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The evolving role of agricultural economists in policy-related research in the rural economy

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Introduction

Recent advances in spatial economics and endogenous growth theory have brought to the fore a number of issues relating to regional development and town-and-country planning in Europe. At the same time, damage done to the environment by human activities is giving cause for concern, while the growing numbers of city dwellers want to be able to enjoy well conserved countryside. Consequently the changes occurring in rural areas have become a major challenge for many countries and regions, either because such areas make up a large part of their territory or because they contain scarce resources that should not be wasted.

Agricultural economists should be at the forefront of the scientific community in understanding what is currently at issue in the countryside, analysing the economic phenomena involved and helping to define the right policies. Is this what they are doing? My answer to this would be circumspect. For one thing, it seems to me that comparatively few agricultural economists today are particularly interested in the economy of rural areas, whereas geographers and sociologists have long been active in this domain. But then again, agricultural economists seem to me to be very well placed to provide a whole new perspective on countryside issues. The reason why our profession is so little involved in analysing the rural economy is most certainly because agriculture has long dominated many rural areas of Europe, leading agricultural economists to specialise in the study of agricultural production and of factors related to markets and trade, and more generally to take a sector-based view. But it is also because it is difficult to work space into economic analysis, outside of research into the urban economy (de Janvry, Sadoulet and Murgai, 2002). That said, recent decades have seen substantial changes in the economic and social organisation of rural areas, with farmers and farming ceasing to be at the centre of country life. Agriculture is no longer the be-all and end-all of country life as it once was and it is becoming urgent to analyse the rural economy in its true dimensions and complexity.

This paper discusses what agricultural economists might contribute to this huge undertaking both by way of a positive approach and in helping to introduce efficient rural development policies. This will involve analysing directions for research in an area that is still underexplored by agricultural economists, so that they can make the best use of their present skills or develop new ones, among other things through working with specialists in other areas of the social sciences. Obviously an option like this entails risks in that it may mean moving away from mainstream economics and measuring up to other disciplines. This paper will refer above all to work done in France and subsidiarily elsewhere in Europe. This rather continental

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approach will probably be a little out of step with the concerns of UK scholars, which should make discussion of it that much more lively!

The paper is divided into three parts. The first of these examines the theoretical and conceptual issues facing those agricultural economists interested in the rural economy. The second covers avenues of enquiry now open, and the third contains some thoughts on the direction that future research might take.

1. Assertions and assumptions about the rural economy and rural development

Unlike agriculture, the countryside is not an easy idea to grasp. Accordingly, any analysis of the rural economy runs up against a problem of delimiting the object of enquiry. While each of us intuitively understands what is or is not rural, closer investigation of what the concept involves soon shows that it varies widely with objective geographical and economic factors as well as with historical and political traditions specific to a country or region. A recent survey by the CREDOC in France on 'the French and the countryside' showed just how widely ideas on this matter differed. When asked 'Do you think you live in an urban area or a rural area?', 48 per cent of respondents who answered they thought they lived in a rural area were actually classified by the national statistics office (INSEE) as living in an urban pole or a periurban district (CREDOC, 2001). People's impressions of the areas they live in may therefore be very different from the statisticians' classifications, for all their objectivity. Any definition of rural areas therefore runs the risk of being an oversimplification. But it is a risk that has to be taken.

The economic, demographic and residential changes now taking place show how transient the boundaries of what used to be the countryside are. Broad belts where farming still goes on now lie within the outer boundary of urban areas and seem destined to evolve pretty much in step with the city at the centre of the periphery they form. This obviously does not hold for the less densely populated areas well away from cities and whose future course seems to be less dependent upon strictly urban change. Under the existing zoning scheme in France, such regions make up the 'predominantly rural space' which is home to 23 per cent of the population and covers 69 per cent of the territory (Bessy-Pietri *et al.*, 2000). Of course, areas which are geographically rural or whose inhabitants, as we saw above, feel they live in the countryside are not confined to these 'autonomous' rural areas, but these rural areas do have characteristics that warrant special attention from analysts and politicians alike and it is to these areas that I shall be referring.

The countryside is defined here, then, on a geographical basis with no prior assumptions about the diversity of the economic structures or of the sociological or political realities to be found there. This choice may be challenged because it situates rural areas by opposition to urban areas (Saraceno, 1995) and so strips them of a part of their supposed identity. But is there really any other choice in today's Europe, where everything seems to be moving towards urban agglomeration, albeit with some national or regional colouring? It is a point that is certainly worth talking about and which may differ in scope from one discipline to another. Rural sociologists and political scientists are concerned by the social changes taking place in the countryside with the decline in the number and social and political weight of farmers, the intermixing of population and the reconstruction of social ties and networks of influence. In a context like this, does the concept of 'rurality', which postulates that there are mechanisms that give rural areas their own structure, have any explanatory value (Marsden *et*

al., 1993) and can it serve as a vector for a European policy (Richardson, 2000)? It is noteworthy that rural geographers, who are increasingly interested in political behaviour and social changes, are undecided which approach to choose and seem to be drawn more towards getting a grasp of the big picture and developing an analysis that emphasises the connections between cities and the countryside (Bailly *et al.*, 2001).

Where do agricultural economists working on the rural economy stand on this? Their position is not the only one, but generally they recognise the role played by outside economic, social and political forces in the economic restructuring of the countryside. Without going into detail about these forces, their presentation now being classical (Blanc, 1997), it should just be recalled that international negotiations on world trade or on climate change have or will have repercussions for two functions of the countryside, the production of agricultural goods and foodstuffs, and the protection of the environment. In addition, the countryside's involvement in displacements of the workforce and in trade in goods and capital assets is actually a partly involuntary contribution to the economic polarisation and concentration of population that is going on in Europe. Lastly, changing lifestyles brought about by society's greater wealth – more leisure time, increased commuting and geographical spread of housing around urban agglomerations – give added importance to the residential function of rural areas.

As I see it, then, the economic analysis of rural areas must be conducted within a very broad framework, although that does not mean that the countryside is a residual space whose future is to be dictated by that of the major cities alone. Nor does it mean that a top-down approach is the only one possible. Quite the contrary, it seems particularly fruitful to conduct an analysis based on thorough knowledge of the economic, social and political mechanisms of local development and on an understanding of the more general trends affecting rural areas. The idea of local economy suggested by Saraceno (1994) emphasises the diversity of relations between different types of predominantly rural or predominantly urban spaces. This tool frees us from the single-track thinking whereby cities hold sway over the countryside. The EU Leader initiative may be seen as an empirical test of this tool in that it is designed to bring together the vital forces of a local community and to develop the dynamism of its networks in producing fresh initiatives.

This last remark brings us to the second objective in this section, which relates to the role agricultural economists can play in rural development. Beyond the work on theory or method that is the core business of our profession, it is clear that decision support is also part of our stock-in-trade. Consequently, for many of us, the more academic side of our work stands alongside an interest in economic policy analysis and specifically an interest in issues of rural development.

Can we try to specify what rural development is and what it represents for an economist?¹ Historically, in many countries, rural development has been mistaken for the modernisation of agriculture, the restructuring of farms and the improvement of farmers' incomes. This is still the prevailing view in the CAP Rural Development Regulation except for its Article 33 (Lowe *et al.*, 2002). And yet, the idea of rural development relates to much wider concerns.² For some commentators, agriculture is still central to the process of rural development because of the forward effects it provides (Midmore, 2003). For others, associating rural development

¹ This section restates a number of the conclusions I drew from the AEEA 2001 Ancona seminar (Léon, 2002).

² See Arzeni *et al.*, 2002 for a recent discussion of this concept.

and agricultural development is a non-starter, given that farming and other countryside activities are heading in separate directions (Thomson, 2001). In France, rural development is viewed as a component of integrated local development and of regional development in the bill that is shortly to be tabled by the 'Ministry for Agriculture, Food, Fisheries and Rural Affairs' (Datar, 2003).

To my mind, rural development must relate to the core concept it contains, the concept of development. I therefore take the view that rural development must be tied in to development economics, that is, to the human dimension of economics. Accordingly, rural development cannot just be about analysing the economic growth of rural areas or the spatial distribution of activities located there, even if the theories and methods employed are of tremendous interest in understanding the mechanisms of development of the countryside.

Rural development is an economic and social project that must achieve the objectives pursued both by the people who live in the countryside and by society as a whole. If this is taken as a starting point, the objectives of a rural development policy should, I feel, relate to efficiency, equity and sustainability, which can be achieved by changing the behaviour of those involved. Although efficiency has a precise meaning for economists and need not be defined here, it may be worth noting that the concept of territorial equity introduced here is about the requirement for everyone to have equal access to a number of facilities and services wherever they may live. Finally, sustainability is a key factor in any development project and is a chief concern of the actors of rural areas. The change in behaviour mentioned refers to the need to think of rural development as a shared project between the people who live in the countryside and the people who make the decisions about territorial planning and its economic and social cohesion. This change in behaviour must be reflected by a more collective approach to development questions within rural communities and by an understanding of the assets those communities possess in the form of human and social capital (Ray, 2000).

This lengthy list of points to consider when dealing with territorial development reflects the complexity of the actual situation. This is a real challenge for agricultural economists, and one which is made that much greater by the diversity of situations found in rural areas whether in terms of their economic fabric, their endowment in resources or their geographical location. Research on rural development should take a specific approach that makes allowance for the sheer complexity of the issues. There is little doubt in my mind that different disciplines must come together to tackle a project like this, because only interaction by economists, geographers, sociologists and specialists in other areas of science can overcome the limits each discipline comes up against. And so it is particularly important to have a clearer idea of what we, as agricultural economists, can contribute to this debate so that we can envisage working with people in other disciplines.

2. The spectrum of issues brought before agricultural economists by broadening their focus to the rural economy as a whole

Although a number of studies by agricultural economists can be used to provide a better understanding of how the rural economy operates, it has already been seen that our profession has done rather little work in this specific domain. Thomson is highly critical of this and even speaks of underdevelopment of this line of enquiry in the UK (2001).³ It is a point of view

³ For a continental observer this opinion appears a little excessive given the number of UK universities and research centres that have been working on this for many years and the standard of their output.

that might be echoed for France. And the same might be said of other European countries with the notable exception of Italy, where agricultural economists have long included the territorial dimension in their work, probably because non-agricultural activities have long been spread around regions where farming was important and because of the significance of small and medium-sized cities in the country's make-up (Saraceno, 1994).

But regardless of how important it may once have been, the historical argument no longer holds, given the current changes which are making rural areas more important again. This observation, which calls for us to think about future lines of investigation, should not cause us to forget that a number of valuable studies have already opened up promising avenues of research into the rural economy. What might be thought remarkable is that these studies have been built on foundations specific to our discipline. This shows how the theoretical premises of economic analysis and the methods already in use can provide an understanding of certain aspects of the rural economy. Here are three examples by way of illustration.

The first approach involves some measure of reflection on agricultural policy, which broadens out to questions about connections between the environment and agriculture and then leads on to a detailed analysis of the rural economy and the prospects for it. This is now a common opening gambit. It is a classical approach in agricultural economics looking into the consequences of agricultural practices for the environment where the real costs of production are not internalised. The pressure of farming techniques on natural resources grows as those techniques progress and is often compounded by signals from the agricultural policy. At this stage, the perspective broadens from one of production economics to resource-based economics, encompassing all of the costs engendered by farming in a single function (van Huylenbroeck and Whitby, 1999). While farming may have a negative impact on the environment, it is recognised too that appropriate farming practices which are more respectful of resources like water and landscape do maintain or produce public goods that are increasingly sought after. This is the direction taken by current thinking on multifunctional agriculture and on its contribution to the protection of rural amenities (Dupraz et al., 2000; OECD, 2001). Extension of such thinking in terms of agricultural policy can be seen in the measures adopted by the Regulation on rural development destined to implement the second pillar of the CAP.

The second stage in this line of enquiry is less common in that it seeks to identify from the foregoing analyses what the consequences will be for rural development. This approach goes beyond an examination of relations between farming and resources in terms of production, to consider how agriculture fits into the countryside. The premises are unchanged but agriculture is now seen instead as an activity that complements other activities or that is in competition with them for the use of rural resources (Mahé *et al.*, 2000). Each activity is classified according to its contribution to rural development in view of the factors determining its location, such as the presence of localised inputs, internal or sector-based scale economies, or proximity externalities. Activities can then be arranged by type depending on their potential contribution to the rural economy. Proponents of the approach claim that farming, the remnants of the quarrying and mining sector, primary product processing and the leisure sector provide a solid foundation for a rural development policy and one on that can be built on by the service activities they induce and the resulting residential demand. A cumulative mechanism may develop because of the density of the economic base in relation to local resources and to the impetus effects engendered by the base and so bring about the development or decline of the area in question. Although the initial endowment in resources is

an essential factor, collective action and economic policy do sometimes make a difference (Mahé and Ortalo-Magné, 2001).

My second example relates to a quite different approach derived from the spatial economy and which may or may not be combined with economic geography. Here, it is no longer their knowledge of the mechanisms of agricultural production that underpins the contributions made by agricultural economists, but their interest in areas that are often overlooked by spatial economists, who usually concentrate on the urban economy. In addition, agricultural economists can use their knowledge of the rural environment, of local labour markets and of the workings of traditional activities in rural areas (Errington and Courtney, 2000). These comparative advantages apart, they are in direct competition with spatial economists.

The value of these analyses lies in the way they handle rural areas with the tools of spatial economics and identify the network of agglomeration and dispersion forces affecting those areas. This is the first stage in understanding the dynamics of the countryside. It sheds light on human commuting and relocation patterns and the movements of goods, services and capital that affect the countryside. A number of studies have been made of the relations between cities and the countryside and in particular the flows of labour between urban poles and their peripheral rural areas. The objective is to identify mechanisms to explain the reversal in the demographic trend that occurred in rural areas close to cities in the final decades of the 20th century and what that means for the economic future of these areas. Although models of location of activities in urban and periurban areas may be suitable for rural areas lying close to big urban centres undergoing a demographic boom, a great deal of work remains to be done to understand what the more remote, autonomous rural areas can expect from this historical demographic change which involves them little if at all (Gaigné, 2001). Schmitt (1999) argues that employment is the key variable of economic dynamism in autonomous rural areas and drives demographic change, while this relation of cause-and-effect is reversed in the case of rural areas within the ambit of cities. My own experience of investigating economic polarisation in an autonomous rural region of Brittany provides empirical evidence that employment is indeed a driving factor in that area (Daucé and Léon, 2002).

Other authors like Kilkenny, modelling the economic dynamics of rural areas, ponder how they can effectively address questions on rural development in economic terms (Kilkenny, 1998). Economic models inspired by Krugman's work, although they have their limitations when applied to the rural economy, open up interesting avenues of enquiry into the role of corrective economic policies. There is for example the European policy for rural development which supports small cities to offset the effects of the trend towards urban agglomeration or, in opposition, CAP support for farmers which forces up land prices in the countryside and so may discourage the setting-up of non-farming activities. These two examples show what a special case rural areas are and argue for the construction of explanatory models that have to be more than just 'reconverted' urban models.

Finally, it seems to me that agricultural economists are in a position to make a major contribution to the evaluation of economic policies for rural development. This is an increasingly important field of activity at European, national, regional and local levels. Such policies are generally targeted at specific territories, which again leads agricultural economists to abandon sector-based approaches and to venture into the analysis of complex relations among the actors, activities and functions of rural areas. On this ground, which has been marked out by many disciplines, we are well placed to conduct an *economic* evaluation of policy effects. I emphasise the term *economic* so as to specify the content of our input as

distinct from that of other disciplines also engaged in ex ante and ex post evaluations of rural development policies. The theoretical and methodological apparatus at our disposal allows us to make ex ante judgements of the relevance and suitability of these policies and to determine ex post, to some extent, in what ways and to what extent they have affected the actors and territories concerned.

Our involvement in the design of policies by the European Union, by central government or local authorities is essential for a proper appreciation of the challenges that such policies entail for society. The same holds for our involvement in evaluations commissioned by the same authorities, if only to compare our viewpoint with that of the actors in these policies and to assess our contribution against that of our colleagues in other disciplines. However, the scope of this involvement may prove too restrictive, being boxed in by the objectives set by the institutions commissioning these evaluations, as Thomson (2001) points out. When evaluating the effects of rural development policy, agricultural economists should exploit their comparative advantages in economic analysis and provide a judgement of the impact of the policy that goes beyond a simple assessment of the policy's internal efficiency and effectiveness.

To pass judgement on the relevance of this type of policy, which is reflected by transfers in favour of rural areas, economists possess a theoretical framework on the relevance of a corrective policy designed to make good market failures. Location theorists often take agglomeration to be the spatial dimension of efficiency, meaning that a territorial development policy such as the rural development one, used as an alternative to the market, would be inefficient a priori. This assumption goes to the heart of current discussion on the relevance of regional policies, particularly of European regional policy (Martin, 1998; Braunerhjelm *et al.*, 2000). The debate is still ongoing. If allowance is made for imperfect competition because of space, it cannot be maintained that the agglomeration of activities is a social optimum (Ottaviano *et al.*, 2000). The same type of analyses are being conducted on European rural development policy but need to be taken further if they are to provide a basis for showing that the policy is economically relevant (Gaigné, 2001).

Analysis of the impact of such policies is still found wanting in terms of theory and the models for quantifying the impact of public support for rural development are still to be constructed, even if some interesting attempts are currently being made (Charlot and Gaigné, 2001). Although less ambitious, attempts to evaluate the effects now yield interesting evidence about the structure variables conditioning economic performances of regions where the policy is operative. One big unsolved question is how to measure the actual impact of the policy under study. Because there is no way of knowing how rural areas receiving support would have performed without the policy, two methods are employed. One consists in comparing the performances of regions where the policy has been introduced with the trends recorded before its implementation. The other compares the performances of regions receiving support with comparable but unsupported regions. The latter method involves allowing for selection bias related to the choice of supported areas, which is a prior condition for building more elaborate models. This approach has been applied by Schmitt *et al.* (2003).

This section has covered some highly promising aspects of the involvement of agricultural economists in rural economics and rural development but it has also brought out the complexity of the issues involved. This implies that more and more varied approaches should be adopted. The final section, then, presents a number of questions worth exploring, some lying on the boundaries of our discipline.

3. Future contributions from agricultural economists: a disciplinary versus a multidisciplinary research option?

Although there is no denying that agricultural economists contribute to a renewal of the approach to questions about the rural economy and rural development, the few examples chosen suggest that there are many conceptual and methodological difficulties to be overcome. There seem to be two obvious ways of setting about this. We need both to look more closely at the concepts specific to economics and, at the same time, to engage in discussion with other social scientists working in this domain. In other words, we have to strengthen the anchor points of our own discipline while accepting that our scientific position is open to debate. Let me illustrate this with two central features of rural economics and rural development: territory and actors. Clearly there is a tie-in with the research of geographers and rural sociologists, who have similar concerns to ours.

Territory cannot be easily introduced into economic reasoning because of the need to find some way of allowing for the loss of efficiency it engenders in allocating resources. However, the programme of work for an economist specialising in rural economy involves analysing the interaction between the economy and space, and this is a matter that has to be addressed. I have already gone over what spatial economics and economic geography can contribute to this. The big issue is probably the restructuring of the countryside, which is carried out in counterpoint to polarisation around major cities. While economists observe and analyse this through patterns of human movements and flows of goods and services (Cavailhès *et al.*, 1994; Royer, 2001), it is a question that has been debated among rural sociologists and geographers in the UK and France for some years now (Bodiguel and Lowe, 1989; Marsden *et al.*, 1993; Hoggart and Paniagua, 2001). Does the countryside change only through the influence of economic forces and movements of population or does this transformation involve a change in social structures and relations between individuals? This is a familiar question for geographers, historians, sociologists, and legal and political scholars, and is also of concern to economists who will find food for thought in the explanations proposed by other social scientists confronted with similar questions although they come to them by different routes. For economists, the view point may be the significance and role of collective goods produced in the countryside and consumed by its residents or visitors. The countryside contains a wealth of public goods such as rivers, landscapes, paths, natural and cultural amenities. Changes in production processes and particularly in farming processes and in rural ways of life lead to a reduced supply of these goods despite increasing demand for them, often from people who have no part in producing them. These goods may even be deteriorated by intensive farming practices. Can such goods be included in the agricultural production function and how is multifunctionality to be dealt with?

This typically economic objective of modelling the production function of an activity producing goods of different sorts may also lead us to investigate competition between different land uses and to think about the relative importance of the functions of production, residence and conservation of natural resources that the countryside provides (Daucé and Léon, 2002; Perrier-Cornet, 2002). Can control of the land and of rural amenities, which is usually exercised by farmers and the traditional actors in the countryside, be challenged by newcomers in the name of development of the residential function? Economists, legal scholars, sociologists and geographers challenge their rights of ownership and their use of certain public goods as well as their political and social status (Soulard, 1999). Thus, the reserved or sometimes hostile attitude of some farmers to the incentives for environmentally-

friendly practices may have social or political as well as economic causes. Likewise, economists also study the behaviour of those actors who challenge the rights and status of farmers by evaluating their willingness to pay for public goods which they wish to consume in the countryside (Hoggart and Paniagua, 2001).

Territory and actors are still closely tied when it comes to rural development policies. In economic terms, such policies are designed to alter the distribution of people and of activities supplied by the market. As economic polarisation is held to be detrimental to the countryside, policy proposes to reduce the inequalities engendered by concentrating the most productive activities and the most skilled jobs in just a few areas and so promote the introduction of a socially preferable equilibrium. However, there are no clear reference points for defining this type of geographical equilibrium. A number of questions are raised (Gérard-Varet and Mougeot, 2001). In terms of efficiency, endogenous growth models show that growth can occur in parallel to concentration, suggesting that territorial policies are of limited value (Jayet *et al.*, 1996). However, work is still continuing on defining the criteria of efficiency in a complex spatial economy. Spatial equity, which is one of the main arguments in support of the rural development policy, also raises a number of problems because it cannot be unambiguously defined. Gérard-Varet and Mougeot report that it is far from self-evident to transpose vertical concepts of equity to territories. Such 'horizontal' equity does not automatically promote fairness among individuals within the relevant territories, even working with the equal opportunities principle suggested by Rawls. This raises the matter of what the target of the rural development policy is to be. Should the policy be aimed at territories or at actors?⁴ This type of policy also posits that agents are comparatively immobile. If they can move around, how can a relevant geographical criterion be found? It then becomes essential to analyse factors that reduce mobility. This relates to the economic costs of relocation as well as its social aspects in terms of the severing of family and social ties that moving house entails. Sociologists must allow for these factors if we are to achieve any understanding of certain labour markets, in particular rural ones, and the failure of certain policies based only on the differences in wage levels between regions.

It can be seen, then, that human and social factors are essential considerations if we are to go beyond the bounds of a strictly economic analysis in dealing with the rural economy. Here is one last example to show this. Economists generally agree that one of the keys to rural development lies in enhancing the value of resources specific to the countryside and many studies have been designed to identify these resources and their distinctive characters in terms of economics. The first notable character, and probably the most important one for endogenous development, is the connection with the territory, which ensures that the resource in question will stay where it is. It has been seen that rural areas have resources of this type, particularly natural resources. Rural areas may also enhance the value of their specific human and cultural resources. Here would be the place to speak of the assets that rural communities can take in hand to promote their development. Ray (2000) referred to the European Leader programme as a 'laboratory for rural development'. To my mind, this sociologist's viewpoint identifies exactly what everyone concerned with rural economy is looking to promote: the endogenous forces whose synergy can sustain development projects. If sociologists, political scientists and geographers are eager to discover what alchemy is at work in this laboratory,

⁴ Actors may be chosen as beneficiaries of the policy to change the distribution of income within the territory. Dluhosch (2000) points out the difficulty with this approach which assumes there is some norm for income distribution and that different distributions can be compared objectively.

economists cannot be indifferent to it either. I feel that they hold there the ultimate reason as to how it is that, under comparable economic circumstances, some regions win and others lose.⁵

Sotte (2002) considers that successful rural development derives from close integration of the natural, artificial, human and social capital endowments of the regions in question. Whereas agricultural economists commonly include the first three of these forms of capital in their analyses and models, this is perhaps less true of social capital, based as it is on the presence of institutions, of interpersonal relations and of networks, which have only come in for economic scrutiny relatively recently. Admittedly, social capital is a notion with no hard and fast definition as yet and is still a matter of controversy even among sociologists (Lévesque and White, 1999; Jóhannesson et al., 2003). Economists are working to make it into an operational concept by considering that the intensity of relations within a group produces positive externalities that can be used to further the group's collective objectives (Kostov and Lingard, 2002). Where there is a connection between the organisation of people and the territory, such social capital becomes non transportable and forms an organisational asset of the region (Jayet, 1996).

Conclusion

To end this paper in a slightly provocative way I am tempted to say that 'the rural economy is too serious a business to be left to the economists alone'. My aim in saying this is, of course, to stir up debate on the topic. I hope that these few examples have shown what agricultural economists are contributing to the debate about the future of the countryside. This contribution is far from negligible, but it is a pity that so few members of the profession have taken up the challenge. The countryside has a considerable role to play in balancing out increasingly urbanised European societies. This role obviously depends on the demands that society makes of the populations living in the countryside, but also on how these populations act or react so as to promote their own interests and wishes. It is exciting work unravelling the tangle of interactions among the various actors.

Even from the standpoint of economists with their premises, their theories and their methods, the human factor has to be taken into account if we are to understand how rural areas operate. I have tried to identify potential common ground for specialists from various disciplines and the benefits that economists can gain from exploiting the output of rural sociologists and geographers. The demonstration is incomplete and I feel I have only been scraping at the surface. The important chapter on methods has been largely overlooked because of lack of space, while analysis of the methods of geographers, for example, shows just how closely allied our concerns are in this respect (Bailly *et al.*, 2001). For want of sufficient knowledge about the other social sciences analysing the rural economy, I have not really gone into a comparison of our respective theoretical premises. Much, then, remains to be done in exploring what could be a multidisciplinary approach to this field of study, but I do feel that this is the way forward.

⁵ To use the expression of Benko and Lipietz (1992).

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