

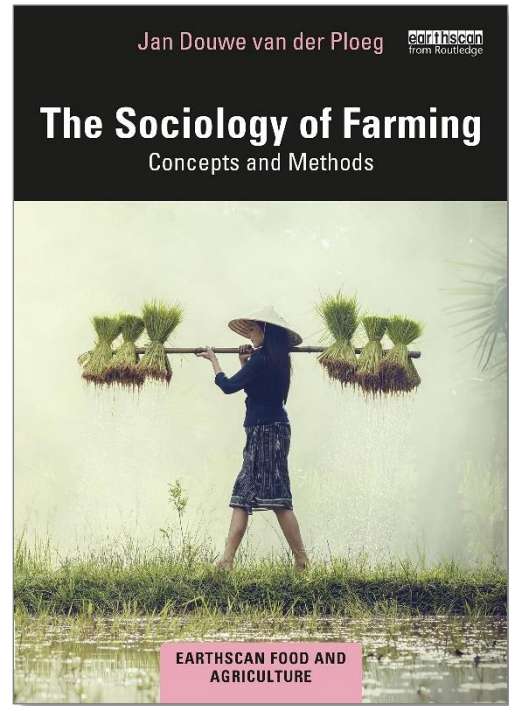
## Farming for sociologists: A new key text for rural sociologists

*Book review by*

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Review of *The Sociology of Farming: Concepts and Methods* (First edition), by Jan Douwe van der Ploeg. (2022). Published by Routledge. Available as hardcover, paperback, and eBook; 326 pages. Publisher’s website: <https://www.routledge.com/The-Sociology-of-Farming-Concepts-and-Methods/Ploeg/p/book/9781032321875>



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“**W**hat is farming for? What are the objectives? How should it relate to nature and wider society?” (p. 121) asks Jan Douwe van der Ploeg in his new book, *The Sociology of Farming: Concepts and Methods*. As an accomplished interdisciplinary scholar making significant contributions to the fields of rural sociology, agroecology, and peasant studies, van der Ploeg offers emerging and seasoned scholars alike an overview of the wide array

of challenges and opportunities in contemporary agrifood systems research.

Examples of applied, interdisciplinary, and creative methodological approaches make for an accessible, structured reading experience that thoughtfully guides the reader through rich and substantial content. Chapter by chapter, readers are routinely asked to orient themselves to questions of power, particularly when presented with what is “right” in agriculture. Through discussions of rural development, market dominance, and peasant struggles, the text provides a critical foundation for future study directions.

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The concept of co-production—an “ongoing encounter, interaction and mutual transformation of man and living nature” (p. 2)—guides van der Ploeg’s examination of the social structures that shape farming practices and the ways in which farmers are tied to their land through connections to communities, economies, policies, and cultures. This co-production framework motivates the sociology of farming as a study “urgently needed [for] changes in agricultural sciences” (p. 45) and serves as a “vehicle for change” (p. 288) so desperately needed to resist the forces of capital. Van der Ploeg asserts that production at the intersection of farmers and nature necessitates the inclusion of farmers’ social realities and epistemologies. Drawing from this stance, the co-production model positions farmers’ knowledge as legitimate (p. 31)—a perspective that gives emerging rural sociologists clear conceptual guidelines to support applied and community-engaged scholarship.

However, the book is not without limitations. Notably missing (especially from an American lens), is a meaningful discussion of race and Indigeneity, particularly in the context of land access. And while van der Ploeg considers the role of women in farming and the long-standing history of devaluing women’s contributions to agriculture (pp. 106–108; 260), gender is presented narrowly (e.g., farming women are referred to as “farmers’ women” and situated in the “background” of the agricultural process [p. 10]).

These absences are important when the crux of this text challenges mainstream ideas about what the study of agriculture is and how it ought to be done. Of course, van der Ploeg cannot, and does not, claim to be able to include all topics of interest or concern within the field. Rather, his aim is to provide a sample of theoretical and methodological tools for readers to pursue those topics themselves. And yet, for an ambitious book like this to leave normative claims untouched seems lacking, especially in the current critical context.

For example, van der Ploeg acknowledges the unique position of agricultural workers as a “third class” who operate in a “non-capitalist segment of the capitalist society” (p. 24), but he does not significantly delve into the tension this creates as

farmers *do* generally exist in a capitalist society. He goes on to assume the family farm as the “best” model for co-production because “the notion of profit becomes irrelevant” (p. 25). This runs contrary to a central “duty” of the sociology of farming that, according to van der Ploeg, is to reckon with the fact that since agriculture is dynamic across time and space, we must explore the many possibilities and perspectives of what “optimal” farming might be (pp. 152–153).

To point to family farms as the most ideal farming model without discussion of race and gender undervalues the labor of women and ignores questions about land acquisition and holdings. Relations of capital are not absent on family farms, as van der Ploeg suggests (p. 25). The family farm works as a third class because labor is not “paid.” Yet capital is acquired, at least in some part or potentially, through racialized and gendered forms of oppression. While the family farm does not have wage workers, realized ownership and labor demands are not shared equally. Further, access to family farmed land is not neutral. While family farms throughout history have been the outcome of many emancipatory struggles, they have also been the impetus for dispossession and oppression. The sociology of agriculture ought to interrogate if the family farm remains—or ever has been—the best mode for a balanced system of co-production.

A thorough consideration of power in agriculture must include an ongoing engagement with environmental justice, gender, and race scholarship. While this literature is not sufficiently included, van der Ploeg does give readers tools to raise these challenges themselves through a plethora of methods and conceptual text boxes that offer ideas, ask questions, and point to exciting areas of growth in agrifood systems research. This in itself is an accomplishment as meaningful as addressing the various potential challenges to the text’s normative assumptions. *The Sociology of Farming* spells out the importance of a sociological perspective of farming and champions the call for methodological creativity. It is as inspiring as it is critical—an important read for every rural sociologist, agroecologist, and agrifood systems scholar. 