Marginal Sociologies or Sociologies of the Marginal? The Importance of Rural Sociology and the Sociology of Food in the Philippines

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The sociology of agriculture, one of the first courses I took in the rural sociology graduate program, required us to go “back to the basics”. As someone who took sociology as a bachelor’s degree, revisiting the sociological imagination and the different sociological perspectives through Macionis and Plummer’s (2008) comprehensive work on sociology in a global context was nostalgic. However, after reading Lobao’s (2007) exposition on the origin, development, and prospects of rural sociology and Beardsworth and Teil’s (1997) invitation to the sociological study of food and eating, I realised how my training in undergraduate sociology missed some important topics concerning a vast proportion of the Philippine society. In undergraduate courses, I noticed a greater focus on urban issues and phenomena such as cultural diversity, poverty, homelessness, informality, crime, rise of transactional relations and decline of community, gentrification, rapid urbanisation, and the like. However, sociology needs to go beyond cities and urban settlements.

It is widely believed that the majority of Filipinos live in rural areas. However, data from the Philippine Statistics Authority (2019) show an interesting demographic shift. In 2010, 45.3% of the population lived in urban areas, while 54.7% lived in rural areas. In 2015, 51.2% of the population was found in urban areas, while the remaining 48.8% resided in rural areas (ibid.). The shift is dramatic since it happened only within a five-year period. Despite the increasing number of urban dwellers, studying rural communities should not be neglected. In fact, the demographic shift calls for a greater focus on what happens in rural areas that drives migration to urban areas. As a city-born trained sociologist, I am familiar with land use conversion and urbanisation. However, the focus of my previous inquiry has largely been on the urban centres that replaced agricultural systems. Lobao (2007) claims

that rural sociology, being a “sociology of the geographic periphery”, is a wake-up call. Rural sociology, as a distinct field from general sociology, places more emphasis on the interaction of social structures and spaces (much like geography). It calls for a focus on rural communities, local traditions and cultures; rural inequalities and poverty; agriculture and forestry-based livelihoods; environment and natural resources management; agricultural modernisation and innovation; food systems; rural-urban migration patterns and local-global relations.

By accepting that rural sociology can address many problems in a predominantly agricultural society such as the Philippines, I realise that a seemingly mundane topic such as food and eating can shed light on changes in social and economic structures and patterns in rural communities. Borrowing from the feminist movement, we might say that the invitation to the sociology of food and eating emphasises how the “personal is political”. These fields of study reveal to us how eating, an everyday practice and necessity, is political. If one cannot cook at home, purchasing food is still possible thanks to convenience stores that operate round the clock and to various food establishments that offer delivery options. However, this convenience is enjoyed mostly in well-off urban areas. An important part of “defamiliarising the familiar”, as Zygmunt Bauman, in Macionis and Plummer (2008), challenged sociologists to undertake, is stepping back from positions of privilege where certain things are rendered invisible. It involves immersing oneself in social systems and processes where inequalities are more apparent. For instance, when natural hazards such as drought and pest infestation cripple the production of crops, middle-class urban dwellers might experience little or no impact on their everyday lives. Life will go on as they purchase less perishable processed food from supermarkets and fast-food chains. However, natural hazards have the power to wipe out all the income of a poor farmer and make them more vulnerable to poverty and food insecurity. They may discourage their children from pursuing farming because it is not a stable or high-paying occupation, especially in the Philippines. Being aware of these realities made me realise that there is nothing mundane in society. An activity as routine as food production and consumption is reflective of bigger social structures and continuous social processes both at a macro and micro level. These matters deserve the attention of sociology and cannot be left solely to other fields such as anthropology, psychology, and human ecology.

Brown, Ebora, and Decena (2018) pointed to low productivity as one of the biggest challenges in the agricultural sector. The decline in land intended for agriculture, coupled with inadequate infrastructure and support services for farming, has largely contributed to low agricultural productivity. Right now, this is a heavy burden carried mostly by rural societies in the Philippines. The symptoms of the poor state of agriculture can somehow be

felt in urban centres, especially in times of food shortages and spikes in the prices of agricultural products. Low productivity in the agricultural sector is compounded by political and cultural structures. The domination of elite families and oligarchs in the Philippines, rooted in the country's colonial history, contributes to the decades-long crisis in Philippine agriculture. Cacique democracy (Anderson, 1988) is a political system where local elites or caciques dominate formal democratic institutions. The padrino (patronage) system is a value system where patrons use their power to secure favours for clients, who in turn are obligated to return the favour. Both are structures that continue to operate in rural Philippines. From this information, I am convinced that a comprehensive national land use plan to protect remaining agricultural lands is not a priority for our lawmakers, especially those from elite landed families with vested family and business interests.

Rural sociology and the sociology of food must be taken out of the margins. Being trained in these fields made me realise that it is time for sociology to take a more active involvement in addressing agricultural issues in the country. Issues in Philippine agriculture persist and require the attention of various fields of specialisation. I believe that general sociology must keep up with other social science fields which have already grappled with rural problems and rural-urban connections. Interdisciplinary collaboration is highly required for applied research, especially policy research on rural societies and food systems. Devoting too much time to abstract theorising and neglecting the impacts of agricultural crises on social institutions and individuals is a disservice to the public. Borrowing concepts and analytical tools from other disciplines, as well as working closely with these disciplines, might produce more effective solutions. I also hope that the so-called "hard sciences" will become less dismissive of sociology's contribution to the study of food systems. The goal is for rural sociology and sociology of food to move beyond being "marginal sociologies" and to foreground the experiences of marginalised sectors that continue to bear the consequences of stunted rural and agricultural development.

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