Towards a Renewed Sociology of Agriculture and Food: Editorial Introduction

Paper first received: 01 January 2022; Accepted: 24 April 2022; Published in final form: 30 April 2022
https://doi.org/10.48416/ijsaf.v28i1.467

Allison Marie LOCONTO,[1,2] Katerina PSARIKIDOU,[3] and Claire MARRIS[1,2]

Abstract

"The Sociology of Agriculture and Food" (SAF) is a polysemic phrase. It represents a sub-discipline within the field of sociology, an epistemic community and a network of colleagues. This, the first editorial introduction of the new IJSAF editorial team, initiates what will be a four-year journey on the path of renewing the sociology of agriculture and food. This short essay provides the backstory for the team's mandate, it introduces the research themes and enigmas that interest the editorial team and it positions the articles in this first issue as a first engagement with the renewed scientific program. It also introduces the new approach to better integrating the activities of the scholarly society (RC40) with the journal, in an attempt to increase the geographic and epistemic inclusivity of both.

[1] Université Gustave Eiffel, LISIS, CNRS, INRAE, F 77454 Marne-La-Vallée, France
[2] Institut national de recherche pour l'agriculture, l'alimentation et l'environnement (INRAE), UMR 1326, F 77454 Marne-La-Vallée, France
[3] Science Policy Research Unit (SPRU), University of Sussex Business School
Corresponding author: Allison Loconto, allison-marie.loconto@inrae.fr

Bibliographical notes

Allison Loconto is Deputy Director of the Interdisciplinary Laboratory for Science, Innovation and Society (LISIS) and a Research Professor at the French National Institute for Research on Agriculture, Food and Environment (INRAE). She is a member of the Multi-stakeholder Advisory Committee of the Sustainable Food Systems Programme of the One Planet Network (UN Environment), a Board Member of Commerce Equitable France and a member of the National Committee for Organic Agriculture (INAO). Allison is an Executive Committee member of the International Sociological Association (ISA), a member of the Network of Organic Agriculture Researchers in Africa (NOARA) and the President of the Francophone Research Network on Fair Trade (FairNESS). Previously, she was a Science, Technology and Society Fellow at Harvard University and a Visiting Scientist at the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. Allison's research focuses on the governance of transitions to sustainable food systems, specifically on the metrics, models, standards and systems of certification that are part of emerging institutional innovations.

Katerina Psarikidou is lecturer in Sustainable Development at SPRU. She is a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy and is also co-mobiliser for SPRU's 'Science, Politics and Decision-Making' research cluster. Katerina is a fellow for the Sussex Sustainability Research Programme, and a visiting research fellow at the Institute of Advanced Studies (IFZ, Austria) and the University of Crete (Greece). She sits at the Executive Committee of the UK Association for Studies in Innovation, Science and Technology (AsSIST UK). She is a social scientist interested in the politics of sustainable development, particularly in relation to the politics of science, research and innovation. Her research revolves around the study of the sustainability and innovation potential of alternative agro-food networks and low-carbon mobility practices, also by situating them in the wider political economic landscape of power and inequalities. She is passionate about developing research alongside non-academic organisations, especially from the third sector.

Claire Marris is a Senior Researcher in Science and Technology Studies at the French research institute for agriculture, food and the environment (INRAE). She was previously a Senior Research Fellow at City, University of London and King's College London. Her research is in the area of social scientific study of bioscience, with a particular focus on the nature, role and translational possibilities of advanced biosciences and biotechnology, in particular genetic modification and synthetic biology. Claire is interested in the ways in which a field of bioscience, such as synthetic biology, comes to be defined and problematized in different scientific, regulatory, political and public arenas, through for example risk regulation, R&D policy, public engagement activities, and organized opposition by social groups. Her most influential research has focused on understandings of science, risk and uncertainty among publics, scientists, and risk regulators.

ISSN: 0798-1759 | This Journal is double blind refereed.

Introduction

"The Sociology of Agriculture and Food" (SAF) is a polysemic phrase. It represents a sub-discipline within the field of sociology, an epistemic community and a network of colleagues. This, the first editorial introduction of the new IJSAF editorial team, initiates what will be a four-year journey on the path of renewing the sociology of agriculture and food. This short essay provides the backstory for the team's mandate, it introduces the research themes and enigmas that interest the editorial team and it positions the articles in this first issue as a first engagement with the renewed scientific program. It also introduces the new approach to better integrating the activities of the scholarly society (RC40) with the journal, in an attempt to increase the geographic and epistemic inclusivity of both.

SAF as a sub-discipline?

In the very first editorial published by IJSAF in 1991, Alessandro Bonanno (1991) explained the origins of the first scientific programme of SAF. Specifically, the 'sociology of agriculture' emerged from its parent discipline 'rural sociology'. While rural sociology was concerned mostly with the study of rurality – rural peoples, cultures, landscapes, and economies – the sociology of agriculture was concerned with the multi-scalar nature of agriculture. Agriculture in the 20th century was global – but it was also local and regional. It was rural, but also increasingly urban. More importantly, agriculture cut across these scales and spaces – particularly when the question of food was introduced into the study of agriculture.

Based originally in neo-marxist, neo-weberian, phenomenology, dialectical and critical theory (The Frankfurt School), SAF scholars developed a uniquely critical voice about the politics and impacts of the ways that we produce, trade, and consume the products of the land and water. For example, even from the studies published in the 1980s and 1990s, the practices of agriculture and food were considered not just culture phenomenon, but also objects of sciences and technology. In this way, sociologists interrogated the social relations between humans and nature through attempts to control that nature through agriculture, fishing and forestry. At the same time, they began to question the forms of knowledge that drove societies to organise these relationships in increasingly exploitative ways (Bonanno et al., 1994).

What Bonnano tells us, is that the creation of IJSAF was marked by the addition of questions around food – thus tying together the social questions of production and consumption in complex agri-food systems. Thus, we see from the very beginning a systemic focus to the study of agriculture and food. These systems were seen as forms of governing that shaped not just the global economy, but also could teach us important lessons about the role of the State, the private sector and an increasingly active civil society. The legacy of SAF in this area is clearly seen today, for example, in contemporary theories of food systems (see: HLPE, 2017), whose roots are found in the commodity system analysis of Friedland (1984). Even contemporary discussions of food systems transitions or transformations (see: Maye and Duncan, 2017) build upon fundamental ideas first put forward in the food regime theory of Friedman and McMichael (1989).

SAF today draws upon a wider range of sociological theories to understand the complex interrelations between production and consumption, food and agriculture, and ultimately humans and nature. Increasingly, the political economy focus of SAF has been complemented with emerging theories in economic sociology, cultural sociology and social movement theories. With the creation of IJSAF, SAF also opened itself up to other disciplines, particularly anthropology, economics, geography, political science, sciences and technology studies, transition studies and systems agronomy. It is indeed through this interdisciplinary dialogue that an epistemic community has emerged around SAF.

SAF as an epistemic community?

Epistemic communities are the called-upon experts who can shed light on the interlocked issues and advise on policy decisions, especially for conditions of high uncertainty. An epistemic community is "a network of professionals with recognized expertise and competence in a particular domain and an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge within that domain or issue-area" (Haas, 1992: 3). It can be made of people from different disciplines or professions so long as they have a "common set of principled and causal beliefs," "shared notions of validity," a "shared policy enterprise," and are "recognized expertise within that domain". Unlike other groups who may also offer policy advice, epistemic communities share principled and causal beliefs, which raises them to a certain ethical standard to act in the

interest of society at large (Haas, 1992).

SAF scholars recognise that the knowledge epistemic communities create is socially constructed, and incomplete, hence there might be forms of partiality or 'invisible colleges' that dominate (Crane, 1981). For this reason, in our belief about the role of the journal, we try to expose these epistemic devices or machineries of knowledge creation (Cetina, 2009) through our approach to publishing from the range of disciplines that are part of the SAF epistemic community. Specifically, we intend to continue the efforts of IJSAF's prior editors by publishing those papers that have a strong theoretical and empirical contributions to the important questions and controversies around agriculture and food. Revealing the methods, processes and analytical devices that are emblematic of our epistemic community will strengthen our collective voice as we continue to engage in public policy debates around sustainable food systems and food security, as we have done in the past (Preston, 2020; CSM, 2016).

Indeed, SAF scholars have long played a role in policy advice – particularly at national and international levels, but they have also been highly active in the agrifood movements that they study. In 2010, this public engagement side of SAF scholars was explained in an article in Rural Sociology by Bill Friedland (2010). Alternative Agrifood Researchers without Borders was at once an attempt to establish an epistemic community that focused on the progressive goals of reducing inequalities and expanding political and social participation. It was call for valuing the knowledge of non-academic researchers and activists as a way to challenge established academic paradigms. While this call was largely applauded and a mentoring programme was even set up for a short period of time, the movement did not gain ground. But that is not to say that the idea is not at the heart of SAF, but rather that the political opportunity for such an effort was there (at least not yet).

The new IJSAF editorial team supports these historic efforts to open up the knowledge produced around agriculture and food – particularly through its open access policy for the journal that consists of leaving the copyright with the Authors and by authorising reuse and distribution through the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 licence. The IJSAF team also supports the valorisation of diverse knowledges as the three editors are trained not only in SAF, but also in sciences and technology studies (STS). We first began to collaborate by organising a panel at the 2018 annual meeting of the European Association for the Study of Science and Technology (EASST). The focus of the event was on 'meetings' and we argued that food is at the heart of all kinds of meetings. We wanted to explore how food could bring together research across diverse themes, approaches and disciplines in order to create new alignments, intersections and networks in STS approaches to food. We found that the research objects and concerns over inequalities, power and intersections between health, environmental, social, cultural and economic aspects of food and agriculture were completely in line with SAF scholars. The differences were found mostly in the theoretical resources that were used to understand the phenomena. The questions that we were interested in understanding – and which we remain interested in understanding – are at the intersections of the STS concerns around knowledge, expertise, value(s), power and the SAF concerns over inequities, exploitation and transformative power of agrifood networks. While STS scholars have always found a place in the SAF community (Busch and Juska, 1997), with our mandate, we would like to continue to expand the dialogue between SAF and STS

SAF as a network of colleagues

IJSAF is the official journal of the International Sociological Association's Research Committee on Sociology of Agriculture and Food (RC40). What does this mean? It means that the journal is only one form of knowledge creation in the epistemic community. RC40 acts as a network of colleagues across six continents – who meet regularly (about every two years) to advance SAF knowledge and to strengthen ties the transformative agrifood movements in the places where our conferences are held via field trips.

We see a clear role for IJSAF in maintaining our scientific dialogue in between these meetings by publishing papers that are published and read by RC40 members and non-members alike. We maintain the high quality of articles that we publish through an international Editorial Board that includes the top scholars in this sub-discipline from the different regions of the world. IJSAF is a collegial effort; we rely upon members of the network to participate in our rigorous double blind peer review.

As an Editorial Team, we maintain the commitment to publishing two regular issues per year. We also are actively soliciting proposals for Special Issues that will ideally be published in the summer each year. For example, we will typically will publish the papers from a session at one of our key conferences (IRSA, ISA and regional conferences) as a special issue. We are also interested in publishing those papers from participants in the RC40 events – like the early career workshops. We also plan to increase the publicity of the articles that are published in the journal by offering to publish a blog about the findings on the RC40 webpage. Thus, dear reader, we encourage you to send us papers and special issue proposals that will keep IJSAF at the cutting edge of this exciting field.

Conclusions

To conclude this first editorial introduction, we want to introduce the articles of the first issue of the 28th volume of IJSAF. These articles reflect the scientific focus that we introduced above as they deal with the political economy concerns of agrifood systems, as well as the knowledge politics of contemporary alternatives to the global food system.

The first two articles are concerned with the environmental intersections of SAF. Standal and Westskog (2022) use social practice theory to explain how a dialectical relationship forms between consumers' food and energy practices in Norway. They demonstrate that community supported agriculture (CSA) participation can reorient consumers towards values of sharing and frugality, but the broader political economy of unsustainable consumption within which CSAs are embedded weakens the power of CSAs.

Häyrynen et al. (2022) offer an environmental take on the concept of centre and periphery by exploring the division of labour and professions according to spatial location and industrial sector in Sardinia, Italy and Kainuu, Finland. Here too, the authors argue that the farming areas are embedded in contemporary capitalism, which conditions the pro-environmental behaviours. However, by examining organic farming, they are able to distinguish the technical from the symbolic to show that the modernist approach to standards is not a standardised story of diffusion, instead official requirements must also adapt to local contexts and cultural spheres.

The last three articles expand on these tensions around knowledge co-production. Li (2022) continues the discussion about organic standards, but this time in China. She explores how ambiguity in non-certified organic opens up a contingent space for participation and negotiating boundaries between "traditional" and "scientific" organic practices. She argues that the growers' reputation, public exposure, and consumers' judgement on the moral compass of producers are all influential factors in maintaining legitimacy for this non-certified form of organic.

Rancatore (2022) also addresses this question of legitimate knowledge by exploring the continuous call by governments, researchers and activists for more and better data on food security. Based on fieldwork in Ghana, Rancatore argues that there are practical and theoretical problems in this call for data, which relies mostly on researchers working in non-governmental organisations. Institutional demands for proof appear to dominate discussions that do not recognise the need to separate efforts to produce knowledge from their own interests in managing food security. The results suggest that the valuing of local knowledge is not just a good practice, but fundamental to understanding the complexities of food security.

Wattnem et al., (2022) address the question of knowledge through an examination of the harmonization of quality standards in the cocoa sector. They argue that the adoption of harmonized quality standards might provide new tools for new origins and farmers to make claims to superior quality. The changing terms of debate around quality in the sector offer opportunities to change the power dynamics in the sector - particularly who will profit or pay the most for superior quality cocoa. Beyond this, the new forms of knowledge needed to evaluate quality according to the harmonized standard are often found in producing countries rather than the consuming countries.

Read together, these articles demonstrate not just the importance of considering the intersections of knowledge and political economy in our research about agriculture, food and the environment; but also the important international nature of these intersections and indeed tensions. We are proud to open up this issue with these papers and we hope that IJSAF and the RC40 community can be strengthened over the coming years so to contribute to change within academic, public and policy debates around agriculture and food.

References

Bonanno A (1991) From the Editor. *The International Journal of Sociology of Agriculture and Food* 1: 9–12.

Bonanno A, Busch L, Friedland WH, et al. (1994) *From Columbus to ConAgra: the globalization of agriculture and food*. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, viii, 294 p.

Busch L and Juska A (1997) Beyond political economy: actor-networks and the globalisation of agriculture. *Review of International Political Economy* 4: 668-708.

Cetina KK (2009) *Epistemic Cultures: How the Sciences Make Knowledge*. Harvard University Press.

Crane D (1981) Alternative Models of ISPAs. In: Evan WM (ed) *Knowledge and power in a global society*. Sage Publications, pp.39.

CSM (2016) *Connecting Smallholders to Markets: an analytical guide*. Rome: Civil Society Mechanism of the Committee on World Food Security.

Friedland WH (1984) Commodity systems analysis: An approach to the sociology of agriculture. In: Schwarzweller HK (ed) *Research in Rural Sociology and Development*. Greenwich, CT: JAI Press, pp.221–235.

Friedland WH (2010) New Ways of Working and Organization: Alternative Agrifood Movements and Agrifood Researchers. *Rural Sociology* 75(4): 601-627.

Friedman H and McMichael P (1989) The rise and decline of national agricultures, 1870 to the present. *Sociologia Ruralis*, Oxford 29(2): 93-117.

Haas PM (1992) Introduction: Epistemic Communities and International Policy Coordination. *International Organization* 46(1): 1-35.

Häyrynen S, Farinella D and Mononen T (2022) The Local Culturalisation of Pro-Environmental Policy: Cultural responses to organic farming in Sardinia and Finnish Kainuu. *The International Journal of Sociology of Agriculture and Food* 28(1):25-41.

HLPE (2017) *Nutrition and food systems*. Rome: A report by the High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition of the Committee on World Food Security.

Li X (2022) The "Real" Organic Food in China: The Tradition-Modern Divide and the Role of Boundary Work. *International Journal of Sociology of Agriculture & Food* 28(1): 43-57.

Maye D and Duncan J (2017) Understanding Sustainable Food System Transitions: Practice, Assessment and Governance. *Sociologia Ruralis* 57(3): 267-273.

Preston B (2020) Philip McMichael: Making an impact in and beyond the classroom. *College of Agriculture and Life Sciences Field Note*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University.

Rancatore J (2022) Problems in Food Security Data Collection Practices with an illustration from northern Ghana. *International Journal of Sociology of Agriculture & Food* 28(1): 59-72.

Standal K and Westskog H (2022) Understanding low-carbon food consumption transformation through social practice theory: The case of community supported agriculture in Norway". *The International Journal of Sociology of Agriculture and Food* 28(1): 7-24.