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HOW ARE ECOLOGICAL APPROACHES JUSTIFIED IN EU AGRICULTURAL POLICY? A TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF CAP AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT DISCOURSES ACROSS SIX EU MEMBER STATES

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Abstract: This paper explores what types of policy discourses are used by national policy makers to communicate the rationales of ecological farming practices in policy documents of the Rural Development Programmes (RDP) of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). A hybrid form of discourse analysis and content analysis is used to analyze both CAP and rural development discourses between six EU member states (MS) and across three different CAP periods. Findings indicate that over the whole period 2000-2020 ecological approaches are related with the multifunctionality discourse with two dominant sub-discourses: i) nature conservation in all considered EU MS (except in Sweden); ii) agri-ruralism (including Sweden). The neomercantilist discourse becomes more and more prominent over time, appearing in third position in the two last CAP periods of 2007-2013 and 2014-2020. Agroecology and organic farming are among the most frequently mentioned types of farming system cluster.

Introduction: Ecological approaches to farming are today promoted by the CAP as a potential for delivering public goods to society. When it comes to fostering these approaches, differences in policy measures across EU MS may be seen as originating from different societal attitudes and views of externalities coming from agriculture. A mean for understanding such differences is viewing them as originating from different discourses (Nilsen and Ellingsen 2015). Discourses can be considered as supporting an entrenched policy paradigm, constituted of ideas “about what can and should be done in a sphere of policy” (Hall 1993). Analysing the policy discourse about ecological approaches of different EU MS can therefore help us to understand the perspective of different societies on the nature of positive externalities of these approaches and their associated policy justifications. This in turn contributes to explain the origins of potential regional differences in uptake of ecological approaches.

Material and methods: We explore CAP and rural development (RD) discourses (see Image 1) across national policy documents of RDPs of Sweden, France, Poland, Bavaria in Germany, Hungary and Romania over three CAP periods by

using a hybrid approach of discourse analysis (DA) and content analysis (CA). More precisely, documents are collected for the 2000-2006 CAP period for France, Bavaria, Sweden and Hungary and Poland who joined the EU in 2004; for the 2007-2013 CAP period in the same EU MS as well as Romania who joined in 2007; and finally for the 2014-2020 CAP period in these six member states. Dominant discourses are explored in relation to how EU members justify the use of ecological farming practices which are categorized in five broad farming system clusters: agroecology, organic farming, integrated farming, low-input farming and conservation agriculture (Rega et al. 2018). National contextual information potentially influencing the type of discourses reflected in policy documents is kept into consideration and complemented with a policy instrument analysis by looking at the distribution of budget across priorities in each country. While CA is a textual analysis but focuses on the text itself, “not of its relation to its context, to the intentions of the producer of the text, or of the reaction of the intended audience”, DA, which is also a textual analysis, is interested in the meaning of language in texts and how their meanings are translated into social reality (Hardy et al. 2004). Epistemological and ontological considerations therefore distinguish CA and DA: DA would be associated to constructivism, a socially constructed reality accessible through interpretative methods, while CA is associated to positivism, an independent reality accessible through the use of scientific methods. Nevertheless, Hardy et al. (2004) highlight that DA and CA can be used as complementary methods and suggest how the two can be combined. This present study can be considered as an interpretative type of CA in the sense that types of discourses, which are in themselves subjective concepts, directed the categories to look for in the data. The adopted approach for the textual analysis is therefore deductive as types of discourses and farming systems that were identified from previous literature, directed the design of the coding scheme. Furthermore, the analysis takes into account national contextual information.

Results: Agroecology is the most frequently mentioned type of farming system cluster across all policy documents although organic farming appears in second place.

The representation of organic farming, when associated to a policy discourse, becomes more and more prominent over time in the case of Hungary, Poland, Romania and Bavaria while it becomes less important in France. Organic farming is the most represented in Sweden for the two first CAP periods and often the least represented in France.

While there is a recurrent association of agroecology to nature conservation and agri-ruralism as main sub-discourses across countries and across CAP periods, there is not such clear pattern for organic farming. Considering the whole sample, organic farming is associated to diverse sub-discourses of multifunctionality such as nature conservation, agri-ruralist, utilitarian and community sustainability but also to the discourse of neomercantilism. Agroecology is also sometimes justified within a neomercantilist discourse, for instance in Poland and Bavaria and especially in Sweden during the last CAP period. Both agroecology and organic farming are however almost never advocated along liberal rationales as the neo-liberalist discourse is nearly absent.

In the case of Sweden, references to organic farming are continuously present and are mostly described within neomercantilist and multifunctional perspectives. For instance, neomercantilist justifications are expressed by the Swedish government when stressing the importance of increasing organic food supply through investments and government intervention by fostering the “consumption of certified organic products in the public sector” (Regeringskansliet 2008:55). Organic agriculture is also described as an opportunity for diversification of the Swedish rural economy, which echoes one of the utilitarian rationales. Environmental benefits (e.g. water quality) and improved animal welfare are highlighted as well. In other EU member states, while the justification of measures supporting organic agriculture are related to environment protection (nature conservation, agri-ruralism), economic (utilitarian) and societal (community sustainability) challenges in Poland, Romania and Hungary, Bavaria mostly emphasizes environmental justifications. Especially, organic

farming is seen as a way to protect biodiversity in Bavaria, which is characteristic of the nature conservation discourse. This rationale is also put forward in Poland in addition to the capacity to reduce greenhouse emissions. Interestingly, the same argument that organic farming is a source of employment and income for farmers, as it requires more labor, is mentioned in Romania, Poland and Hungary. Romania and Hungary also emphasize the benefit to generate new economic activities through organic farming, for instance through rural tourism. These two last results could be explained by the important societal and economic challenges that rural areas are facing in new EU member states.

Discussion: This study contributes to the literature in several ways. First, it is a first attempt to study how CAP and RD discourses integrate ecological approaches by using a broad typology of ecological farming systems. Second, this study is a rare attempt to contrast discourses in a set of different EU MS. Third, this study shows how CA and DA can be used to trace societal perceptions of public good components in ecological approaches.

Compared to previous literature which found some liberal rationales associated to organic farming at the CAP level (Erjavec & Erjavec, 2009), the near absence of neoliberalism in our study shows that, when focusing on the discourse of EU MS embedded in their RDPs, ecological approaches are justified to serve national interests instead of being liberalized and promoted on exterior markets.

From a policy perspective, findings are relevant for a discussion about how policy discourse may influence farmers' perspectives and behaviors to adopt ecological approaches.

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Figure 1: CAP and RD discourses

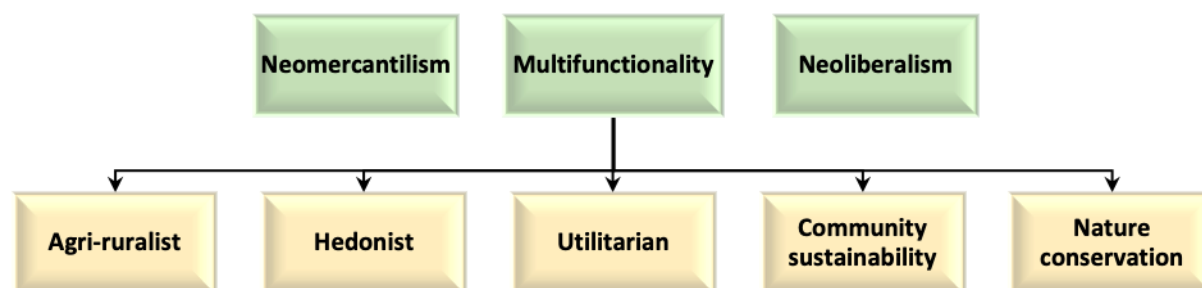


Table 1

	Farming clusters	Farming systems	Discourse						
			Neomercantilism	Neoliberalism	Multifunctionality				
					Agri-ruralist	Utilitarian	Hedonist	Community sustainability	Nature conservation
Systems incorporating differing degrees of ecological practices	Agroecology	Agroecology							
		Biodiversity-based farming systems							
		Diversified farming systems							
		Eco-agriculture							
		Ecological arable farming system							
		Permaculture							
		Natural system agriculture							
	Organic farming systems	Biodynamic							
		Biological input-based farming systems							
		Organic agriculture							
		Organic farming systems							
	Integrated farming systems	Integrated arable farming systems							
		Integrated crop-livestock systems							
		Integrated crop-range-livestock systems							
		Integrated farming system							
	Low input/ extensive systems	Integrated perennial crop systems							
		Extensive grass-based systems							
		Extensive systems							
		Low external input systems							
		Low-input systems							
		Low-intensity systems							
		Reduced input systems							
	Conservation agriculture	Silvopastoralism							
		Conservation agriculture							
		Conservative agriculture							
		Minimum tillage systems							
		No tillage systems							
		Reduced tillage systems							
		Strategic tillage systems							

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