
Panel organiser: Segers, Yves, Interfaculty Centre for Agrarian History, University of Leuven, Belgium

The diffusion of various forms of knowledge and know-how in the countryside, both to increase agricultural production and food quality and to improve the quality of rural life, was without any doubt one of the most striking processes of change in the rural areas of Europe during the last three centuries. However, regions, farming systems, and the roles of farmers and farming families had unequal access to locally and externally generated knowledge, as well as unequal abilities to produce and acquire new knowledge through formal and informal networks such as learning by doing, schooling, extension programmes, media, etc. These two sessions, organised under the same umbrella, aim at unravelling the development of what can be called “cultural and rural knowledge networks” in Europe. Both sessions will address the production and diffusion of agricultural science and agricultural technology. Changing agricultural knowledge and techniques were one of the principal reasons for the increases in agricultural output that occurred since the eighteenth century. Many of the technical changes resulted from the cooperation of governments, scientists and commercial firms resulting outside the agricultural industry itself. Others came from pioneering farmers. Guiding questions for these sessions are: How did these knowledge networks operate? top-down, bottom-up or two-way communication? What was the role of public and private actors (government, state agronomists, farmers’ organisations, commercial firms, media, the church, etc.)? Who had access to which knowledge? To whom was the available information addressed (men, women, youth; professional farmers or rural dwellers)? Which knowledge was adopted or rejected and why? How efficient was the degree of agricultural extension initiatives? Did inclusion or exclusion from knowledge networks influence power structures? Which channels were used to diffuse knowledge (education, newspapers, radio, films, television, journals, books, advertisements, expositions, agricultural shows, etc.)? To what extent was knowledge generated outside Europe, imported in Europe, for instance from the U.S. and European colonies? Or vice versa? To what extent did knowledge networks globalise? These sessions are organised by Paul Brassley (University of Exeter), Yves Segers and Leen Van Molle (University of Leuven), Daniel Lanero and Lourenzo Fernández Prieto (University of Santiago de Compostela), in cooperation with the CORIN network.

Panel participants

Cabo Villaverde, Miguel, University of Santiago de Compostela, Spain

The aim of this paper is to analyse how the Spanish agrarian innovation system was built between 1880 and 1936 (Spanish Civil War starting point), paying special attention to its implementation in Galician rural world (Northwest Spain). We will specifically focus on the Technological Advice System (How it worked at that time) and in which ways innovations were “received” by peasants. Galician agriculture showed important increases in productivity during that period that confirm the Spanish agrarian model within the traditional agrarian economy. Peasants headed this process, defining some of the assumptions of the technological innovation classic models. Our paper will deal with three main innovations: 1) Livestock breeding and the creation of a new cattle breed ‘Galician red’; 2) The general adoption of threshing machines by Galician peasants in the framework of an agrarian economy based in livestock breeding and selling to national and international markets; 3) The Galician case as an example of pioneer diffusion of hybrid maize in Europe during the 1930s and 1950s.

Cabo Villaverde, Miguel, University of Santiago de Compostela, Spain

1900-1975

The agrarian press had an important weight, so that these periodicals had to find resources and an appropriate and formal space to accommodate the requirements of their intended audiences, co-operative saving and lending, gender and the methodology of oral history. Van Molle, Leen

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Van Molle, Leen Van Molle is a full professor of social history at the University of Leuven, Department of History, research group “Co-operative history” and Hogeschool-Universiteit Brussel (HUB). Her research focuses on agricultural and rural history in Belgium and Europe since 1750 and the development of food systems.

Soto Fernández, David

Soto Fernández, David Soto Fernández is a visiting Senior Research Fellow in the Centre for Rural Policy Research at the University of Exeter, UK. Since 2009 he has been working there on a project to investigate the process of technical change and the introduction of new farming practices in English agriculture between 1874 and the mid-1980s. His main interest is in the development of new technologies by farmers and commercial firms outside the agricultural industry, the role of educational, advisory, and communications systems involving considerable energy, expertise, and expenditure, and the efforts of large numbers of often highly trained workers. This paper seeks to explore the dimensions of this system in the United Kingdom and to consider its impact and efficiency. With an effectively organised network for producing rapid innovation and adoption, or a costly and bureaucratic appendage of the agricultural industry?

9.7.4. Technical change and knowledge networks in Great Britain 1945-1980s

Brassley, Paul, University of Exeter, UK

It is widely recognized that the years between the end of the Second World War and the mid-1980s saw the introduction of a range of important new technologies into British agriculture – pesticides, new crop varieties, artificial insemination, mechanisation, for example - and the increased adoption of existing output-increasing technologies such as artificial fertilisers. The development and impact of these changes has been explored by several historians; what has not been so widely explored is the process by which farmers and farm workers became aware of new technologies and competent in their use. It was a multi-dimensional process involving a series of stages from the creation of a scientific infrastructure designed to produce technical change through to the eventual adoption and use of a new technology by the farmers and their employees. To connect the initial and final stages required a variety of educational, advisory, and communications systems involving considerable energy, expertise, and expenditure, and the efforts of large numbers of often highly trained workers. This paper seeks to explore the dimensions of this system in the United Kingdom and to consider its impact and efficiency. With an effectively organised network for producing rapid innovation and adoption, or a costly and bureaucratic appendage of the agricultural industry?

Participants

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9.7.1. Knowledge networks in rural Europe: theories, concepts and historiographies

Segers, Yves, Interfaculty Centre for Agrarian History, University of Leuven, Belgium

Paper

Van Molle, Leen, Interfaculty Centre for Agrarian History, University of Leuven, Belgium

paper

Knowingly is a vague concept, although it seems to refer much more to the city than to the rural environment, to theory than to daily practices, and to those who produce science and transmit its defaces via intensive educational programs than to the doings and dealings of the masses. But historical research has underlined this rather static and top-down understanding of knowledge. In production and circulation are never detached enterprises, but socially situated and intentional. What is recognised as knowledge has perhaps less to do with facts and proofs, with interaction, communication in time and space, negotiation and creative methods of transmission. The introduction to both sessions regarding knowledge in the countryside wants in the first place to focus on recent theories, interpretative models and concepts that can help to elucidate the mechanisms of knowledge diffusion in rural Europe in the past. The second session, the diffusion of knowledge in two cultural contexts, the diffusional model, the act network theory (the concepts of “trading zones”, “cultural amphibians” and “cross-border workers”. In the second place, it aims at introducing the reflection on the sites of rural knowledge, its bearers (individuals, groups, institutions, media,...) and consumers, and the informal and formal structures that shape its networks.

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9.7.2. Agrarian press and its contribution to technical change in Galicia, 1900-1975

Cabo Villaverde, Miguel, University of Santiago de Compostela, Spain

An important number of periodicals was published in Galicia during the first third of the XXth century targeting the rural population. They played a key role in the political, cultural and socio-economic transformation of the countryside. Historians everywhere use this press as source but they seldom regard it as a subject on its own. This paper will deal mostly with the agrarian press, paying special attention by agrarian organizations or aiming the peasantry as primary target, but we will also pay attention to the role played by journals published by state institutions and its interaction with the former. Both were trying to make a breakthrough in a milieu where literacy and oral tradition still had an important weight, so that these periodicals had to find resources and an appropriate and formal space to accommodate the requirements of their intended audiences, co-operative saving and lending, gender and the methodology of oral history.