7. Kritische bijdragen

Farming in cultural change*

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My attention was first attracted to the work of Dr. Benvenuti by the splendid paper which he gave in 1960 before the E.S.R.S. Congress at Oslo. His book again shows this rare capacity for suggesting new departures in sociological research. Benvenuti introduces his subject by asking himself the question why among farmers who start from the same material conditions some are successful and some not? Through a brilliant and highly condensed survey of the relevant literature he arrives at a number of questions the answers to which he hopes will throw some light on the problem.

The questions are: is there in the rural areas an increasing, but unevenly distributed influence of a modern pattern of culture? Is there a relation-ship between this pattern and the efficiency with which the farmer manages his farm? Does the pattern influences in general the social activities of the group in question and is the influence of the cultural pattern essential?

The object of the study is to establish that the influence of our modern type culture is recognisable in the efficiency of farm management and to furnish material for other studies in this direction. It is doubtful, even if Benvenuti should succeed in answering these questions, that he will have arrived at a solution to the problem he poses.

If he shows, that the successful farmer, as estimated by modern standards, is modern in every respect we still do not know why some farmers adopted a new way of life and others did not.

In the second chapter he returns to the subject matter of the Oslo paper; the distinction between Urban and Rural ways of life. Here he adopts a more psycho-logical, one might even say a more philosophical approach. He sees the difference as not one of residence, but as a difference between two essentially different types of man; the traditional type and the modern.

According to Benvenuti, modern man is characterized by a relatively high degree of mental dynamism, by progressiveness as an attitude, by a broader geographical and social frame of reference, by a high capacity to adapt himself to new situations, by the ability to think discursively in terms of abstractions and classes and by the system-atic control of his impulses. It is not quite clear whether he means that the average man or only the successful man in a modern industrial society displays these charac-

* Dr. R. Benvenuti, Farming in cultural change. Van Gorcum en Comp., Assen, 1962.
Bibliotheca Sociologiae ruralis, I, 416 p.
teristics. If he means the former, this would seem to be against the general opinion that the average man in industrial society is losing just these characteristics. If he means the latter, surely these are the characteristics of successful men in any age, and do not imply a new type of man.

We agree that rural dwellers in modern times have a broader geographical and social frame of reference and that they acquire a more vivid consciousness of themselves and their life situation, through the increased possibilities to make comparisons with life situations which up to now were out of material and psychological reach. But this poses the question as to why some make use of the possibilities and others do not.

Benvenuti suggests, that the answer lies in the degree to which certain people have been exposed to modern influences. In other words that the presence of the progressive farmer is directly proportionate to the degree to which modern means of communication allow urban cultural traits to penetrate the rural community. From this we should expect that the less progressive farmers are cut off from these means of communication, and because of the importance of this concept for his theory that Benvenuti would devote a considerable part of his study to it.

But in fact he deals with communication in a few pages at the end of his book and although he presents some useful hypotheses he arrives at no really adequate conclusions.

Again Benvenuti points out that there is no struggle between urban and rural ways of living, nor is there a completely passive acceptance of urban cultural traits, there is only for each independent member of society the possibility to organise his own life according to one certain value system rather than another, which seems to conflict with his statement that culture is totalitarian. One may ask why and on what basis do certain members of society choose one value system rather than another. Russell posited a meta-language as a solution for the paradox of classes. Benvenuti comes dangerously near to positing a meta-standard as a solution for the paradox of social change.

A Cartesian farmer would no doubt have an inborn standard, but this is a conclusion which Benvenuti is most anxious to avoid.

He concludes the chapter with the following hypotheses. First, there is a cultural pattern of a typically progressive farmer, which develops from cultural contact with the Western town and influences total behaviour, including farm management.

Second, the measure to which the rural population is influenced, depends on the degree of contact with the outside world.

The first is not an adequate hypothesis, because even if it is shown that in a certain community, farmers who are modern in one respect, are also modern in others, we still do not know what is the functional relationship between the cultural pattern and progress, and whether the progressive farmer is a new type of man.

The second hypothesis should throw some light on the problem with which Benvenuti opened his study and for this reason, is the most important.

The chapter on methodology is perhaps the most interesting. Unfortunately we cannot do it justice in a short review. Benvenuti attempts to find a way of measuring the degree to which the individual farmer feels he is an integral part of the dynamism
of the modern social structure, by constructing a yardstick that would measure the individuals’ social awareness.

He believes that such a yardstick could be built by putting a number of relevant questions to the respondent and then seeing whether or not he has a definite opinion about them. The measure is the capacity to give a definite answer to ten questions referring to normal problems with which a Dutch farmer has to deal nowadays.

A score is obtained by assigning one point for every well defined answer to each of the ten questions. The score is assumed to express the degree of the individuals social functioning in the modern world. The discriminatory value of the tool is checked by cross tabulating the score obtained by each respondent against his own socio-economic status and by having a group of twenty five key persons classify and describe the farmers of the two extreme score groups. The method is an interesting one and certainly ought to be developed in further studies. By means of it, Benvenuti has come close to making the qualitative elements of culture amenable to scientific research. But I think the yardstick as he constructed it is not a valid one. It is true, that among the farmers selected for questioning those who scored high also had a high socio-economic status, but it is not at all clear that the twenty five key persons made such a strong distinction between the high and low scorers as Benvenuti suggests.

I have used the words “selected farmers” deliberately, because had the questions been put to another traditionally minded group within the community they would have had a high score, thus disproving the discriminatory value of the tool. Because the yardstick is not a valid one the matching of the individuals life, family environment etc. with the score proves only that among this selected group of farmers there is a relationship between progressiveness and modern culture. What the relationship is we do not discover.

I think that the inadequacy of Benvenuti’s study is not one of method, but of theory. If we look at one rather surprising result; that the attendance at religious service increases with the increasing of the score, it is clear that this cannot be explained simply on the basis of a “new type of man” theory. In fact I think this study shows that when a group seeks new ends they will make existing institutions serve those ends. In a rapidly changing society religion, education etc. are instruments facilitating change, in a static society they become instruments for preventing change.

Benvenuti’s theory prevents him from making use of the rich material which his method brings to light. One feels that a more structural approach would have brought us nearer to solving the crucial problem, and at the same time have been a fairer test of his method.

One can say that he has proved his hypothesis, but these hypotheses cannot throw light on the problem.

He has also succeeded in his aim to provide material for further research. The chapter on method suggests many new departures and the concluding chapter is rich in sociological insights. It is a book which rural sociologists and those interested in rural welfare ought to read.

Benvenuti ends by saying: „What is really important for members of society in our era is not so much what they have been yesterday, but what they will be to-morrow“. It is a flaw in his philosophy that he does not see that of necessity both are important.