

**EV5V-CT92-0160**

**LAND, CULTURE & CRISIS:  
FROM PRODUCTIONIST SUCCESS  
TO FISCAL & ENVIRONMENTAL IMPASSE ON  
EUROPEAN FARMS 1940-90**

**SUMMARY FINAL REPORT**

**Key words :** agricultural policy; rural development and policy; culture; attitudes; diversity; CAP; GATT

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## I. OBJECTIVES

As the title of the Project suggests, the general focus of this research concentrated on the complex relationship between farm cultures and the local interpretations and uses of the land.

The Project departed from the premise that EU farmers are currently caught in an uncertain period. On the one hand, they are currently subject to pressures on their livelihoods from the reform of the CAP and from the GATT agreement - all of which has meant that EU farmers have been quite abruptly shaken from a period of economic stability into a new epoch of uncertainty and financial insecurity, with at least a part of the national and EU discourse referring explicitly to the need for farming to be more competitive. On the other hand however, they have been subject to a quite different pressure, of distinct origin but now well established even as an integrated part of the EU policy directives for agriculture, which has set up targets of a qualitative kind - for purer, more 'natural' foods, for reduced reliance on high-cost inorganic and industrial inputs, and for a generalised concern for the land and landscape as finite resources demanding forms of use that are sustainable and "environmentally-sensitive".

Amongst these contradictory models and pressures EU policy has also emphasised the importance of social sustainability and 'subsidiarity' - that is, the joint endorsement of maintaining rural communities (loosely defined) alongside the principled need to devolve decision-making to the lower institutional levels of civil society. The Project was thus designed to draw attention to the way in which dominant discourses on rural life and the 'natural' environment tend to be of transnational or metropolitan origin, thereby implicitly marked by an urban ethos often ignorant of, if not antagonistic to, rural livelihoods and cultures drawn from the land. With some national variations, this trend has meant that farm cultures and indigenous folklore's have been marginalised and even eclipsed - to the possible disadvantage for the reconciliation of urgent issues of agriculture and the natural environment.

Rooted thus in this context, the Project aimed to examine the way in which farm cultures have survived (and been changed by) the structural and technological changes in post-war agriculture, and to assess the extent to which such local traditions of belief and practice might contribute to policy design and implementation conducive to a rural balance between farming incomes and environmental sustainability.

## II. METHODOLOGY

A natural and logical consequence to the Project's objective of sharpening the focus of research onto the cultural composition of the locality was the adoption of a methodological design of empirical and ethnographic emphasis. A fundamental premise of the Project was the need for qualitative studies of the EU's heterogeneous rurality in order to compensate for both the almost surplus availability of aggregate statistical data on EU farming as well as the inevitable administrative tendency to submerge such local differences within artificial uniformities born of governmental and bureaucratic convenience.

The team also worked on the hypothesis that those indigenous dimensions of farm culture which pertained to the realms of 'the environment', land, and land-use, would be largely derived from the local crucible of long-standing interaction between farming and the area's 'natural' endowments. At the same time they also assumed that the cultural product of such a crucible would amount to a dynamic force, rooted in times past as well as continuously shaped by contemporary concerns, and in due measure would require a methodology which encompassed this historical development in addition to its current manifestations. In the first instance this meant that the methodological emphasis was bound to be locality-specific, case-study grounded, and historical.

The priority for culture as a dynamic process had clear implications for the approach to the case-study. The nearest methodological model available for the detailed penetration of indigenous quotidian values and prosaic beliefs was of course the classical anthropological technique of 'participant-observation', but this had to be modified given the research-time available and the need to give this approach a more thematic specificity (anthropology's goal had tended to be more holistic). The methodological outcome to this was the unstructured interview with individuals already familiar to the researcher.

The unstructured and relatively spontaneous design of these interviews was seen to be essential given the politically sensitive nature of the research focus - that is, the current perceived tension between farm livelihoods and environmental sustainability. It was crucial that the data collected was driven by something more general and

amorphous than an ideological and self justifying response to a contemporary agenda. To avoid the likelihood of such shallow and pat returns a strategy was adopted, first to establish good relations with the interviewees, and secondly to couch the taped discussion within the context of a vaguer project aimed at the documentation of rural life in the area concerned and as it had changed over time. Wherever possible such discussions were informed by local data drawn from archival sources and of course by the insights already gained in prior interviews.

The first requirement of established access to informants determined the areas studied in the Project. In each case partners were guided by the knowledge that research-time was limited and that the Project's elusive focus would require the most conducive of research encounters. The Project was thus conducted in the following areas:

1. The Netherlands: an area of the northern Dutch province of Friesland called the Friese Wouden, or Woodlands.
2. Eire: the area to the north of Dublin called County Meath.
3. Spain: the rural hinterland of the town of Santa Fe in the Vega de Granada, just outside the city of Granada.
4. Portugal: the area of Beira Alta in the central region, focused on the residential clusters of Moreira, Santar, Casal Sancho, Sao Joao, Vila Ruiva, Nelas, Senhorim, Guarda and Lapa dos Dinheiros.
5. Greece: the chosen site for this case-study consisted of two village areas on the island of Crete, Pigi and Armeni, in the Department of Rethymnon.
6. United Kingdom: the selected location was the West Midlands' counties of Shropshire, Staffordshire, Herefordshire and Worcestershire.
7. The Czech Republic: in the region of Bohemia, the south-western section of the country.

The initial phase in the field was thus concerned with the consolidation of the informant network on the basis of an acknowledged desire to record local farm history "from the bottom up". Contacts were made with farmers on this pretext and preliminary visits often involved an overview of the farm's activities and sometimes an offer of access to farm papers and documents. Potential informants were then given the tacit opportunity to withhold further cooperation by being evasive over a second appointment for a taped interview. In this way up to 50 unstructured discussions were recorded in each case, normally spread over some two hours.

These discussions covered the requisite cultural terrain but by way of an indirect and circuitous route. The explicit focus of the interview was local, historical, autobiographical, and referred to the general theme of the changes in farming and farm practices over the period 1940-90. The delicate nature of the indigenous cultures of quotidian livelihoods and related prosaic ontologies and epistemologies (of local meaning and knowledge) was carefully constructed from within this dialogue, and interviewers in particular prompted directions which followed the general themes of the Past, the Crisis, the Farmer as agency in relation to civil society, the state and policy, and Local constructions of 'nature' and the 'environment', all of which had previously been defined and discussed in a set of Research Guidelines circulated by the Coordinator.

### **III. MAIN RESULTS**

The first main finding was perhaps somewhat self-evident, but even so - in the context of policy directions which both subsume diversity for administrative convenience as well as entertaining a shift towards 'subsidiarity' and localised devolution - it warrants repetition and detailed format. That is, that the EU rurality, encompassed awkwardly by the Common Agricultural Policy, incorporates a enormous diversity of cultural and environmental conditions. It goes without saying that the product range encountered in the case-studies was enormous, itself a reflection of the variety of climate and natural terrain, whilst the spectrum of unit in terms of scale and capitalization was broad enough to include, at one end, minifundia of bare subsistence viability through to 'agribusiness' operations of more than 1000 hectares at the other.

However, at the same time, what the research did reveal was that, in spite of these enormous material differences, there remained a certain cultural communality amongst farmers - a shared notion of their essential distinctiveness, a typical appreciation of their work and experience as "a way of life", and a representative sensitivity of their position at the edge of society, ever more subject to deteriorating terms of trade and a cultural eclipse of their voice and vision. The demonstration of this similarity in the midst of such difference emerged as an important result of the Project, particularly in the context of discussions at the End-of-Project Workshop.

Generalisation, whilst the objective of any such research, comes hard in this case of diversity. Even so, it is possible to reduce the complex detail of the research in this Project to a pervasive thread in farm cultures of "landstewardship". Research on this theme is as yet insufficiently developed to support a refined conceptualisation of this cultural cluster of memories, beliefs and values, and by the same token it is impossible

for the term to be adequately translated into every European language. Brutally distilled, however, from the range of cultural diversity, one can extract a core of informal and often inarticulated assumptions on the part of farmers that rural livelihoods wrought from working the land create, in turn, sentiments and ethics which coincide with but also extend beyond the instrumentalities of mere economic survival or prosperity.

To some extent this is to echo and validate the recent doubts raised over the suitability of one-dimensional economic models for the complex realm of farming, as for instance expressed in the OECD "Farm Employment & Economic Adjustment in OECD Countries" (OECD, 1994) and by report Gasson and Errington in "The Farm Family Business" (1993). But the research here goes further than these more conventional misgivings by exploring the detail of local farm culture insofar as it operates not only as a check on mere economic instrumentality, but also the extent to which such residual and dynamic idiosyncrasies may provide important - and currently neglected, even denied - 'cultural capital' for the reconciliation of competing claims (between farm livelihoods and environmental sustainability) on the EU countryside.

For this reason it is important to stress that the Project demonstrated that there is no one-to-one equivalence between farm modernity and environmental neglect, nor between large-scale production and a similar lack of interest in sustainability. Although there were inevitable local variations (whereby for instance the ethic in Andalusia, Spain, was expressed in terms of "trabajo bien hecho" - "work well done", implying standards which accommodated the interests of the land as opposed to those of the annual returns, and in Crete it was manifest in the importance attached to the way in which food and wine consumed in the household needed to be produced without excessive inputs), the Project revealed that in each of the cases there were farm cultures which attributed to the land an emotive and ethical value over and above that of 'dispersible capital'.

This pervasive ethos emerged from the fieldwork as fundamental to an EU farm culture which transcended differences of history, unit-scale, nation, and natural terrain - a culture which is as yet insufficiently explored and documented and which can therefore be only loosely and inadequately delineated by the notion of 'landstewardship'. The local ways in which these cultural principles emerged in the data generated were therefore manifold and diverse, and the strength of the case made by the Project can only be appreciated by a reading of all of the case studies, but it is legitimate to say that they emerged particularly around the farmers' discussion of the past (from whence values were transmitted and lessons learnt) and its continuity into the present, and with reference to a perceived sense of crisis affecting the farm.

In this respect the Project demonstrated that a perception of crisis pervaded EU farming but that the actual construction of this sense varied from place to place. Without exception, however, one single interpretation of the crisis recurred time and again - where it was expressed in terms of farm livelihoods and the implications of GATT and of the reform of the CAP for reduced farm support - with farmers from each of the Project cases anxiously reviewing the prospects of their families' possibilities of remaining in the industry and on the land.

However, the farmers' sense of crisis was also conveyed in more abstract, less personalised terms, with reference to the core value of the land and how current processes threatened its sustainability. Here the Project uncovered the appearance of the North-South dichotomy insofar as the Northern cases reflected a more developed and formalised celebration of the raw rural assets as an aesthetic commodity of 'landscape', established as 'national heritage' and often equated with national identity by way of generations of literary, artistic, musical and journalistic output in addition to the even more explicit evaluations to be found in the traditions of natural history.

And so the research on the Northern cases revealed a complex sense of crisis from the perspective of the farm - on the one hand, in terms of declining real incomes and the daunting prospects of extended exposure to global competition, whilst on the other, a quite contradictory evaluation of the 'natural environment' as a finite resource open to other legitimate claimants such as environmentalists and connoisseurs of landscape, 'nature', and 'fresh-air' leisure. In the Southern cases, such concerns had not yet diversified to the same extent and instead tended to focus on the way in which technological advances had taken their toll on previously immutable 'nature' (availability of water and fertility loss) alongside such issues as the erosion of 'community' and the declining qualities of food purity and flavour.

Thus in sum, the Project's main findings may be distilled as follows:

1. That farm cultures remain important residues of values and beliefs forged in the interaction of local 'nature' and farming, and that such residues continue to be marked by a cultural distinctiveness dividing farmers from the social and institutional hinterland of government and 'urban' civil society beyond;
2. That these residual cultures appear in many different local guises, but that there were pervasive themes common to all the different farm-groups covered in the Project sample;
3. That in all cases constructions around "the past" and "the crisis" provided clear evidence that farm cultures have long-established referents to the special qualities of land (for which the notion of 'landstewardship' provides provisional but insufficiently elastic conceptualisation), and that such ethical clusters remain neglected or concealed areas of 'cultural capital' for the ongoing struggle to reconcile contending interests of social and environmental sustainability in the EU countryside.

#### **IV. SCIENTIFIC INTEREST AND POLICY RELEVANCE**

##### **(i) Scientific interest and novelty;**

The single most important and significant innovation to emerge from this Project was the revelation that farm cultures have their own distinctive pattern and nature, and that they do not conform mechanically to trends which have overtaken the economic structure of their industry. In short, we are reminded powerfully of a message that has been largely forgotten - that economic change moves faster than other aspects of the social world and that commensurably there is a 'cultural lag'. Too often it has been presumed that farm cultures have merely adjusted to the economic regime as a dependent variable. This Project has begun the task of balancing-out this stream of assumptions with evidence of the relative autonomy of the local cultures. Farmers, on the basis of the material provided by this Project, exist very much on the frontiers of trends with views and values which reflect preoccupations with immaterial concerns ("way of life"), as much as the 'bottom-line' of material profit and loss.

The Project's findings on the way in which farmers' cultures are dynamic forces which draw as much from the past as they do from current economic exigencies has important implications for our future research. The project shed light on a secluded and elusive, hard-to-access area (incredibly little work has consequently been done on rural culture in the EU compared to the attention granted to the more tangible and accessible aspects of technological and economic transformation and 'vertical' integration), and it is clear from the limited comparative capacity of the notional concept of "landstewardship" that much more needs to be done on a locally-specific basis before one can talk confidently about the bases for farm strategies designed to address the central issue of balance between environmental and social sustainability

In short, the Project has merely scratched the surface of an important area of concern to EU environmental and rural policy which demands urgent attention.

##### **(ii) Policy relevance**

The findings of this Project have important implications for Policy, especially in terms of design and implementation. The team attracted attention to the obvious, but somewhat neglected, reality of a rural diversity in the EU that is hard to accommodate within even the most finely adjusted common policies. To this extent they provided a strong argument for extended sensitivity to this heterogeneity, but more importantly, the Project made the point that farm cultures are both vital sources of 'cultural capital' for the struggle to reconcile competing interests of production and consumption (farm income and the 'environmental sustainability'), and at the same time, precisely by virtue of their essential qualities of rurality and specificity, that they tend to be neglected in the ever urbanising trend of generalities within dominant metropolitan and transnational cultures. The Project bore witness to this in the consistent theme of farmers' sense that their local knowledge and indigenous experience are marginalized by policies and regulations determined by a governmental drive to be uniformly valid.

Ironically, in this regard the rural EU appears to lag somewhat behind developments already well established in third world countries (where of course the metropolitan emphasis in culture and demography is less advanced). There, greater attention has been paid to the local inputs into policy design and implementation, as shown by the proliferation of the practice of 'participatory rural appraisals'

In short, what this Project showed was that farm cultures are neglected reserves of energy and experience, finely tuned to indigenous circumstance of nature and rural society, and that the current processes of policy design and implementation (especially with regard to the role of local civil society and democratic processes) would be much enhanced by increased farmer participation. These are after all the people who put policies into practice on the land, in all their regional and cultural variety, and this Project's findings suggested that they must be allowed a greater voice (locally as opposed to institutionally) if a truly integrative policy around the EU directives for social

and environmental sustainability is to be fashioned and implemented. Above all else, this Project demonstrated the importance of taking account of indigenous farm cultures within the unfolding strategy for environment and agriculture as the best way of designing and introducing reforms which will attract voluntary adherence and self-monitoring in place of the costly and bureaucratically cumbersome systems of regulation and policy coercion.

This research argued that greater attention paid to local farm cultures would help promote and facilitate such a crucial process and would also contribute to EU efforts to withstand the flow of migration away from the rural areas and particularly into the "golden triangle" delineated by Turin, London and Hamburg.

Various Community programmes (such as ORA and LEADER) are designed to combat this trend and to generate rural employment, as does the EU commitment to a single market with an appropriate geographical population balance. This project has demonstrated that farm cultures and institutions are important but neglected and under-utilised resources for EU research and policy strategy.