



Editorial

Towards pagan agroecology

Science has a strongly religious character, it has often been observed. Scientists are typically priest-like, serious and full of methodological rectitude about the rituals of procedure for gaining access to starry truth. The laity rise and come to us to receive wafers of wisdom and sips of insight. The objective knowledge incarnate we dispense is everywhere the same: same wafer, same wine. Indeed, universality is science's whole point. But what kind of religion is this? It is a faith that exalts monologue over dialogue, oneness over manyness, the general over the locally specific. It is a faith that offers transcendence, not immanence—a feeling of control over space and time and of release from the biases of the local and momentary. It is a faith that contends that a single truth exists and is the core of life. It is a faith whose moral power comes from its claim that it has escaped politics thereby.

Not all religion, however, exalts in such unity, offers such a mood, or claims such a generalized authority. There have long been—indeed, longer been—faiths aplenty that discovered the divine in the here and now of the particular, an immanent and dialogic supernature that is us and not other, admitting and embracing the political character of the gods and of truth. Zeus and Hera are always squabbling, the ancient Greeks taught, favouring some people and places over others as a result. But the heroes were those who argued with this heavenly injustice, and sometimes even stole the gods' fire. The goddess Coventina lives in her well by Hadrian's Wall, the Britons taught the Romans, and can only be found there. But her specificity meant the pious and hopeful could approach her directly with a plea for health for themselves or their loved ones, drinking her waters and leaving her a gift in return—a divine politics of exchange. Many people still believe such things, or would dearly like to.

So too in science, and increasingly—especially in agroecological research, the topic of this special section of *Journal of Rural Studies*. Although it is admittedly provocative to describe it in these terms, a *pagan science of the particular* is on the rise, engaging difference and welcoming the old discovery that a more relevant truth is to be found in and through the subjectivities of politics, and not in a false magic that masks them.¹

This pagan science goes by many names—action research, participatory action research, community-based research, and citizen science, among others—but participatory research is perhaps the most common. Agroecological research has seen some of the most

assiduous and creative efforts. We are tempted to indulge in a bit of self-flattery and call agroecological research one of the leaders of this new scholarship that is also so old. But it is hard to measure such a claim, and it would be unnecessarily annoying to participatory researchers in other domains to make it. Far better to present and debate some of the participatory explorations by agroecological research, so others can learn from them, improve them, and adapt them to their own particular circumstances. Such is the goal of this special section.

We have three readings in mind for the title of the special section, “Subjecting the Objective.” First and foremost is *making objectivity something we come to see as always integrated with subjectivity, and vice versa*. All the papers in one way or another strive for this integration. Campbell and Rosin describe how researchers in a 15-year study of organic agriculture in New Zealand found that their research agenda and research categories shifted through engagement with farmers, highlighting the influence of subjectivities in the objectives of research, and also found that the objectives and their results changed the subjects themselves. In a study of a CSA project in North East England, Charles explore the use of participatory methods to deliberately conduct “value laden” research with an explicit emancipatory agenda, rather than the hidden politics of a claim of pure objectivity. Relatedly, Cuéllar Padilla and Calle Collado describe a research project in Andalusia that brought subjectivities together with an explicit social change agenda: engaging farmers and researchers to find ways to help small- and medium-sized organic farms overcome barriers to certification. Lyon et al. recounts another effort to engage the insights of researchers and farmers, in this case researchers and graziers in Wisconsin, so as to yield research that fits what university scientists can offer, given their institutional constraints, and that fits what graziers need to farm, given their locally specific needs. Petit et al. recounts their effort to build an appreciation for subjectivity among agricultural biodiversity researchers in the Northern Alps by involving them in a group story-telling process to narrate what actually went on in the research, as opposed to what they might write up in a supposedly objective scientific publication. Finally, Stassart et al. explores the use of reflexive film-making by part-time livestock farmers in Belgium, so that research may be better informed by the subjective conditions of their situation.

Second, we intend our title to refer to *making the subject an objective of our sciences*—that is, developing methodologies that enable science to understand the subjectivities with which it is inevitably, but by no means lamentably, integrated. Stassart et al. brings this analytic move to the fore with their reflexive film-

¹ We adopt our use of the term pagan not in the sense of hedonism or being irreligious but in the sense of accepting a multiple and local sense of the divine, as opposed to the universal monotheism of the Abrahamic religions.

making and its emphasis on listening for the hesitations and disagreements among Belgium part-time livestock farmers, and their collective shaping of subjectivity through film narrative. Petit et al. further this line of analysis by studying the subjectivity of researchers themselves, inviting them to tell the story of their research process together. Lyon et al. explain their approach to identifying the tensions that researchers and participants face, given their different social locations, the better to bring their needs and their insights together in the development of “agroecological tools” and “agroecological principles” that enable working with social and biophysical variation, rather than seeking to eliminate it. Cuéllar Padilla and Calle Collado argue that “science with people” depends upon problems and solutions that rise up from below, and show how agroecology can achieve this through participatory action research. Charles alerts us to the ethical complexities that can emerge when all of those involved in the research process are, as they should be, equally regarded as subjects with their own particular concerns and involvements. Campbell and Rosin contend that making the subjective a positive emphasis of research, and not a methodological flaw, is part of what they term the “ontological turn” of what Lowe (2010) called “enactive” rural sociology.

And third, we coined our title to reflect our concern for *making the objective a subject of our sciences*—that is, for interrogating objectivity itself and subjecting it to scrutiny as a part of the research process. For Campbell and Rosin, such a concern is part and parcel of the “ontological turn” in which we accept that our research practice does not merely describe reality but as well brings it into being. Charles also contends that there is nothing to fear here; indeed, she suggests that interrogating the object and objectivity of research gives us an opportunity to open research up to the “ethics of care.” Cuéllar Padilla’s and Calle Collado’s science is one that has as its starting point recognizing the power dynamics involved in what Foucault (1980: p. 133) called “the production of truth.” Lyon et al. highlight how objective science typically styles its value as that of providing context-free, universal results, resulting in a sharp disconnect with an agroecology that must local and

specific to be practical and productive. Petit et al. offer their storytelling experiment with researchers as a way to invite the researchers themselves to inspect the narratives in which they collectively construct and interrogate their “archipelagos of relationships and meaning.” And Stassart et al. give us a method, through film, for allowing the “minority practices” of farmers to come into view, giving us a more plural understanding of the constraints and possibilities of agroecological practice.

Such are the welcome interventions of an agroecological pagan science of the particular that welcomes difference and a dialogical conception of nature that is us and not other, admitting and embracing its politics as a potentially productive source of insight. But pagan agroecology, as we envision it, is not anti-transcendence, a grotesque mirror of the church of conventional science in which the views are reversed and the hierarchies are flipped. Its goal is not swapping the logical for the mythological. Rather, the goal of pagan agroecology is swapping the logical for the multi-logical, speaking from and to the fertile diversity of our circumstances. The result, we hope, will be to open our objectivities and subjectivities up to the creative delight of the unexpected, and the sustaining power of an ever fuller engagement with social, agricultural, and ecological life.

References

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