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The development of qualitative monographic studies of rural environments in Germany and Austria

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Rural social studies in Germany and Austria have developed in stages. Ever since their emergence, they have undergone a significant expansion and professionalisation, also in terms of methodology, while developing a variety of scientific, institutional, practical, political and ideological connections across different political systems, close to or far from them, eventually resulting in the formation of a subdiscipline of rural sociology/sociology of agriculture with its own international network. This article discusses the development of qualitative monographic studies in Germany and Austria on an example of selected works introducing new topics and approaches. The term 'monographic study' is not widely applied in German-speaking sociology. Here it is understood similar to Polish rural social studies (see Kaleta 1913: 20ff), as discussed for example in an article in a Lithuanian magazine published as early as in 1981 (Vosyliūtė 1981/new edition 2014). Below are presented empirical studies of villages and rural communities, in particular, farming families in Germany and Austria.

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Prominent early empirical studies

Significant qualitative monographic studies have explored numerous relevant topics long before rural sociology, or more specifically, sociology of agriculture established itself as a sociological subdiscipline in Germany and Austria.

One of the highlights of early empirical research into rural life is the study *Fünf Dorfgemeinden auf dem Hohen Taunus* [Five village communities in the High Taunus] (1883) by the Frankfurt-based independent scholar Gottlieb Schnapper-Arndt (1846–1904), renowned for high levels of accuracy and dedication. The study focused on livelihoods and lifestyles of predominantly poor inhabitants of five villages in the Taunus region, who relied on cottage industry and subsistence farming as their main sources of income. The empirical basis was provided by available data sources, primarily observations, conversations and individual studies, including a compilation of statistical data regarding the studied households collected in repeated, long-term field research. Schnapper-Arndt described unfavourable climate and soil conditions for the local farming, further exacerbated by the inheritance-based system of land division into very small plots (in German: *Realteilung*), as well as types of cottage industry (the workshop system) and poor working conditions. He also discussed the living conditions, family relationships and 'moral conditions' that enforced strict compliance with the applicable norms. In general, Schnapper-Arndt concludes that for these social strata, the chance of reaching 'happiness in life' in the pre-industrial environment was low, while that of 'falling into ruin' was quite large.

Before the First World War, a rising interest was observed, particularly in the women's movement and social-political associations, in studying the problematic living conditions of women in agriculture. The situation of female farmers at that time was analysed, for example, in two empirical studies conducted by young scholars at the universities of Freiburg and Tübingen. The first one was a detailed and inquisitive dissertation by Marta Wohlgemuth, who explored the situation of female farmers, both as agricultural workers and as housewives, wives and mothers, in two Baden municipalities (Wohlgemuth 1913). The author concluded that despite its 'strong bright and dark sides', the life of the studied women was generally more positive 'compared to the life of the majority of other working women

of our time' (op. cit., p. 149). The second study, still praised today, is the political science dissertation *Die Bäuerin in zwei Gemeinden Württembergs* [The farmer woman in two municipalities of Württemberg], published in 1918 by the prematurely deceased Maria Bidlingmaier (1882–1917). The author's task, as she defined it, was to study 'to what extent the rationalisation of agriculture affected women employed in agriculture – female farmers' (Bidlingmaier, new edition 1993: IX). She conducted a comparative study of two villages with different inheritance standards and advanced level of the rationalisation process at that time. The empirical material included primarily numerous discussions with female farmers and analyses of the available data and sources. The consequences of the development differed for both villages in terms of the situation of female farmers. Due to limited access and extensive livestock breeding as the main source of income, the rather remote village of Kleinaspach had largely retained its rural character, with its 'intimate, naive, modest, even primitive' quality of life (op. cit., p. 1). In contrast, in Bidlingmaier's home village of Lauffe, marked on the one hand by the *Realteilung* and on the other by favourable access and climate conditions for agriculture and wine-growing, economic development had already gained a stronger foothold, with all its negative consequences of intense physical labour on female farmers' health and their performance as housewives and mothers.

Although the institutionalisation of sociology in German research and academic circles began in the Weimar Republic, little attention was paid to rural sociology. Instead, its topics were addressed within the framework of another field, agricultural policy, with the Research Institute for Agriculture and Settlements (in German: *Forschungsinstitut für Agrar- und Siedlungswesen*; 1921–1834) headed by Max Sering (1857–1939) playing the leading role. The situation in Austria was similar at that time.

Another prominent work is the famous *Marienthal-Studie* [The Marienthal study] (Jahoda et al. 1933, new edition 1975), a classic among empirical research of unemployment and an excellent analysis of a village in a state of emergency. The late 1920s global economic crisis led to the closing down of a textile factory in a village in the vicinity of Vienna, leaving most families without a single breadwinner by early 1932. Initially, the workers were offered unemployment benefits, which were temporary and low, followed by a just as temporary and even lower emergency allowance, but after that, they were left with no support. The authors of the study were

young, dedicated and at that time, jobless researchers. It was headed by Paul Lazarsfeld (1901–1976), the founder of the Austrian Economic Psychology Research Centre (in German: *Die Österreichische Wirtschaftspsychologische Forschungsstelle*), which was the first private social research institute in the German-speaking world. Later, as a Jewish immigrant in America, Lazarsfeld became a leading representative of social research and survey methodology. The major contributor of the book about the Marienthal study was Marie Jahoda (1907–2001), who later also emigrated and became a professor of social psychology in England.

Both researchers were supported at the practical stage of their study by five young doctors, who formed a socially engaged research group that offered free medical consultations, counselling and courses, organised a campaign of collecting and distributing second-hand clothes, all of which allowed them to have an insight into people's situation, family relationships, behaviour and experiences. They recorded their observations and reflections daily, distributed timesheets for logging daily activities, collected detailed life stories from over 60 unemployed people and compiled other related material. The results of the study were condensed into key diagnoses based on the most striking phenomena observed, for example, the diagnosis of 'a tired community', because the life of the villagers, once known for their love of life, changed dramatically. The researchers identified four 'approach groups' (in German: *Haltungsgruppen*) among the unemployed families: the small minority of the (still) 'unbroken', the large majority of the 'resigned' and, up to that point, still small groups of the 'desperate' and 'apathetic', whose sizes would probably continue growing along with the rising unemployment rate. Another striking phenomenon was how the new situation changed the perception and use of time in the studied population, which was particularly visible in now mostly inactive men compared to women still preoccupied with coping with everyday life. Finally, the researchers sought to assess the 'power of resilience' to the perennial state of unemployment among the villagers.

The reorganisation of village studies in the 1950s

One can find numerous highly informative reports on the fateful development of rural social research during the Nazi regime. With the implementation

of the National Socialist policy towards agriculture and rural settlements, researchers who were not forced to leave work, emigrate or otherwise withdraw from their academic activity, were suddenly confronted with multiple opportunities but also obligations to participate in state-regulated rural social studies and urban planning. Contract (state-commissioned) research gained particular meaning at that time and was ultimately used for designing population programmes and for urban planning of the 'new' *Ostraum*, i.e. future 'new areas' in the occupied eastern territories beyond the then German border.

After the Second World War, empirical social research dedicated to rural areas gained new momentum in West Germany in the 1950s. The pressure of social changes and the expectation of a new political beginning, supported by university lecturers specialising in agricultural policy, resulted in the institutionalisation of rural sociology at university faculties. Particularly active were American government agencies and foundations that supported community research, both financially and conceptually, as part of the 're-education' efforts. This is how the so-called 'Darmstadt Studies' came to being which investigated the integration of urban areas and their surroundings. They were conducted at the Institute for Social Science Research in Darmstadt, founded for a limited period of time, with the involvement of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research.

Three studies were published in 1952 (Grüneisen 1952; Kötter 1952 and Teiwes 1952), presenting a pluralistic methodology which included data analysis of four studied communities, a sample survey, expert discussions and case studies of individual families. The study by Herbert Kötter, also submitted as a dissertation, was entitled *Struktur und Funktion von Landgemeinden im Einflußbereich einer deutschen Mittelstadt* [Structure and function of rural municipalities within the sphere of influence of a medium-sized German town], and it addressed the then recognisable change in the mentality of inhabitants of rural communities close to a town, from the farming family/rural model towards a more individualised economy/urban model. His study of the rural area around Darmstadt, with all of its regional diversity, revealed that 'the integration process of the urban and rural areas [proceeded] in different conditions and [was] at different stages' (Kötter 1952: 39), depending on the industrialisation, access roads and commuting possibilities. Kötter divided the population into the 'main categories' of farmers, part-time farmers, non-agricultural population and

new inhabitants (at that time, mainly refugees and evacuated city dwellers). He saw how the historically rural lifestyle was transformed by modern city-oriented development. It was a process which certainly brought losses but also positive changes, such as the 'progressive "demythologisation" ' as part of the 'real enlightenment', because 'with an increasing understanding of the laws of nature the magic could increasingly be pushed into the background' (op. cit., p. 91). Another study focused on part-time farmers and their lifestyle of commuters (Teiwes 1952), showing that 'commuters can be seen as a strong social link in the local community. Undoubtedly, due to their intermediate position between the city and the countryside they have accepted modern views which however are confronted with strong traditional and conservative ties' (op. cit., p. 120f). The topics addressed by the Darmstadt Studies remained the focus of rural sociology for the next few decades.

Herbert Kötter (1916–2003) gained recognition, also internationally, as a scientist and political advisor. His habilitation thesis *Landbevölkerung im sozialen Wandel* [Rural population in the process of social change] (Kötter 1958) may be regarded as one of the most significant publications in German rural sociology. In 1964, he joined the first German Chair of Agricultural Sociology at the University of Gießen, and in 1969, he took over the Chair of Economic Sociology at the Faculty of Agriculture of the University of Bonn. He was also particularly active in the field of scientific political consulting. Between 1973 to 1976, he took a leave of absence to head the UN Human Resources, Institutions and Agrarian Reform Division in Rome.

The first attempts at the institutionalisation of rural social research emerged outside academia. An initiative of several lecturers from agricultural science faculties and universities resulted in an extensive research and publication activity, leading to the establishment in 1952 of the Research Society for Agricultural Policy and Sociology (in German: FAA – *Forschungsgesellschaft für Agrarpolitik und Agrarsoziologie e.V.*), with its research centre in Bonn, founded by the Federal Ministry of Food in cooperation with rural sociologists. The FAA operated until the end of 2003, i.e. until the end of the governmental funding. Those involved had already decided in 1951 to focus primarily on small farmers, at that time, typically defined as those with farmland between 2 and 7.5 hectares.

For example, the study *Lebensverhältnisse in kleinbäuerlichen Dörfern* [Living conditions in villages of small-scale farmers], coordinated by employees of nine participating agricultural research institutes, was conducted in ten villages. Its objective was to give insight into problems faced by small farmers, which could be managed with the appropriate agricultural policy. To this end, the situation of individual small farms and farming families was juxtaposed with the overall picture of agriculture in the respective villages. All study collaborators were first familiarised with the respective (previously unknown to them) sociological research methods applied in family and village studies. Only two years later, a summary report was presented based on the monographic studies of the relevant villages (by Dietze/Rolfes/Weippert 1953). A wide spectrum of environmental, population-related and social conditions was taken into account – next to purely farmer villages, those with a mixed population of farmers and workers were also represented. In terms of family arrangements, the traditional patriarchal family type was still represented, mainly in Catholic regions; however, most cases could be described as transient in which the patriarchal pattern was in the process of dissolution. Most small farmers relied on non-agricultural forms of employment to earn their rather poor living, with a heavy workload, particularly in the case of frequently overworked female farmers. The relations with neighbours with regard to economic and material help in emergencies were limited. Especially in the villages with a mixed population of workers and farmers they typically included non-economic forms of support. In the 1970s, the study was repeated to determine what had changed in the villages since the previous research. Comparable studies and surveys were conducted with the use of the predominant quantitative methods at that time, revealing that the villages had largely lost their small-farmer character and changed in part into communities of commuters.

On rural social research from the perspective of relevant institutions and academics

Since the end of the 1950s, chairs of rural sociology (sociology of agriculture) have been established at most agricultural faculties and universities across Germany, such as the universities of Bonn, Gießen, Göttingen and

Hohenheim, at the Technical University of Berlin and the Technical University of Munich (the Weihenstephan Campus). As the most proliferate German rural sociologist, Ulrich Planck was the author of numerous research projects and publications, for many of which he travelled abroad. His academic career gained momentum at the University of Hohenheim (Stuttgart), a school originally dedicated exclusively to agricultural sciences. Particularly well-known is his textbook *Land- und Agrarsoziologie* [Rural sociology and sociology of agriculture], which he published together with another representative of agricultural sciences from the Weihenstephan Campus (Planck/Ziche 1979). Planck emphasised representative standardised surveys in his empirical research.

Since the 1980s, and particularly in the last decade, the perception of institutions and academics in German rural sociology and rural social research has changed, which has resulted in their reduced institutional anchoring at university faculties of agricultural sciences. Although the agricultural chair at the University of Göttingen was still headed by Heide Inhetveen, many rural sociology chairs became increasingly vacant as their professors retired. This affected the university teaching positions at the TU Munich (Weihenstephan), the University of Gießen and the University of Bonn. In Stuttgart-Hohenheim the post of Planck's successor, Franz Kromka, was taken over by Andrea Knierim, while after Inhetveen's retirement, Claudia Neu was appointed as the Head of the Chair of Rural Sociology for the University of Göttingen and the University of Kassel, collectively.

The FAA was replaced by the Institute for Rural Areas in Braunschweig (in German: *Institut für Ländliche Räume*), established in 2004 as part of a more comprehensive initiative, the Federal Research Institute for Rural Areas, Forestry and Fisheries (in German: *Bundesforschungsinstituts für Ländliche Räume, Wald und Fischerei*). In addition, there is also an institute for socioeconomics at the Leibniz Centre for Agricultural Landscape Research (in German: ZALF – *Leibniz-Zentrum für Agrarlandschaftsforschung*) in Müncheberg, Brandenburg, which was founded in 1992.

Even without the formal institutional anchoring, rural sociology and rural social studies continued to be practised at sociological institutes, with empirical research projects implemented by interested university lecturers with research staff for a long time before their retirement, e.g. by Bruno Hildenbrand, mainly with Karl Friedrich Bohler as a research contributor,

first at the University of Marburg, then the University of Frankfurt am Main, and most recently at the University of Jena. For the past few decades, the author of this article has also been able to incorporate his rural sociology interests in his lecturing activity at the University of Oldenburg. Also, architect Joachim Grube continued his village studies even after retiring from the position of a university lecturer. Rural social research is now and was then also carried out by geographers interested in rural regions as well as by dedicated folklorists and researchers working in the field of cultural studies.

In East Germany, following the dissolution of the Academy for Social Sciences at the Central Committee of the SED (in German: *Akademie für Gesellschaftswissenschaften beim Zentralkomitee der SED*) after the political change of 1989, the local department of sociology of agriculture also ceased to exist. After German reunification, the posts of university lecturers in this field remained vacant at the University of Halle and the Bernburg University of Applied Sciences after their previous holders had retired, while the faculty of agriculture of the Humboldt University of Berlin was integrated with the TU Berlin.

Rural social research in Austria spread relatively late, in fact, only since the 1970s. Initially, like today, it focused primarily on studies of the agricultural population, particularly mountain farmers (in German: *Bergbauern*), but since the 1990s, it has become increasingly interested in village studies. Founded in 1960, the Federal Institute of Agricultural Economics in Vienna (in German: *Bundesanstalt für Agrarwirtschaft*) played a major role. Another important institution was the Federal Institute for Mountain Farming in Vienna (in German: *Bundesanstalt für Bergbauernfragen*) established in 1979. With its sessions held twice a year, always with an impressive attendance, the Working Group on Rural Social Research (in German: *Arbeitsgemeinschaft Ländliche Sozialforschung*) established in 2016 and nowadays operating as part of the Rural Social Research Branch of the Austrian Association for Sociology (in German: *Sektion Ländliche Sozialforschung der Österreichischen Gesellschaft für Soziologie*), also plays an important role. Other places which conduct rural social studies include: the Institute for Sustainable Economic Development at the University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences in Vienna (in German: *Institut für Nachhaltige Wirtschaftsentwicklung der Wiener Universität für Bodenkunde*); the Institute of Sociology at the University of Innsbruck, currently headed

by Markus Schermer; the Department of Sociology at the University of Vienna, with Roland Girtler, a popular author of books about outsiders and the decline of rural life; and the Institute of Rural History in St. Pölten (in German: *Institut für Geschichte des ländlichen Raumes*), founded in 2002 and headed by Ernst Langthaler. Moreover, there are also studies conducted by regional scientists, historians, geographers and folklorists.

In the past four decades, rural social research has seen considerable expansion and differentiation of qualitative monographic studies. A selection of the studies which have contributed to the discussion of new topics and further development of knowledge in the area of village studies and sociology of agriculture is presented below.

Further differentiation of village studies

Since the late 1970s, empirical studies in West Germany have increasingly come to the fore in the field of rural sociology (sociology of agriculture), freed from the requirement to serve as comprehensive representative testimonies using standardised mass surveys. Instead, they seek to study locally or regionally limited fields more intensively for a more in-depth or case-specific analysis of typical characteristics. To this end, researchers once again reach for a more pluralistic methodology in their field studies, including longer stays on-site, observations and discussions, document analysis and data studies. They opt more frequently for open conversations with villagers, farmers, etc., in which the latter can express themselves in their manner. A hermeneutic analysis of such conversations sometimes results in in-depth case studies.

Particular development has been observed with respect to village studies conducted by sociologists, folklorists and historians, who typically employ a variety of methods, with some studies manifesting a truly extensive investigation process. One may find several studies that focus on the ambivalence of reality perception as a striking feature of social change in rural areas. For example, a folkloristic-cultural anthropological study of a Swabian village (nowadays a small town) developed into a commuter town points to the 'inner sense' of the rural and farming life still felt by its inhabitants (Ilien/Jeggle 1978). The authors used a variety of methods to study social relationships among families, relatives and generations (found

to be still determined by the local rural economy), the local system of prestige (based on persistence and adaptation), and the image of the village (now devoid of economic self-sufficiency), all of which were perceived as a counterbalance to the 'external' world, everyday life outside the village. Traces of that could still be found in local festivals and people's nostalgic attachment to associations cultivating local customs and traditions.

Another source-abundant study explored the process of the socio-cultural change and 'development of the figuration' (in German: *Figurationsbildung*) in a Hessian village (Meyer-Palmedo 1985). It put forward the thesis that the village's everyday life was determined by two parallel 'realities': a traditional rural one and a newer reality corresponding to the modern industrial society. The villagers' life in these 'two worlds' is described as a break in everyday life caused by modernity, whereby the still influential system of kinship partially compensates for the consequences of outsourcing important areas of life to the external (out of-the-village) 'figuration planes'. In turn, a sociological study conducted in a village in the region of the Black Forest (Brüggemann/Riehle 1986) argued that the 'village's social form' provided for the integration of social changes since the 1950s, thus preserving the place's 'rurality' understood as an 'internal set of rules' that succeed to capture 'the new' and adapt to it despite any crisis. However, adopting their worldview, the authors come to a negative conclusion that 'the social form of the village hinders its emancipation and education' (op. cit., p. 232).

In 1993–1995, the FAA, in collaboration with a few institutes of the sociology of agriculture, repeated its study of the living conditions in rural areas, this time also including four villages from former East Germany. A diverse methodology was used comprising a representative standardised survey, expert conversations, qualitative interviews and farm surveys. The research was designed as a monograph of particular villages as well as a study extending beyond one locality. The summary report (Becker 1997) discussed the development of the villages since the previous research and compared differences between the West German and East German villages. The population and employment structure of the former was found to have changed fundamentally, with marginal agriculture and most people employed in production and services, often commuting to work. The population increased as a result of the influx of town dwellers and the social life in the villages also changed, with 'its evident convergence

across towns and villages' (op. cit., p. 298). Particularly worth mentioning are partial studies of this repeated survey, submitted as dissertations, such as a study of the social life in the villages (Hainz 1999). Its author used the data from the representative survey conducted in all villages as well as the results of expert conversations and interviews in three villages included in his study. Setting forth the individualisation thesis, the study revealed a variety of village-related aspects that were important to the inhabitants, while the fact of living in the countryside played only a limited role to most of them. Their lifeworlds encompassed more places of living and were now characterised by spatial mobility which depended on car ownership. The festivals and events organised by local associations were perceived as symbols of village life, allowing villagers to express their social distinctness, depending on individual preferences and perception of the available offer.

Many towns on the North Sea and Baltic Sea coasts, on the islands, in the Alps and lower mountain ranges turned into tourist resorts, where qualitative studies started to be conducted relatively late. One of them focused on a lock haven settlement in East Frisia and its transformation into a tourist destination (Hahn/Reuter/Vonderach 1987). In addition to the history of the settlement and the spatial reconstruction of the village, the researchers studied (by means of open discussions) how the village life stories 'contributed' to the development of local tourism. The reconstructed 'case stories' revealed three types constituting the chronological sequence of 'historical' lifestyles of people renting their places out to tourists and the balance they managed to find between what holidaymakers made of their life and their views of the everyday life in their hometown.

In Austria, the expansive and at times problematic development of tourism, especially the mass tourism in the Alpine regions, has often been the subject of empirical studies conducted by sociologists, spatial planners, folklorists, historians and geographers. They are mostly interested in the effects of the studied phenomena on local residents, agriculture, landscape and environment. For example, a qualitative study carried out in the Montafon valley in Vorarlberg with the use of in-depth interviews analyses the identity of a village under stress from mass tourism (Högl 1995). Another relatively recent and comprehensive study, carefully prepared and rigorously conducted by a historian, used archive material, observations and in-depth interviews to explore how an Alpine mountain farming region was transformed into a tourist landscape (Krawarik 2012).

This detailed description, spanning from the first country inns to over two centuries of the region's ups and downs and the present, shows how since the 1950s local tourism has grown from a marginal phenomenon to a major economic factor. Many farms were turned into tourist businesses, while agricultural areas kept shrinking, with holiday houses, cottages and apartments changing the landscape dramatically. The tourist demand, offer and infrastructure also changed significantly, with the event-based culture gradually taking over along with new concepts of life: a shift from rural tradition towards urban lifestyle. The local population now faces the need to find a compromise between the event-based culture and tradition, while further expansion of winter tourism is increasingly perceived as a problem and environmental risk.

German reunification resulted in several studies regarding changes in rural environments. One sociological study (Gebhard/Kamphausen 1994) examined differences in the mentality in both parts of Germany shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall, using the example of two industrial and commuting communities in the Saxon and Bavarian Vogtland. Its methodologically pluralistic approach included participant observations, photo documentation and qualitative family interviews. More similarities than differences were found between both places, while any discrepancies identified were a result of the individualisation process that was more advanced in the West. In both communities, the 'community-oriented' constituted the basic approach to all areas of life. In the Saxon location, the post-transformation individualisation was lamented on as a loss on the community, whereas in its Bavarian counterpart, the community rhetoric served as protection against its, recognised as unpleasant, consequences.

A comprehensive description and evaluation of numerous village renewal projects, followed for more than two decades by Joachim Grube, may be found in an extensive work entitled *Lebensraum Dorf* [The Village as 'Habitat'] (Grube 2006). The empirical basis was provided by forty case studies evaluating the planning and implementation of village renewal projects in structurally disadvantaged regions in Lower Saxony and Saxony-Anhalt, along with their consequences for the quality of life of local populations as verified in several questionnaire campaigns. The author discussed both positive and negative developments of the village as 'habitat'. The latter include specifically the shrinking of the agriculture in former farming villages, nowadays mostly commuters' dwellings, pushing the

agriculture out to the outskirts of the settlement, and often unsuccessful conversions of historical farmsteads. Basic infrastructural services were found to improve only in larger towns while declining in smaller villages. The social ties among the villagers, local associations and neighbourly help were evaluated positively.

Most of the working population living in rural settlements are employed outside their village, in agglomerations, cities and towns or at other locations within the region. This is where significant changes have been observed as regards the structure of commuters as well as the type and distance of commuting. The commuters that featured in the Darmstadt Studies from the early 1950s were mostly farm workers or part-time farmers who travelled every day by train to work in the next town. Over time, more and more of them drove to work in their car. Subsequently, the groups and motives of the commuters started changing, with most of them currently employed in services, including a significant representation of women and people with higher qualifications.

Among them are numerous former city dwellers who continue working in the city but have various reasons for their move to the countryside. Their motives and their rural integration or separation is now attracting the attention of rural social research. Villagers who moved to the countryside from the city became the subject of a partial study (Johaentges 1996) based on a representative, standardised repeat survey of rural living conditions and 'qualitative' interviews with forty villagers who had moved to the area. Their motives were of family nature and included primarily the desire to live in one's own house and experience 'rurality', understood as something that gives more freedom and enables a greater development in the rural environment, even though the newcomers' participation in the village life was small.

Further insightful information was provided by another qualitative study (Steinbusch 2001), which analysed interviews with people who moved from Cologne to a place in the Eifel region fifty kilometres away; in some respects, they are still 'city dwellers' who just happen to live in the countryside. In the interviews, the respondents often talked of the 'edge' (in German: *Rand*), which they used in different contexts: as the boundary marking the area from which Cologne could still be easily reached on a daily basis or as the snow line in the mountains from which one could still commute even in winter. It was better to live on the outskirts rather

than in the inner part of the village, close to the 'edge' of the forest as this encouraged walking.

Yet another insight is offered by a Franconian village study of collective orientation and behavioural patterns shaped by the tension between tradition and modernity (Schmidt 2011). Five case-based monographs described the population of the 'natives' and 'newcomers'. Next to the generalised behavioural types, i.e. closer either to one extreme (tradition) or the other (modernity), they revealed yet another hybrid identity type understood as evolved either autonomously or as a result of one's adaptation to heteronomous events. These types of behaviour also have an impact on civic and voluntary engagement.

A broader approach was adopted in a socio-historical and sociological study of the Brandenburg society in the period between the late 19th century and the end of East Germany (Beetz 2004), which asked questions about links between the region's transformation, mobility of its inhabitants and their life stories. It was an empirical analysis of three localities that focused on causes and effects of city-countryside migrations, asking how people choose their place to live. Biographical narrative interviews were conducted with five people living in rural areas to better understand such decisions. Mobility decisions turned out to be dynamically dependent on different areas of life and behavioural patterns, evolving along with the changing conditions.

Life quality and attractiveness of rural settlements stem particularly from people's volunteer work and participation. Most voluntary activities, organised partially as compensation for insufficient professional resources, infrastructure and offer in relevant facilities, are of great importance for the village's social life and people's identification with it. This claim was examined, inter alia, by the author of this article on an example of twelve rural museums, most of which were operated on a voluntary or private basis (Vonderach 2005). The volunteers included both men and women, particularly seniors, people of educational background as well as those of commercial, industrial and technical profiles, unevenly distributed across the respective museum activities. In general, their engagement was characterised by the continuity that resulted not only from the volunteers' interests and ample time but also their stable situation at work (or retirement) and private life.

Specific migration and social projects have also been discussed as possible contributions to rural life, e.g. in two recent Austrian studies. Firstly, a geographic dissertation submitted at the University of Vienna (Gruber 2017) deals with an increasing retirement migration to rural areas, with data on the spatial distribution and socio-demographic characteristics of these migrants determined for entire Austria. Two regional case studies were conducted in the Waldviertel and South Burgenland, regarding migrants' motives and lifestyles, and the evaluation of the migration. To this end, problem-oriented guided interviews were conducted with local experts, along with thirteen narrative interviews with newcomers as well as with returning migrants. The motives of the migrants, all of whom moved with their life partners, were generally lifestyle-orientated and in the case of the returning migrants, also partially 'network-orientated' (family ties). The author concluded that such immigrations are a positive phenomenon for structurally disadvantaged regions. However, it is important to offer new residents opportunities for social participation.

Another peculiar feature of rural areas – 'social agriculture' projects aimed at improving the life prospects of affected groups – was studied by a working group established by the Federal Institute of Agricultural Economics and the Federal Institute for Mountain Farming in Vienna (Wiesinger et al. 2018). It sought to explore the impact of such projects in the local and regional context. Three projects were selected for the purposes of the study. Conducted in three different communities in Lower and Upper Austria, they addressed the problem of elderly care, long-term unemployment among women, and drug-dependency/drug addictions. In terms of methodology the study was based on a quantitative survey regarding the municipalities' social capital, the qualitative approach of the Grounded Theory, and the actor-network theory (ANT). Questionnaires were sent to local residents, and narrative interviews were conducted with project coordinators, partners and beneficiaries, as well as with local representatives and experts. The study revealed no clear connection between successful project implementation and existing local social capital, especially as project demands also differed. Ultimately, a thorough analysis was recommended of the local, regional and social framework to avoid failure before starting a project.

Recent approaches in empirical research into agricultural population

Since the 1990s, sociology of agriculture has shown particular interest in intensive and methodologically diversified empirical research into social changes among the agricultural population, now also in the eastern part of Germany. The study *Bauernfamilien im Modernisierungsprozeß* [Farming families in the process of modernisation] (Hildenbrand et al. 1992; Bohler et al. 1992) can be regarded as the most important recent sociological work in the German-speaking world in terms of both theoretical and methodological demands. Conversations collecting family histories provided the empirical material covering a wide range of agricultural life and local business practices, despite a low number of West German families included in the study (seven). The contradiction between farm continuity and one's independence was found to be the central problem in the relationship between what is traditional and what is modern: 'The farmer is not only expected to bend to the family's expectations and forgo his life perspectives but at the same time he should also be an individualist. Today, a farm only has a chance of survival if it is run in the style of innovative entrepreneurship.' (Hildenbrand et al. 1992: 14). The study considered the general social structure with its rationalisation processes, specific features of a given region, the structure of each farm and family business along with their histories, subjective orientations and individual backgrounds. The case reconstructions based on the 'objective hermeneutics' and conversations with families range from farmers as 'entrepreneurs' to 'traditional farming families operating at the edge of profitability' to families for whom their farms are only a part-time job. The cases were compared in terms of economic behavioural patterns and motives, and the continuity and discontinuity of farms, also across generations.

Another family biographical study by Bohler and Hildenbrand (1997) examined farming families in crisis caused by the farmer's addiction to alcohol. As this condition may also have family causes, the authors outlined a complex network of causes and effects based on the reconstructions of family cases. To this end, they held family history interviews with seven selected families. Based on their analysis, the researchers distinguished two types of farmers: those strongly oriented towards traditional values, who were marked by relatively high susceptibility to alcoholism, and a more

innovative, entrepreneurially driven type oriented towards more modern, partner-like lifestyles, capable of combining farming with other forms of employment.

In the study *Milchbauern in der Wesermarsch* [Dairy farmers in the Wesermarsch] (Timmermann/Vonderach 1993) conducted in a grassland region in the north of Germany, open family conversations were used to analyse the characteristics, forms of action and adaptation strategies, with a particular focus on the generation change in farm management. In total, sixteen cases were studied, with basic strategic attitudes towards farm development classified along with different life patterns among younger women. The study offered some insight into shrinking family resources in terms of farm management and the possible development of a family business into a partner company when there is no farm successor.

From early on, rural social research has been very much interested in the situation of female farmers. A frequently quoted study from the period around 1980 (Inhetveen/Blasche 1983) provides information about the situation of a specific group of women farmers. Basing on a large number of open interviews, several group discussions and expert interviews, the authors explored feminisation in small-scale farms under 20 hectares, treated increasingly as a sideline job, in smallholder agriculture areas in Franconia. It was evident that female farmers, who did the main part of the farm work, were faced with new challenges: 'Traditional systems of reference, life experience, and new insights, desires and needs had to be combined to propose practical life concepts, ideas and perspectives.' (op. cit., p. 13f). The fact that traditional ways of thinking were still largely preserved was in the study connected with the meaning it carried for women farmers.

Another dissertation in the field of pedagogy (Hötger 2003) discusses the biographical context of life conflicts experienced by 'middle-aged female farmers'. A typology was proposed based on narrative interviews with women farmers from Westphalia: from highly active, rather conservative women who stick to the most productive work while serving as mediators in the family, to women who continue the old role models through voluntary work outside the family business, and to women who combine their functions on the farm with a new role model of being active also in other areas than only home and farming. In turn, a habilitation thesis by a sociologist from Vienna presented a constructivist study regarding rural

women in Austria (Goldberg 2003). As part of the study, biographical interviews were conducted to reconstruct identity patterns. Based on the Grounded Theory, the study classified the interviewed women as traditionally oriented 'assistants', committed 'farmers-workers', and 'farmers' (house)wives' who distance themselves from farming, while offering some insight into their reality constructions.

Environmentally-friendly farming constitutes an innovative variant of rural agriculture. A recent empirical study and a dissertation in the field of cultural studies focused on the reality of the life of 'organic farmers today' and their self-perception (Dietzig-Layer 2016). Topic-oriented guided interviews were conducted with seventeen organic farmers in the southern Black Forest, the content of which was then subjected to structural analysis. The respondents enjoyed working in their profession, which they saw as an advanced approach and future model. Certain differences could be noticed, such as affiliations with different associations or differences between those more attached to their homeland (in German: *Heimat*) as owners of the inherited farm/estate and those more cosmopolitan leasing their farms.

Particular attention was also paid to developments in agriculture after the political transformation and the integration of East Germany with the West German legal and economic system. The dissolution of agricultural production cooperatives (in German: LPGs – *Landwirtschaftliche Produktionsgenossenschaften*) brought a radical change at the fundamental level. Interestingly, many of them continued production as agricultural cooperatives, now under West German law, geared towards the market economy and EU agricultural policy, and with a much smaller workforce. Numerous qualitative interviews were conducted in three cooperatives as part of an in-depth study, further supplemented with surveys from a much larger number of cooperatives (Laschewski 1998). According to the author of the study, agricultural cooperatives continued their activity in new social conditions due to social rather than economic reasons, based on the experience and life stories of former LPG members. Another analysis of case studies, also submitted as a dissertation (Neu 2004), explored what effect the political transformation had on the employment history of former LPG farmers, to what extent their occupational and social mobility was influenced by structural and individual characteristics, and how those affected perceived the changes in their professional and everyday life.

Since many of the studied villages operated within the LPG system, the relevant studies adopted the perspective founded on a mixture of the sociology of agriculture and village studies. This was, for example, the case with a Mecklenburgian village where three young sociologists followed the local changes for several years employing participatory observation, biographical interviews and numerous expert conversations, with the results published in a few studies (Ernst 1999; Willisch 2005; Brauer/Willisch/Ernst 1995). The payments for the land and inventory to the compulsorily collectivised farmers or their heirs led to the dissolution of the LPG, as a result of which most villagers became unemployed, went into early retirement or found a job but in a different place to which they had to commute. The analysis of strategies adopted in the changed economic and political conditions revealed that the villagers were still clearly divided into two groups: former 'farmers' and the so-called 'others' who before the collectivisation were smallholders (in German: *Büdner*), cottagers (in German: *Häusler*), farmworkers, refugees or displaced persons who came to the village from the East. Due to their LPG experience and the resulting self-confidence, the former 'farmers' enjoyed a particular position and prestige in the village. Their family status was further secured by their children who went away to pursue better careers outside the village. However, this prevented them from being part of the local social life. Consequently, after the transformation, they were no longer considered resettled farmers. In turn, many of the 'others' – who had benefitted from the collectivisation which had removed the old dependency relationships and improved their working and living conditions, consequently, their reputation and influence in the village – now saw themselves as the real losers of the transformation.

Next to the dissolution of the once large and village-controlling LPG farms and their subsequent modification into cooperatives and agricultural enterprises or division into smaller parts, sometimes new farms emerged, offering a new beginning to resettled farmers. This 'transformation potential' was studied in an example of families on the island of Rügen, who had been farm owners for generations until the collectivisation. The study, submitted as a dissertation, relied on family interviews and 'objective hermeneutics' for their subsequent analysis (Engelstadt 2006). It shows that due to their long farming traditions, the studied families were able to preserve their rural social ways of life, even after the long period of collectivisation, having developed several management strategies.

Review and outlook

Qualitative monographic research into rural environments started early in the German-speaking world, developing significantly over recent decades. Its highlights may be traced as far back as the late 19th century, when independent, creative and laborious studies were conducted in pursuit of knowledge, the results of which are still of importance today. Those researchers did not perceive themselves as sociologists in the current sense of the word, rural sociology (sociology of agriculture) did not exist then as a specific field and neither did a scientifically proved research methodology. Studies focused on topics that were of relevance at the time: a village marked by poverty in the times of pre-industrial development, the situation of female farmers in the process of agricultural modernisation, a village in a state of emergency – at that time a village of unemployed worker-peasants. Since then, changes observed across villages and in farming families in connection with the historical transformation have remained central topics of qualitative monographic research. What is particularly noteworthy in this early research is a significant involvement of young female researchers and socially committed Jewish scientists, such as Gottlieb Schnapper-Arndt, Paul Lazarsfeld and Marie Jahoda. The latter group also included the social activist and agricultural economist Gertrud Dyhrenfurth (1865–1945), herself a manager of an estate and author of numerous industrial and rural research publications not discussed here (e.g. Dyhrenfurth 1906).

The institutionalisation of what is now known as rural social research began in former West Germany shortly after the Second World War – first with the FAA and then with chairs of rural sociology founded at most universities and faculties of rural studies, some of which have since been dissolved. Relevant studies were also conducted outside of agricultural sciences. In Austria, rural social research has concentrated mostly around the Federal Institute of Agricultural Economics and the Federal Institute for Mountain Farming in Vienna but is also conducted by some university institutes and other institutions. An important communication function is here fulfilled by the Working Group on Rural Social Research, nowadays operating as part of the Rural Social Research Branch.

In the early 1980s in West Germany, and then a decade later in reunified Germany, as well as in Austria, considerable expansion and differentiation were observed in rural social research in terms of qualitative monographic

studies, which now included studies conducted in ethnological, historical and geographical environments. Village studies turned towards newer topics: the tension between the tradition and modernity in rural culture, changes in rural social life, development towards tourism, expansion and change of commuting, including immigrants from the city, and voluntary engagement. Rural social research focused particularly on how farming families handled modernisation and its demands, and on the situation and behaviour of female farmers, also taking into account those previously employed in LPGs in former East Germany.

In my opinion, qualitative research may provide for a useful analysis of current developments in rural environments and economic activity across Central Europe, particularly in the following areas: rising interest in 'energy farms'; the resulting changes in the use of the land and its perception; forests and their economic, cultural and everyday values; the evolution of the human/animal relationship with respect to farm animals, home pets and wild animals; development of peripheral rural habitats; and last but not least, the new phenomenon among the rural population which involves living one's everyday life in multiple localities.

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