

**SOCIOLOGY OF AGRICULTURE AND FOOD BEGINNING AND
MATURITY: THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE MISSOURI SCHOOL
(1976–1994)**

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ABSTRACT

Sociology of agriculture and food (SAF) is one of the most visible substantive subareas in Rural Sociology and a growing subarea in Sociology. While the studying of agriculture has always been a part of Rural Sociology, it was in the 1970s that the process that led to a clear and formal distinction between Rural Sociology and SAF began. SAF grew stronger in the 1980s and became established in the 1990s. This paper reviews salient theoretical and historical events that engendered the establishment and growth of SAF as a separate substantive area from Rural Sociology. Additionally, it reviews its development in the United States in relation to a movement that has been global since its onset. In particular, the paper addresses the ways in which SAF developed at the University of Missouri-Columbia under the intellectual leadership of William Heffernan. Heffernan’s “radical” reading of, and methodological approach to, the evolution of agriculture and food are compared with other popular views of, and approaches to, SAF such as the Marxist and the Constructionist. It is argued that Heffernan’s approach is grounded in the American theoretical tradition of Pragmatic Democracy exemplified by the classical work of John Dewey. Research on SAF produced at the University of Missouri-Columbia became highly visible as SAF reached its maturity in the mid-1990s. Heffernan’s intellectual contribution remains most influential in current salient debates within SAF.

Sociology of Agriculture and Food (SAF) is one of the most visible substantive subareas within Rural Sociology and an area of investigation that has often claimed “independence” from the discipline of Rural Sociology. In effect, it has been often argued that SAF is a substantive subarea in Sociology and that its links with Rural Sociology are historical but do not reflect conditions that have come to fruition over the last three decades (Friedland 1982; 2002). These claims of independence are the result of changes in the production, distribution and consumption of agricultural and food products and concomitant scientific analyses of these changes. Armed with empirical observations and theoretical conclusions, scholars of SAF have defined an area of knowledge that bridges several substantive subareas and that is distinctly different both from Rural Sociology and Sociology. Its difference from Rural Sociology rests primarily on the transcendental spatial dimension of its topics of investigation. Contemporary agriculture and food cannot be confined to rural regions as it goes beyond specific geographically defined spaces and social relations. It is neither rural nor urban, but it focuses on phenomena that simultaneously

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include these two spatial dimensions. It is different from Sociology as it accompanies the analysis of existing social relations with a genuine desire to change them¹. While rigorous in analyzing the events, actors, institutions and the evolution of agriculture and food, SAF scholars distinguished themselves for a strong commitment to improve social relations and contribute to the emancipation of subordinate groups. The objectives of social justice, environmental sustainability, food security and safety among others have been at the forefront of SAF research.

The aim of this article is to illustrate the development of SAF, from its beginning in the 1970s to its maturity in the early 1990s, with a particular emphasis on the contribution of the Missouri School. From the late 1970s, the University of Missouri became one of the most relevant centers for the study of agriculture and food under the intellectual and institutional leadership of William D. Heffernan. Heffernan and his students, along with other faculty members in the department, generated a wealth of research that provided impetus to SAF and defined a style of doing research that has become prominent in this substantive area.

The paper opens with a synopsis of the major events that led to the creation of SAF. This illustration is paralleled by an analysis of SAF's theoretical components. In particular, the tenets of SAF Neo-Marxist and Constructionist Schools are reviewed. The following section is devoted to the analysis of the birth and early growth of the Missouri School. Stressing on the work of Bill Heffernan, the research interests, methodological approach and theoretical underpinnings of this school are pointed out. The latter constitute the foci of this essay. It is argued that the Missouri School is theoretically based on the American tradition of Pragmatism and its emphasis on Pragmatic Democracy. Through a brief analysis of the classical work of John Dewey, the similarities between salient tenets of Dewey's philosophy and the analytical posture of Bill Heffernan's SAF are scrutinized. This investigation leads to two concluding observations. First, the Missouri School's contribution has significantly affected debates in SAF both methodologically and substantively. Second, the use of Pragmatism makes the theoretical roots on this school uniquely different from those of the other major SAF schools.

¹Some approaches within sociology share this view that the study of society should be aimed at the emancipation of subordinate groups and the alteration of undesirable social relations. However, the dominant posture within sociology centers on the application of the scientific method for the generation of "neutral scientific" results (Ritzer 2008: 282). This "scientism" is pervasive in the American Rural Sociological Society (RSS).

HISTORICAL EVENTS AND THEORETICAL CURRENTS

Agriculture, food, farming and the study of rural areas were largely considered synonyms for the first seven decades of the 20th century. At the time, this was not an oddity since most of what was considered food was generally produced within the “farm gate,” and farming was the primary socioeconomic activity of rural areas (Buttel and Newby 1980). A review of the scientific production published in *Rural Sociology* during the first fifty years of the Rural Sociological Society (RSS) reveals that agriculture, farming, and issues concerning farm communities were among the most common researched subjects (Buttel, Larson and Gillespie 1990; Garkovich 1985).

The second half the 20th Century, however, brought about accelerated processes of concentration and centralization of agricultural and food production that significantly changed the sector and its relationship with rural areas (Buttel et al. 1990). By the 1970s, most food items could not be identified with the commodities produced within the “farm gate.” Even “fresh” products were now parts of complex commodity chains transcending the farm. Simultaneously, rural industrialization, decentralization of industrial production away from urban regions, and the development of other commercial uses of rural space created new conditions whereby the identification of agriculture and food with rural areas was simply no longer tenable.

Analytically, it was in the 1970s that the process of decoupling the concepts of agriculture and food and rurality began to take place². This was a worldwide phenomenon that, however, was predominant in advanced countries (Buttel and Newby 1980). Two key intellectual processes defined this change. The first was the growing dissatisfaction with the use of Functionalism as the primary theory through which these concepts and related empirical events were analyzed. The second refers to the consequent search for alternative theoretical paradigms that could be employed in the analysis of the increasingly complex and centralized agrifood sector.

In North America, the symbolic beginning of SAF coincides with the 1976 annual meeting of RSS held in Guelph, Ontario. In that occasion, a large group of young rural sociologists made explicit its intention to approach the study of agriculture and food with fresh intellectual insights and in a way that separated it

²It is interesting to note, however, that while sociologists of agriculture and food claimed a new intellectual space for themselves, they were not so quick to dismiss the label of rural sociologists. In arguably the manifesto of sociology of agriculture and food of the late seventies, Buttel and Newby (1980) define themselves and their colleagues as rural sociologists.

from traditional Rural Sociology. Bill Hefferan was one member of that group along with other “founding fathers” of SAF including Bill Friedland, Fred Buttel, and Larry Busch. In the years that followed the “new” sociology of agriculture—as this intellectual movement was named by its own members (Buttel and Newby 1980)—grew in visibility and was paralleled by the development of similar groups in other countries. In 1978 at the IX World Congress of Sociology, the internationalization of SAF was formalized through the creation of the International Sociological Association’s (ISA) Research Committee on Sociology of Agriculture and Food (RC-40)³. To be sure, this was not simply the coming together of scholars who were interested in SAF around the world, but it reflected the mounting global nature of agrifood and the fact that its study could not be effectively carried out simply focusing on national settings.

Theoretical Currents

At the outset, the search for alternative theoretical approaches to functionalism consisted in the revisiting of classical sociological works. In particular, SAF was characterized by the heavy use of the work of Marx and other classical Marxist authors—such as Karl Kautsky and Aleksandr Chayanov—and the contribution of Max Weber. This process centered on new readings of Marxist texts moving away from then popular use of Lenin’s 1915 study of American Agriculture (Lenin 1967 [1915]). For Lenin, agriculture followed the same patterns of concentration and centralization observed in manufacturing. This path would lead to the development of the “green factory:” large farms manned by wage labor and controlled by capitalist entrepreneurs. This capital intensive and wage-based agriculture would be the “norm” in advanced societies and would gradually expand to the rest of the world. Simultaneously, the search for alternative theories involved the use of “cultural” explanations that centered on Max Weber’s analysis of the evolution of agriculture and the persistence of small farms (Weber 1958). For Weber—as well as for Kautsky and Chayanov—family farms would often persist despite processes of concentration of capital. This is due to the cultural importance of the farm both in terms of symbolic meanings of land ownership and the actual economic advantages that it causes.

³The process that led to the creation of RC-40 was relatively long and it was only in 1984 that RC-40 was formally recognized as a research groups by ISA. Also it was in '87 that the word food was formally added to the “sociology of agriculture”, the original name of the group. For a more detailed intellectual history of the early years of RC-40 see Bonanno and Constance (2007).

Novel readings of classical sociological works were accompanied by original works that follow contemporary intellectual currents. While theoretically informed, these works were all aimed at generating a wealth of empirical information on the evolution of agrifood. In this regard, of particular relevance was the creation of the “corporate watch” program in the 1980s. This was an informal program initiated by Heffernan at the University of Missouri and followed by other SAF scholars around the world aimed at documenting the actions of agrifood corporations. Heffernan and his graduate students began documenting corporate activities by carefully analyzing published resources—such as trade magazines, press releases and newspaper articles—that reported a host of relevant corporate moves such as acquisitions and mergers. In a short time, Heffernan and his group accumulated a wealth of information that allowed them to clearly map out the levels of concentration of agrifood. Corporate watch was accompanied by the introduction of new methodological tools that allowed a better understanding of the evolution of the sector. This is the case of the “commodity chain analysis” approach. Pioneered by William H. Friedland in a now classical series of studies on several commodity chains (Friedland and Barton 1976; Friedland, Barton and Thomas 1981; Friedland 1984;), it became widely adopted in the study of both manufactured and fresh agrifood commodities. Quickly corporate watch and the commodity chain analysis became fundamental tools for SAF.

The SAF debate was characterized by the emergence of three distinct schools of thought. The first was the neo-Marxist; the second the Constructionist, and the third was Pragmatic Democracy. The latter characterizes the approach dominant in the Missouri School. Before turning to the Missouri School, however, allow me to briefly sketch the primary features of the neo-Marxist and Constructionist Schools.

Neo-Marxism

The neo-Marxist approach was employed by several SAF scholars. Prominent among them was William H. Friedland. As indicated above, Friedland pioneered the commodity chain analysis through a series of research projects. The first of them was an investigation of the production of fresh lettuce reported in the award winning book “Manufacturing Green Gold” in 1978⁴. His work documented the concentration of capital and power occurring in capitalist agriculture. Following the tenets of neo-Marxism, Friedland was concerned with applying Marxist theory to

⁴The book was subsequently published by Cambridge University Press under the auspices of the American Sociological Association.

the new socioeconomic conditions of mature capitalism. While he was careful in acknowledging the peculiarities of the agro-food sectors, Friedland's thesis was that processes of capital accumulation were often ultimately homogenous across economic sectors leading to further concentration of capital and marginalization of labor. Regarding the latter, he further documented the proletarianization and exploitation of migrant workers. Under Friedland's intellectual leadership, several second generation SAF neo-Marxists quickly appeared. In the mid 1980s young scholars—such as Philip McMichael, Geoffrey Lawrence, and Alessandro Bonanno—began publishing relevant research on the topic⁵. This research followed established neo-Marxist paradigms such as World System Theory, Monopoly Capital, and Critical Theory. McMichael—a student of Immanuel Wallerstein—brought to SAF the insights of World System Theory (Wallerstein 1974) and in collaboration with Harriett Friedman—another of the founding members of SAF in North America—introduced the now popular theory of “agro-food regimes” (Friedman and McMichael 1989). Lawrence's (1987) neo-Marxist analysis of agrifood in Australia paved the way for the growth of one of the most prolific and visible international groups of SAF scholars: the Oceania (Australia and New Zealand) group. Applying the commodity chain approach and class analysis, Lawrence illustrated the processes of concentration of capitalist agrifood in the Southern hemisphere and its consequences on the region's farming structure and labor relations. Bonanno's work drew significantly from Critical Theory. Employing Antonio Gramsci and Georg Luckás' emphasis on ideology and social legitimation, he studied the role of the state⁶ in the evolution of agrifood and in the transition from Fordism to Globalization (Bonanno 1987).

⁵ Given the space available it is impossible to mention, let alone discuss, the works of key members of this school. However, it would be impossible to discuss Neo-Marxism in agrifood without pointing out the seminal contribution of Frederick Buttel. Fred was one of the founders of SAF in North American and among the first scholars to study the intersection of agrifood and the environment (Buttel 1986) and the analysis of the implications that biotechnology has on agrifood (Buttel 1986). Theoretically, he adopted a Critical Theory position that was enriched by his excellent knowledge of the work of Jürgen Habermas. At the time of his untimely death in 2005, Buttel was among the most prolific and recognized SAF scholars in the world.

⁶ Members of the Missouri School—such as Gary Green and Douglas Constance—significantly contributed to the analysis of the role of the state in agrifood.

Constructionism

The Constructionist approach in SAF took at least three distinct turns. The first refers to the adoption of Max Weber's theory in the analysis of the evolution of the structure of agriculture. This was largely the result of the work and teaching of Howard Newby—a visiting British scholar—at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in the late 1970s. A group of graduate students—and chiefly among them Patrick Mooney (1982; 1988)—began employing Weber's work in the study of SAF. Debating the neo-Marxist structural reading of the evolution of agriculture proposed by Susan Mann and James Dickson (1978), Mooney argued that the characteristics of the evolution of contemporary farming cannot be correctly understood without considering culture and social agency.

The second component of this school is represented by the work of Larry Busch. Inspired by a sophisticated combination of Phenomenological, Pragmatist, Interactionist, Post-Structuralist, and Critical Theory currents, Busch (1978; 1981) was concerned with demonstrating the social construction of agrifood practices and their undemocratic nature. His work on the institutional evolution of agrifood research and later biotechnology showed the class nature of contemporary agriculture but also the limits of positivist approaches to the study of the intersection of science, technology and agrifood.

The third constructionist current refers to work done by SAF scholars at the University of Wageningen in the Netherlands. Predominantly European-based, the Wageningen School, however, influenced the research of second generation SAF scholars worldwide. Symbolized by Norman Long and Jan Douwe van der Ploeg's use of the Actor-Oriented approach (Long and van der Ploeg 1989) members of the Wageningen School (Arce 1993; Arce and Marsden 1993) produced important sociological studies that stressed the relevance of social agency and the analytical "limits" of Structuralist and Neo-Marxian approaches. The Actor-Oriented critique of both Marxist and Functionalist versions of Structuralism centers on anti-foundationalism. Anti-foundationalism rejects the idea that action can be ultimately linked to any underlying structure. Therefore, it criticizes accounts that see in economic (e.g., the logic of capital) and social (e.g., the satisfaction of functional needs) forces the underlying causes of the evolution of agrifood. In their view, this "rigidity" of Structuralism prevents the understanding of the relative position of actors regarding other elements that form the networks (contexts) within which action is performed. According to the Actor-Oriented approach, understanding action is not about understanding its essential dimension, but it is the process of

learning from actors the features of their actions (what they are doing) and the reasons behind their actions (why they are doing it).

THE MISSOURI SCHOOL

After the constitutive phase in the mid-1970s, SAF gained momentum and became one of the official specialty areas in several institutions in the US and abroad. At the University of Missouri, Bill Heffernan continued his work on the structure and organization of agriculture and began recruiting and training graduate students on this topic. This early phase of the Missouri School featured research on the structure of agriculture, migrant agricultural labor, and quality of life in rural communities (Green and Heffernan 1984; Heffernan 1972; 1982; Heffernan et al. 1981; Nolan et al. 1981). By the mid-1980s, however, Heffernan had already shifted focus from the structure of agriculture to capital concentration in agrifood commodities (Heffernan 1984). Through the corporate watch program first and “commodity conglomerate analysis” later (Constance and Heffernan 1994), Heffernan intensified his analytical production aided by a new group of graduate students who fully embraced his intellectual interests and research methodology⁷ (Constance and Heffernan 1989; Constance, Gilles and Heffernan 1990).

Heffernan’s posture toward, and relationship with, his graduate students deserve a few remarks. Primarily, they were based on a rigorous notion of instruction whereby students were required not only to learn relevant debates and master pertinent methodologies, but also to document their findings and supporting rationales carefully and accurately. To date, this meticulous fact gathering remains one of the most distinctive aspects of the Missouri School⁸. Second, they were inspired by a true sense of equality and mutual respect. Heffernan always viewed his students as colleagues who were contributing to the generation of relevant

⁷To be sure, the intellectual climate in the Department of Rural Sociology at the University of Missouri was also positively influenced by the presence of faculty members whose interests were germane to SAF. In this respect the contributions of Jere Gilles first, and Sandy Rikoon later, deserve to be mentioned. Simultaneously, it needs to be stated that scientific production at the University of Missouri included contributions inspired by both Neo-Marxist and Constructionist postures. These postures were incorporated in the overall scientific production of faculty and graduate students. As explained below, however, the Pragmatist position remained the most distinctive characteristics of Heffernan’s work.

⁸This is not to say that other schools neglected the empirical dimension of their research. Conversely, it is to stress the overt and painstaking care that members of the Missouri School employed in the documentation of corporate behavior in a context in which this information was difficult to gather and often controlled by the same TNCs that were investigated.

knowledge. Finally, teaching and research for Heffernan always signified political action. Carried out in the name of shared values such as social justice, equality and fairness, Heffernan's sociological research systematically translated into comments to those active in the political and social arenas. His students followed this path and quickly learned that studying and researching was not an abstract exercise but was part of human beings' right to fight for a better society.

Research Production

One result of Heffernan's new focus was that his research took a more prominent position in the SAF debates. At the beginning, his work was aimed at documenting the structural changes in key agrifood commodities—first the poultry industry and later, beef and pork production. Soon, however, Heffernan began paying particular attention to the capital concentration in these commodity chains and the social consequences that they generated for family farmers. He analyzed the evolution of contract farming and the vertical integration that it entailed. Further, he showed the very rapid patterns of concentration of power in the hands of large agribusiness and the concomitant disempowering of family farmers and communities.

Combining analytical insights with methodological concerns, Heffernan and his students (Heffernan 1990; Heffernan and Constance 1994) became aware that the study of vertical integration in a single commodity chain could not adequately capture the emerging features of the global agrifood system. Therefore, the commodity conglomerate analysis was designed to document the global integration of agrifood production and the power that it delivers to transnational corporations. In pursuing this analytical and methodological turn, Heffernan and his group first illustrated the concentration of power across commodities with the US food system. Attention was paid to the growth of large agrifood firms and retailers and the subordination of local small producers. Later this approach was extended to the international arena. It was carried out through the qualitative review of existing sources, in particular agricultural trade journals, with the objective of identifying dominant corporations in each of the commodity sectors. The result was a careful documentation of the fact that patterns recorded in the US were occurring at the global level and that the contemporary agrifood sector was controlled by a handful of large transnational corporations (TNCs).

To be sure, it would be reductive to characterize Heffernan's work as simply a sophisticated mapping of the concentration of agrifood. In effect, one of his primary objectives has always been the identification of the social contradictions that capital

and power concentration engenders. His original preoccupation with the fate of family farms and farm communities was later accompanied with concerns over patterns of development, food security, national sovereignty and democracy (Heffernan and Constance 1994:48). In the concluding section of his work “Transnational Corporations and the Globalization of the Food System” (Heffernan and Constance 1994), he posed the question of corporate accountability and control. Anticipating one major issue of the first decade of the 21st Century, Heffernan rejected the idea that corporations can be controlled by market forces or can exercise self control. Conversely, he saw the increasing inability of nation-state governments and institutions to control corporate actions as a fundamental contributor to the worsening of the socioeconomic conditions of the “have-not” nations and groups. He also implied that food security—one of the fundamental tasks to be performed by the nation-state—would be jeopardized if left in the unchecked hands of TNCs. Most important, though, he saw in the spread of corporate power a direct attack to democracy and the ability of national constituencies to exercise effective forms of decision making. “As multinational corporations cut their apron strings with parent nation-states and become transnational” he writes “the locus of control of TNCs becomes problematic” (Heffernan and Constance 1994:48). “Who or what will regulate the TNCs and hold them accountable for their actions?” (Heffernan and Constance 1994:48) is the question that summarizes Heffernan’s worries about the future of democracy.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Neo-Marxism and Constructionism undoubtedly affected the work of Heffernan and his students. For some graduate students, this is demonstrated by works that they published after completing their doctoral degrees (i.e., Constance 2002; Gronski and Pigg 2000). Yet, the work generated by Heffernan and the members of the Missouri School transcends the broad umbrellas of these established schools. Heffernan’s emphasis on a) teaching and research as components of political action, b) fact gathering as a starting point of construction of knowledge and political statements, and c) substantive democracy as the desired outcome of scientific investigation place him in the American intellectual tradition of Pragmatic Democracy.

Symbolized by the work of John Dewey (1975 [1922]; 1963 [1935]), Pragmatism became a philosophical current that separated the American thought of the 20th century from those continental (i.e., European-based) intellectual movements that framed most of the research in the social science during that

century. While the attention that it received in sociology was less than that attributed to other indigenous currents—most notably Symbolic Interactionism—Pragmatism is considered among the intellectual roots of Interactionism and Ethnomethodology. Further, and through the work of Dewey, it is considered a fundamental pronouncement in support of participatory liberal democracy (Bohman 1999; Caspary 2000). Following, I will parallel Heffernan's major intellectual emphases with those of John Dewey. I will employ Heffernan's approach to teaching and research, fact gathering and, substantive democracy to show the similarities that he shares with the Pragmatic tradition of John Dewey.

A) Teaching, Research and Political Action

Dewey's view of democratic life begins by placing learning (school) at the forefront. For Dewey full democracy is an objective that can be achieved only by having the active participation of a fully informed public. Democracy cannot be obtained if society is controlled by elites. Accordingly, the public must be placed in the condition to be fully informed and obtain the tools necessary to understand and analyze this information (Morris and Shapiro 1993). Armed with this open knowledge, the public must be allowed to practice effective communication among its members and between them and politicians. Politicians are, then, accountable for the decisions that they make. Accountability and a direct connection between the rules and the governed are fundamental conditions for democracy. To achieve this goal effective public oriented education is fundamental (Festenstein 1997).

At the heart of this process of learning to participate in democratic decision making is Dewey's rejection of *Spectator Theory*. Spectator theory refers to the idea that knowledge derives from the observation of an independent object by an also objectively independent observer (subject) (Dewey 1969). This idea, Dewey argues, is dominant in Western philosophy and is rarely challenged. The idea that spectators construct knowledge is denied, he contends, as the creation of knowledge is accompanied by a "quest for certainty" that claims that knowledge engenders fixed and certain results (foundationalism). Dewey counters Spectator Theory by contending that the creation of knowledge is directed to solve practical problems. Accordingly, knowledge is not generated to understand the essential nature of things for it is not absolute and does not exist. Yet it is produced to solve problems faced by the community⁹.

⁹ Following his definition of Pragmatism, Dewey believes that ideas cannot be judged by objective criteria because these criteria cannot be established. Conversely, the results they produce when put into practice provide the elements for their evaluation.

Like for Dewey, Heffernan's research and teaching does not originate from the search for invariable truths, but they are inspired by the desire to address the problems affecting "communities." For Heffernan, these communities are primarily those of agrifood producers, rural residents, and consumers. The concentration of capital and the power of TNCs limit the ability of these communities to freely operate in society and participate in democratic decision making. Research and the process of teaching graduate students how to study the above-mentioned phenomena are, therefore, aimed at altering the status quo in favor a more just agrifood sector. In denouncing the manner in which capital concentration negatively affects rural communities, Heffernan draws significantly from Walter Goldschmidt's (1947) classical work. As for Heffernan's own admission in several personal communications, Goldschmidt's work had a fundamental influence on his political action oriented research and teaching. It is not a coincidence, therefore, that Goldschmidt, like Heffernan, followed Dewey's American tradition of Pragmatic Democracy.

B) Fact Gathering, Knowledge and Solution of "Problems of Men"

For Dewey the method for solving social problems and related moral questions (justice, freedom, and above all democracy) rests on the elimination of the difference between the approach to solve social and moral problems and that of solving practical problems. In his view, the latter (solving practical problems) should be used to address moral and social problems (Dewey 1969). This method is empirically-based and designed to gather relevant facts leading to the identification of the roots of the problems at hand and the creation of possible alternatives (Morris and Shapiro 1993). Calling his approach a "method of intelligence," Dewey maintains that an experimental methodology based on the careful collection of empirical data must be applied to the understanding of problems. It should be further directed to the identification of measures that, if applied, result in the well-being of individuals and communities. Finally, this method requires a critical examination of the consequences of the means adopted to promote these alternative conditions.

Dewey identifies the primary problem of inquiry in the abstract nature of philosophical approaches. For Dewey, philosophy has been concerned with abstract problems – the problems of philosophers, as he termed them. Attention, he argues, should be shifted to the "problems of men" (Dewey 1969). This preoccupation to denounce the abstract nature of philosophical inquiry rests on his view that social progress is the ultimate goal of scientific investigation. We need to study reality to

change it, he contends (Dewey 1969). Social change is both an entity to be studied and a political objective. According to Dewey, scientific inquiry has reached a “fatal turning point” and needs to be radically redirected to the solution of problems that people experience in their search for emancipation. Since scientific investigation (knowledge) is conceived as an entity external to the actual lives of people (Positivism), individuals and their communities cannot control the institutions that affect their lives.

While it is safe to say that questions over the nature of philosophical inquiry have not concerned Heffernan and his associates, fact gathering and the application of a practical methodology constitute two of the most distinctive features of his work. The importance of carefully documenting the actions of TNCs through the application of “commodity conglomerate analysis” engendered a wealth of knowledge that has always been targeted to illustrate the problems with contemporary agrifood. This knowledge has also always been applied to create resistance and develop alternatives. As with Dewey’s “problem of men,” Heffernan’s approach to studying agrifood has never been abstract. Conversely, it has always been directed at the creation of political statements directed toward the establishment of new and emancipatory social relations.

C) Substantive Democracy and Scientific Investigation

The basic theme that unifies Dewey’s works is his profound belief in democracy. Democracy, for Dewey, is substantive: it is not merely confined to democratic forms of governance and institutions, but it is extended to the practical existence of society and the individuals that form it. Democracy is manifested in the habits of the members of the community, their cooperation in the solution of problems and decision making, and their ability to obtain the means to actively participate in society. Democracy is substantive if it is practiced and it is ineffective if limited to its formal dimension (Westbrook 1991).

Three items can be employed to summarize Dewey’s position on democracy: “anti-elitism,” “social interdependence,” and “active participation” of members of society in decision making processes (Westbrook 1991). Dewey is primarily an anti-elitist. He argues that the ability of a few to identify the public interest can never be effective because it is distorted by their individual interests. This is the case even when these elite members are wise and educated (Dewey 1969). The remedy to this problem is democratic participation. The active involvement of community members is a guarantee against the particularistic views offered by elites. This is also an important aspect of individual freedom as the well-being of society cannot

simply rest on the solutions made available to the masses. Because democracy is not “simply and solely a form of government,” if it remains the sole prerogative of the political and/or ruling classes, it would be deprived of substantive meanings (Dewey 1969:296). In other words, democracy should not be the property of political institutions but should be contained in a wide range of social institutions (Dewey 1969:246).

Democracy mandates the centrality of social interdependence. Democracy is not about the freedom of individuals, Dewey argues. Taking a strong stand against those classical liberals who saw individuals as independent entities in competition with each other, Dewey maintains that it is through the “collective” social life that this freedom is achieved. He contends that human beings cannot be considered isolated non-social atoms. They need to be viewed as social beings. They become social beings in so much as they are involved in social relations. The state, in turn, recognizes them only when they are organically related to each other (Dewey 1969:231-232). In our modern industrial society, democracy signifies having a say in the shaping of the activities of the community. All individuals must have a real say in shaping the life of their communities. From the community point of view, democracy means to allow each of its members to express his/her potentialities in harmony with the objectives of the group. For Dewey, therefore, social relations link individuals together and make them a community. The participatory construction of these social relations is central for the establishment of democracy. If violated, this social interdependence translates into oppression (Westbrook 1991).

From the above it is clear that for Dewey individual active participation in decision making is a fundamental aspect of democracy. While this is a point stressed by other members of the liberal tradition, in Dewey’s thought, participation is understood in “discursive” terms. Dewey is forever clear about the importance of discussion, consultation, persuasion and debate in democracy. These processes are necessary to create and enhance public awareness of the problems at hand, make explicit current social needs, and inform the decisions to be made at the political level. Further, this process of open participation and public discussion is seen as the most appropriate manner to address conflict in society. “The method of democracy—in as far as it is that of organized intelligence—is to bring these conflicts out into the open where their special claims can be discussed and judged in the light of more inclusive interests than are represented by either of them separately” (Dewey 1963:52). In essence, for Dewey participation in democracy is aimed at both searching for the best collective goals and discussing over how to identify and apply them.

Another important point should be mentioned in this discussion. It refers to Dewey's insistence that participation—as the overall process of establishing democracy—should be substantive (Dewey 1963:56). This brand of liberalism calls for careful attention to the connection between historical events and ideas. For Dewey, classical liberal formulations established before the 18th Century—i.e., those emphasizing individual natural rights (Locke 1988 [1689])—were a direct response to the despotic aristocratic rule that limited the freedom of the bourgeoisie. Nineteenth Century liberalism's call for the elimination of outdated legal norms (i.e., Bentham 1996 [1789]) represented an attack to the old feudal system of laws that prevented the free movement of labor and goods. Twentieth Century liberalism means “liberation from material insecurity and from the coercion and repression that prevent multitudes from participating in the vast cultural resources that are at hand” (Dewey 1963:48). For Dewey, in a market and society controlled by a few large corporations, individuals must be given the actual (practical) opportunity to participate in the activities and decision making processes of the communities and societies in which they live.

Heffernan's work is centered on the notion of substantive democracy and participation. He concurs with Dewey that current capitalism is not a “free market” society. Still, it is a system dominated by large corporations. In Heffernan's analysis, the most significant danger of today's agrifood is the overwhelming presence of TNCs and their ability to affect markets and bypass democratic forms of control and social participation. He continues by stressing that farmers, consumers and their communities should be allowed actual participation in decision making processes and should also be informed about the actions of these corporate conglomerates. Regarding participation and information, therefore, the similarities between Heffernan and Dewey's views of substantive and participatory democracy are striking. For both of them, unless democratic pronouncements are translated into actual practices, satisfactory social relations are not achieved.

CONCLUSIONS

Two points can conclude this analysis of the early years of the Missouri School of SAF. First, its contribution to pertinent debates has been significant. From the very early studies on the characteristics of the structure of agriculture to the more recent analyses on the concentration of commodity production, the Missouri School has generated a wealth of contributions that provided impetus to research and documented relevant trends. Indeed, the documentation and analysis of vertical integration and corporate concentration stand out as two of the most salient

substantive contributions of this school. Simultaneously, the Missouri School's methodology of commodity conglomerate analysis represents a novel manner to understand the conditions of agrifood. A great deal of attention has been paid to this School because of its experimentation with commodity conglomerate analysis and the results that it has generated. In this context, Heffernan's intellectual contribution remains one of the most influential in salient debates within SAF.

The second point refers to its theoretical uniqueness. This is also the primary contribution of this essay: the documentation of the unique theoretical underpinnings of this School. Members of SAF have been influenced by some major theoretical schools in sociology. This is particularly the case with Neo-Marxism and Constructionism in their diverse forms. The Missouri School, while drawing on both Neo-Marxism and Constructionism, derives its primary theoretical features from the American tradition of Pragmatism and its emphasis on practical outcomes and radical democracy¹⁰. In this light, it can be concluded that the application of the Pragmatic tradition to the study of SAF positions the Missouri School squarely within the American intellectual tradition. This posture allows members of this school not only to carefully and effectively analyze global events, but also participate in, and contribute to, international debates. It is in this respect that we can see a fundamental side of the Missouri School: a group that has brought to the global forum a tradition and ideas rooted in the heartland of the United States.

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¹⁰To be sure, it is not my intention to argue that the Missouri School and Heffernan had the monopoly of the use of Pragmatism in SAF. The seminal contributions of Larry Busch and Bill Lacy as well as Fred Buttel can be cited as examples of the use of Pragmatic Democracy in SAF. My point is that Heffernan was arguably the most fervent of supporters of this brand of democracy.

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