Turning points in Finnish rural studies

From traditional rural research to new rurality studies

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Turku, the oldest city in Finland, was founded in 1229, and the country gained its first university, the Royal Academy of Turku, in 1640. When the war of 1809 ended in Sweden's defeat by Russia, Finland became an autonomous Grand Duchy of the Russian Empire. The Russians nevertheless saw Turku as being both culturally and geographically too close to Sweden, and made Helsinki the capital of Finland in 1812. Sixteen years later the Turku Academy was also moved to Helsinki. Today, as the University of Helsinki, it is still the largest university in Finland.

It is impossible to appreciate rural development in Finland without considering its broader connections with the transformations of Finnish society, especially the Scandinavian model of the welfare state and the delayed but eventually very rapid processes of industrialization and urbanization that took place in this country. The question of food supplies and the needs of society at large have determined the direction of rural research at various times. Agriculture and forestry are integral parts of the Finnish countryside, but this short overview will not be concerned as such with the very extensive research that has taken place in these disciplines.[1]

Finland is geographically a vast country dotted with small towns and local communities. The *village* is not just a traditional form of dwelling place but lies at the heart of the Finnish mentality. It is the fixed point at the centre of the Finnish mindscape, the focus of the great transformation that the Finns have collectively witnessed and experienced.

Rural research has not become institutionalized as an independent academic discipline in Finland, but rather scientific questions concerning rural areas have been considered within separate branches of science. In that sense rural research has always been multidisciplinary. Now, in the 21st century, it is well established as a network-based field of academic research also producing university-level teaching.

To summarize the development of Finnish rural research, I would divide it into three periods defined by certain historical turning points. The first 100 years:

I The age of social and village studies in agrarian rural Finland (1860–1959)

will be dealt with here fairly briefly relative to its actual duration, as the main emphasis will be on the last 50 years. Here we may distinguish two significant turning points, the first around 1960, marking the beginning of *modern rural research*, and the second around 1990, marking the formation of a *rural researcher identity*. These two phases can be designated as:

II The age of rural research in a welfare state context (1960–1989)

III The age of the new rurality and development-oriented rural studies (1990–).

I will describe these three phases below in general terms, without going into the work of individual researchers or projects. The references on which the interpretations are based are listed in the bibliography.

I Social and village studies in agrarian rural Finland (1860–1959)

As a country of forests, lakes and rivers, Finland was a land of vigorous primary production and lively village communities up until the 1950s. The motivation behind the visits made by academics to the countryside in the early decades of this period was not exclusively the acquiring of scientific knowledge but rather it included the stimulation of a national identity based on the Finnish language and culture. There was virtually no rural research as we understand it today, nor did the scholars think of themselves as rural researchers; they were anthropologists, students of comparative religion, historians, ethnologists, geographers etc.

Finland grew up as a nation on the strength of reforms such as the intensification of agriculture, the creation of a system of local government (1865), the organization of a civil society and the strengthening of the cooperative movement. A certain amount of industry also developed, and trade was permitted in rural areas from 1858 onwards. By 1870 the country had 34 small towns, accounting for about 8% of the total population.

Considerable progress was made in the social sciences towards the end of the 19th century, when 'concrete' social research gained in importance, supported by the founding of the Finnish Statistical Office in 1865. The 'father' of Finnish sociology, Edward Westermarck, was appointed adjunct professor in that subject at the University of Helsinki in 1890 and also acquired a reputation abroad as a researcher and as a professor at the London School of Economics. A similar academic position in Finno-Ugric ethnology was created at the University of Helsinki in 1891.

Social research around the turn of the century was mainly concerned with the living conditions of the landless rural population, the question of peasants, tenant farmers and land ownership issues. An important part was also played by traditional village research, which continued from the 1920s onwards under the auspices of social and cultural anthropology, history, comparative religion, geography and ethnology. At that stage the *village* was an obvious unit for studying, a visible part of the settlement pattern of Finnish society and an element in its structure of production and its culture.

II Rural research in a welfare state context (1960–1989)

The age of an agrarian rural society persisted for an exceptionally long time in Finland by European standards, with the turning point coming only in the 1960s, as urbanization gained momentum, modernization set in and work began on constructing a welfare state. Tensions emerged between the rural and urban areas and were reflected in social contrasts between town and country dwellers, farmers and wage-earners.

It was at this point that the social structure of the traditional village communities broke down and people began to migrate from the villages to the towns and to Sweden. Agriculture declined in importance as a primary source of livelihood and forestry work became mechanized. The villages of the welfare state began to fare badly. This aroused opposition, of course, including political opposition, and society descended upon the villages in a brash and ugly fashion.

The modernization of the social sciences in Finland had already begun, in the 1950s, with a greater diversity of themes and more advanced methodology. A number of new state universities were also developed at that time, partly on the grounds of regional policy, and some of these gained departments in which rural studies could be pursued.

Concern was expressed at the speed of the change in rural areas, and many researchers were united by a generally critical attitude. There was an evident desire to generate research results for use in critical discussions and political decision-making processes. Descriptions were given of the great transformation that was taking place and of a rural landscape of declining villages. It was in this context that modern rural research found its identity, and the object of that research was construed as *the changing village*.

Again the changes affecting the villages

were studied on a multidisciplinary or even interdisciplinary basis, with some of the researchers remaining within the agrarian tradition, concentrating on the transformation in agriculture or the culture of the local communities, while others examined these as local manifestations of the structural changes in society at large. Also connected with this was a Marxist approach, reflecting a very powerful trend in the social sciences in Finland in the 1970s. By no means all the rural researchers concurred with the Marxist tenets, however, and many adopted other new methodologies, including statistical methods, field research, interviews and surveys.

One thing that both the Marxists and the other rural sociologists at that time had in common was that they did not make active attempts to suggest how rural development should proceed, but were mostly satisfied with critical interpretations of what the capitalist society had done to the villages and local communities. The outcome was a collective picture of *the dying village* painted by a multiplicity of researchers.

One significant exception to this trend was the approach known as action-oriented village research, which, although remaining critical in outlook, preferred to speak of *the living village*. Again the question of how came to the forefront. This orientation was typical of human geographers in the fields of regional planning and regional studies, and was manifested most clearly in a multi-centre village studies project with a powerful action research bias launched in 1976, which proved decisive for the rise of the village activities movement in Finland.

The first longer-term funding received from the Academy of Finland for basic rural research was for the *Rural Vitality Programme (1986–1988)*, following which the University of Helsinki decided in 1988 to set up two institutes of rural research and training, in Mikkeli and Seinäjoki, to study rural living conditions and sources of livelihood. These represented real investments in institutional capital for applied rural research and development.

III The new rurality and development-oriented rural studies (1990–2009)

The golden age of the welfare state may be said to have ended with the economic recession of 1989. Finland's neighbouring state, the Soviet Union, ceased to exist in that form, politics began to undergo a major liberalization and the role of the state in directing development came to be challenged, this function being partially taken over by free market forces. Finland became a member of the European Union in 1995.

The traditional village was dead, and people were beginning to lose interest in the construct of a *changing village*. Its story had been told already. Attention was now turned towards *the new rurality*. At the same time, a form of national rural policy was gaining currency that supported the opening up of new possibilities for rural areas. Suddenly the countryside was bristling with development projects, and new resources were invested in applied research in the hope of generating ideas for the creation of a new rurality. At the same time academic discourses were linked to wider discussions of the "cultural turn" in geography and other disciplines.

A meeting of those engaged in *village research* held in 1992 established a new tradition of annual gatherings backed up by networking among the researchers and others more interested in rural development. A year later, in 1993, an important new national forum for publications in this field was set up under the title of *Maaseudun uusi aika* (literally in English: The new era of rurality), which adequately sums up the expectations accompanying it: the development of a new rurality stemming from mixed and innovative sources of livelihood and entrepreneurship. This networking and possession of a common journal symbolized the creation of an identity for those engaged in rural research, and a corresponding organization was founded in 1999.

The second Academy of Finland programme of basic research, *Economic Adaptation in Rural Areas (1994–1997)*, was also focused on the challenges of the new rurality, being concerned with Finland's economic adaptation to the European Union (especially in agriculture).

The focus in most studies at that time was on

applied and development-oriented research, and money was channelled into this via both national and EU programmes, partly for the use of young researchers recruited from a number of universities and research institutes.

It was decided at the beginning of the new millennium to create a number of posts of limited duration for professors of rural studies within a variety of disciplines, and this was followed in 2002 by the inauguration of a national multidisciplinary programme of teaching in rural studies arranged jointly by several universities. At present there are 9 professors working within this multidisciplinary academic field, and a Rural Studies network of ten universities exists which offers its students academic teaching in rural studies, grants interdisciplinary master's degrees in this field and contributes to the development of rural research. (www.ruralstudies.fi)

The study modules of the Rural Studies network are representative of the broad extent of this subject as taught in Finland: 1) change and development in rural areas, 2) research and development skills, 3) rural policies, 4) rural cultures, 5) environmental issues in rural areas, and 6) entrepreneurship in rural areas. The students (currently 160 altogether) have very different backgrounds, representing about 50 separate disciplines, although most of them are human geographers and social scientists.

Finnish rural studies has its deep roots in the multidisciplinary field of social sciences. Modern rural research found its identity about five decades ago and the formation of an identity for rural researchers become more concrete in the 1990s. Today rural research is established in many universities. It is a network-based field of study with academic posts producing teaching for master's and doctoral degrees. The main future challenges are related to basic research funding, greater internationalization and new methodological tools for synergic knowledge-based management of rural studies.

NOTE

1 This research closely connected with agricultural studies generated a Nobel Prize for chemistry, awarded in 1945 to Artturi Ilmari Virtanen (1895–1973) for his research and inventions in agricultural and nutritional chemistry, especially his animal fodder preservation method.

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