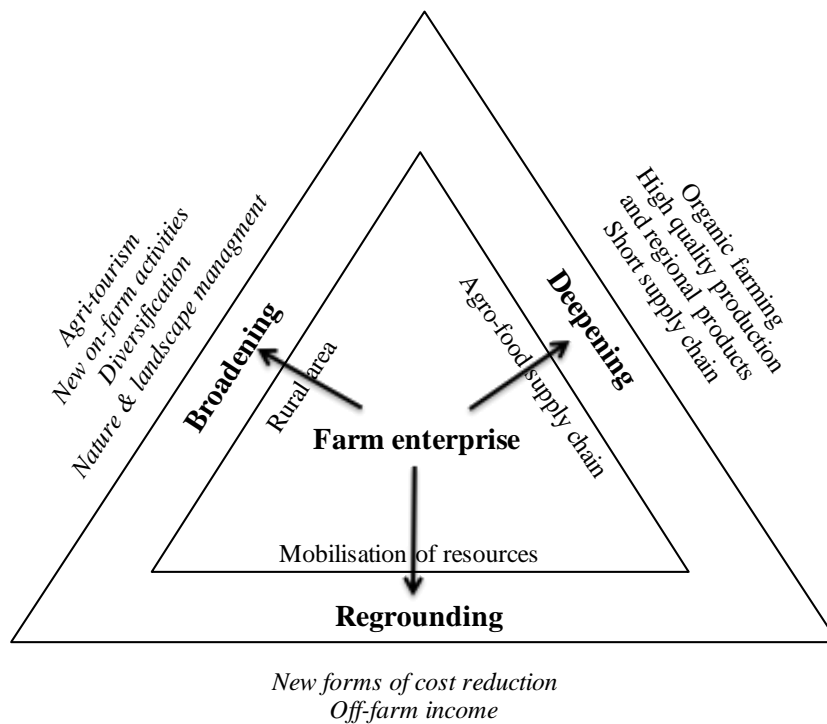
#### 4.2. 'Specialized or multifunctional?'

There is mouldability, not only at the input-side of farms, but on the output-side as well. Here, the guiding question is: '*specialise or diversify*'. There is a wide spectrum of possibilities – and in this respect Italian agriculture represents, once again, an amazing richness. Some farms develop a broad portfolio of products and services, while others are highly specialized.

Along with many others, Ventura contributed to the meticulous documentation of this many-sided variety and the novel mechanisms it fostered. By building on Panzar, Willig (1981), she pioneered the analysis and theoretical representation of the multifunctional farm). In doing so, she developed, together with Milone, the concept of 'changing farm boundaries' (2004). This theoretical notion became a cornerstone of what is now understood as rural development. The concept also explains why and how rural development activities can generate considerable additional flows of income.

Let the inner triangle in Figure 1 represent the conventional farm. The three sides of the triangle refer to its basic aspects: the mobilization of resources, their conversion into products and services and the farm's position within the countryside and society. This inner triangle represents the *specialized* farm, producing raw materials for processing in agro-industries, having little relationship with the surrounding context and only able to function due to the mobilization of resources in the respective factor and non-factor markets. The surface of the (inner) triangle represents the income that is generated in this specialized farm. Now, this conventional farm can well be 'enlarged' through new forms of multifunctionality, which will *change its borders*. Thus an enlarged triangle (with a higher income) may be constructed. This can occur through several different processes: re-grounding, broadening and deepening. Deepening refers to all kinds of productive activities that aim at obtaining more value added per unit of end product: switching to organic production and/or regional specialties, on-farm processing, on-farm or direct selling, etc. Broadening refers to the integration of other non-agricultural economic activities into the farm, in order to add more value added to the enterprise. This can happen through e.g. remunerated maintenance of nature, landscape, the development of biodiversity or water retention, agro-tourism or offering different kinds of services to neighbouring villages or nearby towns. Re-grounding refers to a reshuffle or re-combination of the production factors on which the farm is based. This can be organized through e.g. new forms of local cooperation, pluri-activity and/or new relations between farming and nature.

**Figure 1: Boundary shifts**



NIE helps to conceptualize the processes at work here. It helps us to understand that multifunctionality does not come down to a mere *addition* of activities. This is because the costs of producing two products together are lower than producing them individually – especially if they are linked by synergistic loops. “As cases of indivisible investments and inputs are common, [the] joint production of a number of products allows for better utilization of both inputs and outputs” (Scherer, 1975; Saccomandi, 1998). Thus, synergies are created and the economies of scope replace economies of scale.

Theoretically important with this shift to economies of scope (Milone, Ventura, 2000: 454-458; Brunori, Rossi, 2000) is that the farm enterprise enters the analysis as an *institution*. It is not just a (non-) place where the function of production is located – it is, instead, the assemblage of resources and actors who, in a knowledgeable, goal-oriented and strategically inspired way, develop their farm and the networks in which it is embedded. The farm is not only *surrounded* by (economic) institutions – it is also by itself a major (economic) institution. Later on, this argument was extended to the *market* as such. As Milone and Ventura argued: “The market can be basically conceived as an institution with specific social rules which provide the basis for exchanges to take place” (2015: 41).

In this way, yet another major meeting point between agrarian economics and rural sociology was forged. But more importantly is that this same observation, i.e. the market being an institution by itself, allowed for the theoretical possibility, and quickly expanding practices, of *constructing new markets* (Milone, Ventura, Ye, 2015; Ventura, Schiavelli, Milone, 2016).

### 4.3. 'Step-by-step or jumping?'

There are major differences discernible in the *direction* of development trajectories constructed by different farm enterprises, even within one and the same economic environment (where the institutions, technologies and markets are the same for all farms). As amply documented in Ploeg (1990), Ploeg, Saccomandi, Roep (1990) and Ventura (1995), there are also important differences in *nature* and *rhythm*. Some farms develop 'slowly', in a step-by-step way, and they do so largely by building on the available social and material resources and networks and by taking into account the limits implied by society and nature. Other farms, by contrast, develop through the creation of ruptures. They try to 'jump' over the limits implied by existing resources, networks and external conditions. Their growth is structured as a process that brings magnitude and presumably also market power.

These differences in growth patterns underscore the explanatory value of conceptual pairs, such as endogenous vs. exogenous development, transformational costs vs. costs of governance (understood as embracing both feedback and feedforward loops) and incremental vs. radical innovations. Such concepts help to explain how farmers face and resolve several of the dilemmas mentioned above. The consequences of different growth trajectories turn out to be considerable. Growing inequalities, the emergence of an environmental crisis, the (re-)birth of right-wing rural protest movements and deep divisions within rural societies are but a few of the outcomes.

A new challenge for rural studies resides in adequately grasping the dilemmas that are related to the way farmers currently face the future (as shaped by agricultural and especially environmental policies). For some farmers 'the burden of the past' prevails – they are squeezed, as it were, by the urgencies of the present and the routines and goals that they developed in the past. Others are driven by opportunities entailed in the future (and therefore willing to engage in spending and investments that others consider as too dangerous).

## 5. Bringing in institutions and introducing new fields of inquiry

The systematic application of NIE to agriculture opened a range of new fields of inquiry. These were aptly summarized in 2007 by Ventura and Milone as:

- The territorial articulation of agriculture and the diversity of its organizational forms.
- The interrelations between the farming family and other components of rural communities [and food systems]; and the double role of the farming family as provider and beneficiary of services.

Related to this there are fields of interest situated at the interface of agriculture and policy:

- The adaptability and flexibility of structural policies for agriculture.
- New interpretative schemes that allow for the elaboration of appropriate policy interventions that are able to meet the real and differing needs of different territories.
- The governance of local processes of transition through the redesign of the interaction between farm enterprises and other components of the food system(s).

- The relations between regional autonomy on the one hand and central authority on the other, within a framework of subsidiarity (Ventura, Milone, 2007).

The study of these fields can produce policy proposals that centre on the introduction and development of *new institutions*. A telling (if not monumental) example here is that, during the negotiations about the McSharry reform of the Common Agricultural Policy (a reform that was a definitive step in the liberalization of the Common Market), Saccomandi (then Minister of Agriculture) proposed, and obtained, the European Regulation for the Protection of Products with Denominated Origin. Thus, the partial elimination of one set of institutions (the rules that governed the European market for agricultural products) was countered by the development of a new set of rules, which had a positive and visible impact on Mediterranean agriculture (and increasingly beyond). The new rule set allowed for further deepening at the farm and territorial level, for the construction of new markets and the protection of those that were at risk from copy-cat products.

Following this stance, Ventura and others developed an impressive array of insights into existing, and proposals for new, institutions able to support and strengthen processes of rural development (Milone *et al.*, 2015; Ventura *et al.*, 2016).

## **6. The distinctive features of rural studies: a summary**

Facing and (theoretically) resolving the dilemmas that are inherent to farming as a practice and as a developmental process requires a paradigm that goes beyond the limits of single disciplines. This applies especially in times of crises, i.e. when one dominant agropolitical orientation (such as modernization) is challenged by another (such as rural development). Rural studies promise to provide such a paradigm and can do so, as argued in several contributions in Valorosi and Torquati (2007), because it reconsiders several of the main dilemmas that were previously seen as irrelevant. Rural studies are also distinctively new and different in that they employ a range of methodological features (or devices) that differ significantly from those that characterize the more classical agrarian sciences. I will briefly elaborate here on six such features.

### *6.1. Multi-disciplinarity*

Multi-disciplinarity is a central feature of rural studies. It is grounded in the recognition that “economic development [has] a multi-dimensional nature that includes, alongside the economic aspect, the surrounding ecological and socio-institutional dimensions” (Ventura, 2001: 1 and 2023: 15). It is important to note that we are *not* talking here of multi-disciplinarity as knowing a bit about every discipline (and consequently barely knowing any single discipline well). The type of multi-disciplinarity that is central to today’s rural studies is grounded on a set of interfaces that allow for the identification of dilemmas (such as make-or-buy) that are situated at the intersection(s) of the social and the economic. It is at such intersections that the social feeds into the economic and vice-versa. Such ‘feeding’ is both translational and

performative. Economic relations, prospects, parameters and concepts are translated to the social and thus help to shape it (the latter is the performative aspect). This evidently also applies in reverse, from the social to the economic. The mutual flows of translations and performance meld the economic and the social into one single and indivisible reality: a reality that is experienced (by practitioners) and theorized (by scientists) as *simultaneously* economic and social. Separating such realities into single and isolated halves only produces blind spots, confusion and misunderstanding.

## 6.2. Context: Taking time and place into account

Institutions are translational: they transport meaning from one domain to another, just as they prescribe how to read events and translate them into recommendable and/or needed courses of action. Institutions are also subject (though often resistant) to change. New institutions may emerge, others will fade away. During their ‘life’ (which might be short or extremely long-lived) they always carry a balance of continuity and change. Change can be purposeful or result from external and uncontrolled events, processes and/or circumstances. More specifically: farming strategies may be adapted as new markets or new technologies appear (or existing ones are adapted) and the structure and composition of rural communities (and the subsequent patterns of cooperation and division of labour) evolve. All this implies that time and place definitely need to be included within the analysis. This is precisely what rural studies does. Importantly, it does so very much through *comparative analysis* and considering extended *time series*. Rural studies take into account the *longue durée*. They refrain from only using *cross-sectional* analysis (that for a long time dominated the study of agriculture). On the other hand it is also true that rural studies are sometimes hindered by a surfeit of *un-mediated case studies*. This hinders the understanding of what-is-being-studied (the object of study) as part of a more encompassing flow through time and space. Overcoming this limitation will be decisive for the further unfolding of rural studies.

## 6.3. The dialectics of actor-structure relations

Whilst acknowledging the crucial importance and often far-reaching impact(s) of structural patterns, rural studies reject any form of determinism (and especially the technological and economic determinism embodied in agrarian disciplines of the past). In doing so they build on actor-structure relations as developed in sociology by Anthony Giddens (1997) and the actor-oriented approach developed by Norman Long (1977, 2015). On the economic side a similar ‘duality’ (structures impacting on actors and actors reproducing and changing structures) is discernible. Markets shape the behaviour of enterprises but enterprises, in turn, affect and sometimes reshape market relations. “A firm is usually not a prisoner of its industry’s structure [...] It also attempts to shape its environment in a firm’s favour” (Porter, 1985: 7). An interesting interface here is the ‘bridging’ activity of (proto-) entrepreneurs operating at the margins of existing but separated markets: they connect previously separated value circuits. By doing so they create value, trigger economic growth and simultaneously improve their own incomes. They often come to the fore as *tertius gaudens*: “an entrepreneur in the literal sense

of the word – a person who generates profit from being between others” (Burt, 1992: 34). It is the type of entrepreneurial behaviour one sees among those strongly involved in the development of multifunctionality, the construction of new markets and the creation of new, long-term flows that link past, present and future in novel ways (Rooij, Ventura, Milone, 2014). It is, in short, behaviour that contains and tries-out new solutions for the many dilemmas farmers (and others in the food system) face during transitional periods.

#### 6.4. *Bringing in living nature*

When raising the issue of ‘make or buy’, the balance of internal and external resources (internally made vs. bought resources) moves to the centre of the analysis. In agriculture this implies that the *role of living nature* needs to be included in the discussion. For agriculture is co-production. It is, like all productive activities, the ongoing encounter, interaction and mutual transformation of the social and material. But in farming, the material includes *living nature*: animals, soils, trees, vines, etc. There can be no agriculture without living nature (Ploeg, Ventura, 2014). However, in farming, the position of living nature can vary dramatically – especially, but not only, due to technological development. In the context of co-production, the productive potentials of living nature can be enlarged considerably (or, can equally be reduced or destroyed). If living nature is enhanced it becomes an increasingly productive force that allows specific forms of competitiveness and high levels of sustainability but also different modalities of endogenous growth (Ploeg, Saccomandi, 1995). This was shown, in a convincing and detailed way, in the early work of Ventura (Ventura, 1995; 2001; Ventura, Meulen, 1994). Later on this was elaborated further, notably in a key publication Ventura co-authored with other European colleagues (Ploeg *et al.*, 2019).

The search for sustainability is another entrance that necessarily directs to co-production and the central role of living nature. Reducing the use of fossil fuels, pesticides and nitrogen-containing inputs implies the further development of *internal* resources and, especially, an increase in levels of use-efficiency (an early exploration of this theme is found in Ventura 1995).

#### 6.5. *The labour process*

Just as rural studies bring living nature back into the analysis of agriculture, they also excel in re-introducing labour (partly via the concept of co-production). As argued before, labour is not simply about setting the means of production in motion. The labour process is constructive; it not only produces end products but also and especially a way of farming (a farming style). Hence, the *qualitative* dimension of labour (the knowledge, skills, design-capacities, abilities to engage in networks, and experiences embodied in it) comes to the fore as a constitutive pillar of agricultural and food systems. It largely explains ‘X-efficiency’ (Salter, 1966). Understanding labour in this way helps to introduce the mouldability of farming and agriculture into the analysis – thus opening new, previously often neglected inroads into potential transition processes (Ventura, Milone, 2005). Consequently, farmers’ innovativeness emerges as important field of research (see e.g. Ventura, Milone, 2004). As a matter of fact, the

exploration of novel practices produced in, and through, the farm labour process is now one of the strongholds of rural studies, the results of which feed into, and strengthen, new forms of policy making. “Development from below” is the often-used keyword here.

### 6.6. *Micro-macro linkages*

A final feature of rural studies to be mentioned here is their attention to the complexities of micro-macro linkages in agriculture. The macro-level is definitely not seen as a mere agglomeration of data derived from the micro-level (or the local). Neither do macro-phenomena directly shape activities at the micro-level. The local is not a derivative of the macro. Instead, the local is the place where specific realities, new tendencies, the rules and deviations are constructed – but under conditions that are often defined as macro phenomena, such as price-levels, price-relations and market tendencies. These are actively ‘read’ by the actors operating in different micro situations and then ‘translated’ into specific courses of action. Echoing Porter (1985), some of these actors are even able to reset several of the seemingly untouchable parameters that reign at the macro-level.

Between the macro- and micro-levels there are many in-between levels, in several of which influential institutions play important roles. Meaning ‘travels’ from level to level and at every interface there are important processes of translation and negotiation. A considerable part of the real-life economy is constructed at these interfaces and it is precisely here where room for manoeuvre can be created, enlarged or reduced. Rural districts (as discussed above) are a point in case.

## 7. **By way of conclusion**

In this article I have tried to discuss how, why, where and by whom rural studies have been built. It would be ridiculous, of course, to even suggest that their construction depended on only a few places and people; it would be equally ridiculous to point to direct and straightforward connections between changing practices and policies on the one hand and the rise and fall of theoretical approaches on the other (*or vice versa*). Having said this, it can be maintained, I think, that the neo-institutional analysis of farming and agri-marketing initiated by Vito Saccomandi and later further developed by Flaminia Ventura and her colleagues has contributed remarkably to the rise of rural studies. This occurred directly (through books, articles, contributions to conferences, etc.) but also through the stimulating role of both Saccomandi and Ventura in scholarly and agro-political networks that covered Europe and later extended to China and Brazil.

It should be admitted that rural studies have made research into, and the elaboration of adequate theories of, the rural *more* complex than it was before. Going beyond traditional and well separated disciplines, such as neo-classical agrarian economics and rural sociology, has made our work far more complex and difficult. The six features of rural studies, elaborated above, are more than proof of such complexities. But then, whilst it might be more difficult, rural studies are equally and definitely more attractive and exciting than the single disciplines



of the past – probably because they do not accept simplistic explanations and have stopped to suggest easy solutions (which, if implemented, mainly result in frustration and increased disorder).

We have to be modest. There surely will come a time in which the shortcomings of rural studies become evident. Rural studies may even become obsolete – as happened to their predecessors. It is fairly impossible to assess when that time will come, although it doesn't appear to be imminent. In the meantime, however, it is good to have this thing called rural studies.

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