

Realizing Rural Utopias: Cooperative Professionalization and Agricultural Change

Theme

Professionalization of cooperative groups and agricultural change

- Professionalization = Organisational restructuring for the advancement of a groups impact or efficiency
- Cooperative agricultural Groups = Groups which ideologically favour democratic decision making and experiment with agricultural practices in order to enhance their food supply

Issues addressed

Agricultural sustainability, innovation, intracooperative processes, linkages of national policy development and cooperatives

Main premises

Non-deterministic actors, dominance of a functional differentiated economic system

Thesis

Professionalization processes and their effect differ in former and current cooperative networks, due to altered technological possibilities, meanings of cooperative actions and societal preconditions.

Research questions

In what ways do professionalization processes in the current Swiss alternative cooperative network differ from the historical professionalization processes in a traditional Swiss cooperative network?

What are the major differences of the societies in which historical and current cooperative movements are embedded in?

Methodic approach

Qualitative cooperative case study

Cases

Swiss agricultural producer cooperative network in the late 19th/ early 20th century (Case I); The 21th century 'alternative' food and agriculture network in german speaking Switzerland (case II)

Case I: Historical Swiss agricultural cooperative network (selection in process)

Case II: Current Swiss alternative food and agriculture network

Project-phase 1: Outline

- Selection of similar networks of agricultural cooperative engagements in two different time periods
- Outline of the selected networks, available data, group typology

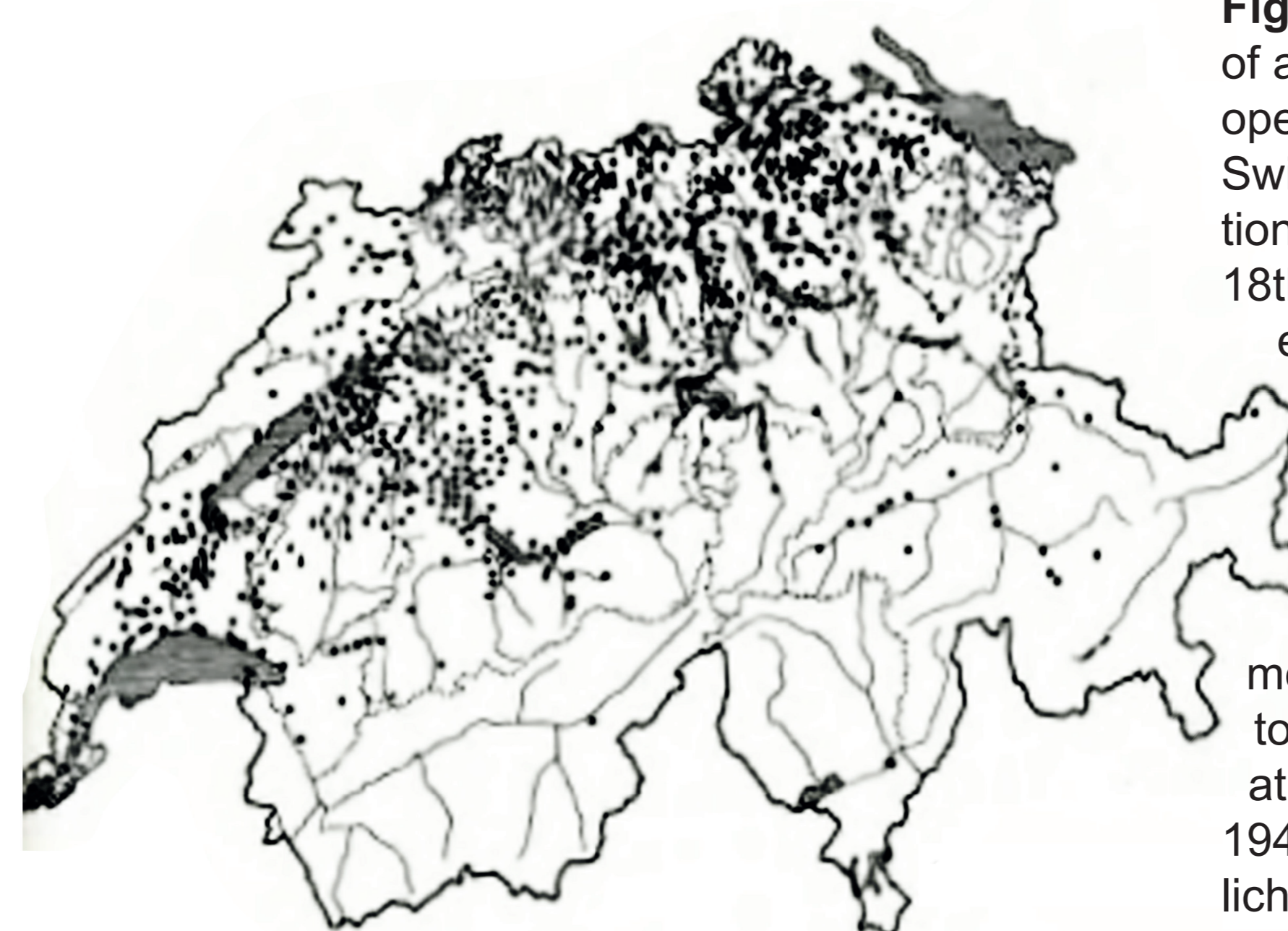
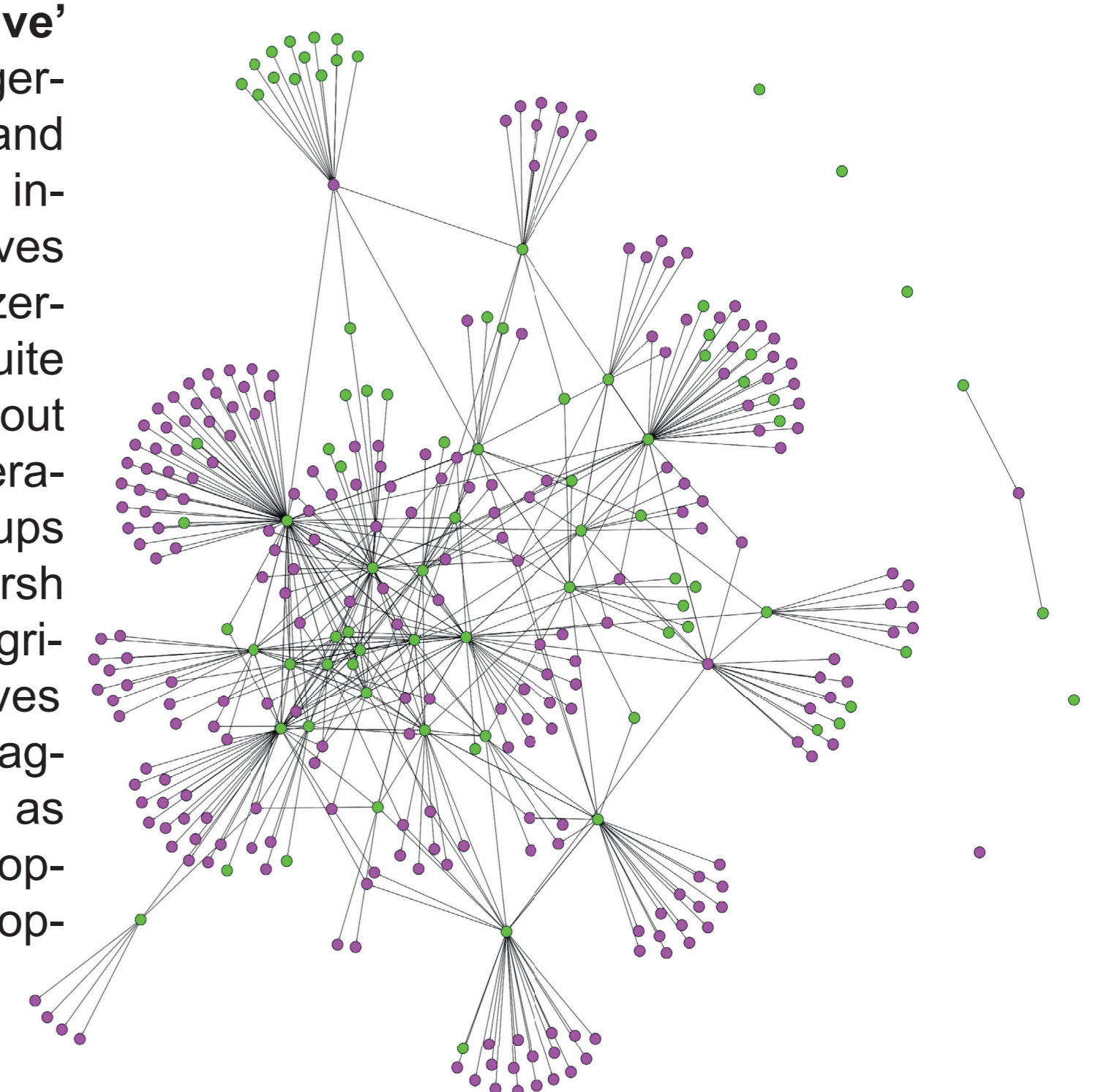


Fig.1: Historical network of agricultural producer cooperatives associated to Swiss cooperative federations (1940). From the late 18th century on the cooperative networks in Switzerland have much advanced. In 1940 over 1.000 cooperatives (displayed in dots) with over 110.000 members are connected to 10 cooperative federations. (Franz Schmidt 1944: "Die landwirtschaftliche Genossenschaftsbewegung der Schweiz". Buchdruckerei V.S.K. Basel.)

Fig.2: Current 'alternative' agriculture network in german-speaking Switzerland (Yifan Hu Plot based on information from cooperatives homepages, 2016). In Switzerland in the past 40 years a quite cohesive network of about 100 new agricultural cooperatives has emerged. The groups (plotted in green) share a harsh critique of conventional agriculture. The new cooperatives act at different levels of the agricultural value chain (e.g. as CSA-farms, consumer-cooperatives). Links to non-cooperative organisations (e.g. family farms) are common (displayed in purple).



-phase 2: Focus

- Collection of best available data for reconstructing professionalization processes: Interviews, participatory observation, document analysis
- Coding and triangulation of interview transcripts, field notes and documents



Fig.3: Historical cooperative professionalization. The office of the 'Swiss federation of consumer-cooperatives' (Verband Schweizerischer Konsumvereine V.S.K.) in 1906. The presentation of technical finesse is typical for early publications of the Swiss cooperative federations, e.g. high accuracy in the handling of paperwork. (Hans Müller 1906: "Der Verband Schweizerischer Konsumvereine". Verlag des V.S.K. Basel.)

Fig.4: Current cooperative professionalization. Detail from the homepage of the Swiss agricultural cooperative Eulenhof (2017). Current cooperatives' homepages portray the quality of their products rather than the quantity they produce. Online representations often are elaborate. Note the widgets, showing the cooperative's use of various current communication techniques. (Eulenhof 2017: <http://eulenhof-moehlin.ch/wp/>)



-phase 3: Comparison

Analysis of differences regarding the cooperatives

- use of technology
- meanings given to professionalization
- societal context

Abstract

Cooperatives in history have meaningfully influenced the development of the food and agriculture sector. They did so as opponents but also as partners of global food corporations which have recently come under much criticism for non-sustainable production practices. The cooperation of corporate and cooperative businesses is regularly explained by scientists and activists through co-optation, meaning former idealistic cooperatives transformed themselves into pseudo-cooperatives under the influence of capitalism, they got taken over by corporations, or their ideas were alienated and integrated into corporate market principles. I wonder if the development of cooperatives should rather be explained through professionalization. Cooperative actors often want or are forced to restructure cooperatives in order to be more efficient or effective in

the production of marketable goods. They do so not only due to capitalist greed, but due to various personal and political reasons. Recently founded cooperative networks as well attempt to professionalize. The comparison of the historic and current professionalization processes in agricultural cooperative networks might enable anticipation of upcoming challenges for agricultural cooperatives and support the development of more sustainable agricultural production systems. Two cases of professionalization in the Swiss agricultural cooperative networks of two different time periods are therefore studied. Controlling for similarities in the selected cases shall enable discussion of differences in professionalization processes and their effects in light of the networks' specific historical and spatial context.