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The Marginalisation of Farmers in Polish Sociology and Social Research: Diagnosis and Interpretations

Abstract

Aim of the work: This article attempts to define the place of farmers in Polish sociological discourse on social structure.

Research method: The study was based on a critical content analysis of articles published between 2015 and 2025 in selected academic journals (*Przegląd Socjologiczny*, *Kultura i Społeczeństwo*, *Studia Socjologiczne*, *Polish Sociological Review*, *Wiś i Rolnictwo*).

Key results: The results indicate that farmers frequently appear in these publications as a statistical-demographic category or a homogeneous collectivity, and less often as a differentiated group involved in processes of modernisation, professionalisation, and market dependency. The dominant approaches focus on urban experiences and middle-class issues, which limits the visibility of rural inhabitants in analyses of social structure.

Main conclusions: The article identifies the prevailing research themes and demonstrates that the marginalisation of farmers in academic discourse stems not from an absence of change within this group, but from dominant research approaches that overlook the specificity of rural social processes. As a consequence, this leads to a narrowed account of Poland's social structure and reproduces assumptions about the urban character of modernity.

Keywords: farmers, social structure, rural sociology, mainstream sociological research.

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1. Introduction

Dominant discourses on social structure in Poland constitute a key point of reference for analysing the mechanisms of stratification and social mobility. The narratives that run through public debate and sociological research draw on structural transformations: the legacy of the specific modernisation pursued under the communist system, the transformation of the 1990s, and its social and economic consequences. They shape how social hierarchy and social advancement are perceived, indicate the dominant schemas of thinking about social classes and groups, and reveal the tensions and conflicts that arise from their change.

These discourses animate the debate on the class-based and socio-occupational differentiation of Polish society, revealing both entrenched stratification mechanisms and new forms of hierarchisation. Today, the narrative on social structure appears to be dominated by issues connected with the middle class: its identity, aspirations, and the threats associated with processes of precarisation (De Angelis, 2010; Domański, 2012; Lepczyński, 2021; Świrek, 2023). This is a differentiated group that has taken on the role of forerunner of change, and for which globalisation, creating new jobs and expanding employment prospects in many areas (communication, advertising, services, management, culture, tourism, international projects, and others), has become not merely a symbol of progress but an indispensable reality (Świrek, 2023). It is precisely this group's characteristics that orient much of today's class and social analysis. This trend can be explained by the spread of reflection on globalisation, the development of the neoliberal state, post-socialism, or the effects of the financial crisis.

Meanwhile, other (significant) groups, workers and farmers, remain on the margins of sociologists' interest. This is certainly due to a number of factors, such as the shifts associated with new, dominant research paradigms. As far as farmers are concerned, processes of modernisation and transformations in social structure (which I discuss in more detail below) have led to their marginalisation as a socio-occupational category that does not fit the dominant models describing the dynamics of contemporary society. As a consequence, even though the countryside and rural areas continue to attract research interest, the category of the farmer as a social subject remains largely under-represented in sociological reflection.

The aim of this study is to reconstruct and analyse the place of the farmer in sociological discourse through a critical review of the literature devoted to this issue. The article is also a reflection on how the evolution of theoretical approaches to this social category reflects broader changes in sociology as a discipline, as well as changes in the socio-economic reality of the rural and agricultural world.

2. On the farmer: Preliminary remarks

In common understanding, a farmer is a person living in a rural area who engages in growing crops and/or raising livestock. Depending on the scale of production, this activity may serve both the farmer's own needs and the market. The main source of income is work in agriculture. Within Poland's socio-economic, legal, and administrative system, a number of different definitions coexist and apply to different areas of regulation (Marks-Bielska, 2021; Sadowski, 2021). Membership of the category of farmers can be defined not only through the lens of actually running an agricultural holding, but also through institutional criteria, such as membership of the Agricultural Social Insurance Fund (ASIF; Polish: KRUS) or the use of support mechanisms under the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). At the same time, this is an internally highly differentiated group: it includes both small farmers producing for their own needs and the owners of large-area holdings.¹

In Poland, a farm can function as an efficient enterprise generating high revenues, but it can equally perform a social function, securing basic needs, income, insurance, and social identification, through the system of subsidies (Michalska, 2021). The farmer, as an owner of the means of production who at the same time chiefly exploits himself and his family, also slips through the social divisions of capitalism. In various theoretical approaches and empirical studies, the farmer is typically characterised with reference to: production relations, socio-cultural identity, structural change, marginalisation, and, more rarely, symbolic dominance (Wasilewski, 2011). Thus a 'farmer' is at once the owner of a small family holding and an agricultural producer deeply enmeshed in market mechanisms.²

Bearing in mind the complexity of the definitional issues and the diversity of theoretical approaches, I adopt the position that a farmer is someone who makes a living from agriculture (work on the family holding as the main source of income), which follows from the sociological definition of an occupation (Domański, 2012; Halamska, 2016a). This perspective is part of a broader process

¹ Gałęski (1963, pp. 49–50) listed the following 'social peculiarities of the farming profession': 1) the family character of the work (the specific unit that the family constitutes, together with its specific organisation of labour); 2) its connection to the scale of the means of production held (chiefly land); 3) the broad range of tasks that make up the farmer's work ('occupational many-sidedness, and at the same time occupational dilettantism'); 4) the autonomy that follows from satisfying one's own needs. 'In the farming profession these traits are interlinked, each entailing the next: the family character of the work, its broad scope, its autonomy, and its connection to ownership condition one another.'

² Even in research conducted in the 1980s, during the period in which new organisational structures of the movement bringing together people employed in agriculture were taking shape, drawing on historical patterns of identity (*Solidarność Chłopska* ['Peasant Solidarity']), owners of individual farms showed a clear tendency to identify with the categories of 'farmer' or 'agricultural producer', distancing themselves from the traditional term *chłop* ['peasant'] (Halamska, 1991).

of socio-economic transformation, in which agriculture is gradually losing its distinctiveness as a specific form of activity, and farmers increasingly function within the universal occupational categories characteristic of the modern economy. This is the 'normalisation of the farming profession' (Laferté, 2018),³ which can be understood as the full incorporation of farmers into the structures of the capitalist economy, into the socio-occupational system, and into a model of society dominated by market relations and the individualisation of occupational strategies (CBOS, 2014; 2019).

3. Methods and data

The basis of this study is a critical content analysis of academic publications devoted to the place of farmers in Polish sociological discourse. The method applied makes it possible to trace how this social category has been conceptualised in the academic literature and to identify the dominant theoretical and empirical perspectives of the last decade.

The research material consisted of articles published in leading Polish sociological journals. The choice of periodicals was deliberate and covered the following titles, each with an established position in Polish sociology: *Przegląd Socjologiczny*, *Kultura i Społeczeństwo*, *Studia Socjologiczne*, and *Polish Sociological Review*. These journals represent the mainstream of Polish sociological thought, have operated continuously for decades, and are indexed in international databases. Given the nature of the subject matter, *Wieś i Rolnictwo* [Village & Agriculture] – an interdisciplinary quarterly that serves as a forum for the exchange of academic thought on the transformation of rural areas and agriculture in Poland – was also included in the analysis. Although this journal extends beyond a strictly sociological framework, its importance for research on the countryside and agriculture is beyond question, and the texts it publishes often make a significant contribution to the debate on the social structure of the Polish countryside.⁴

³ Put more broadly, this 'normalisation' was closely bound up with the process of modernisation, which in Poland presupposed the shaping of a capitalist, modern society oriented towards Western patterns. A key role in this process was played by the middle class, which constituted the foundation of the socio-economic transformation. Achieving this 'normality' required the liberalisation of the market, the institutionalisation of private property and entrepreneurship, and the building of a civil society founded on human rights, freedom of speech, and freedom of association (Kalinowski, Wyduba, 2021; Sosnowska, 1997).

⁴ Among other Polish periodicals devoted to rural themes, *Wieś i Rolnictwo* is exceptional in terms of publishing continuity and its social, including sociological, profile: *Zeszyty Wiejskie* represents a different disciplinary character (anthropology, ethnography, rural history), while *Roczniki Socjologii Wsi* has only recently resumed activity after a many-year break. The selection of journals is therefore sufficient in relation to the available pool of periodicals meeting the criteria adopted.

The period of analysis covers the years 2015–2025, which makes it possible to capture the most recent tendencies in research on social structure. This is a period long enough to observe the evolution of academic discourse, while at the same time close enough to the present for the conclusions of the analysis to have direct relevance for understanding the current situation of farmers within the social structure.

The article search procedure proceeded as follows: the search engines available in the electronic archives of the selected journals were used, applying the keywords ‘social structure’ and ‘farmers’. The choice of these terms was deliberate: the first refers to a fundamental analytical category of sociology, the second to the specific socio-occupational category of interest. Both terms were applied jointly in a single query, which was a deliberate methodological assumption: the object of the analysis was not farmers as a category of rural sociology, but farmers within the discourse on social structure. The search was conducted separately in the electronic archives of each journal. The initial search yielded 58 articles containing the indicated terms in the title, abstract, keywords, or body text. All texts were then subjected to detailed analysis with respect to their actual subject matter and their cognitive value for achieving the research aim. On reading, 14 articles were excluded on grounds of thematic mismatch; this group comprised texts in which:

- issues relating to social structure were purely theoretical in character, with no reference to farmers;
- the subject matter concerned chiefly historical sources (e.g. an analysis of memoirs) with no clear bearing on contemporary sociological issues;
- or the texts were polemical or of a review character, bringing no new empirical or theoretical findings.

44 articles were qualified for further analysis. Within this set, in as many as 28 texts farmers were not the object of analysis at all: that is, the texts did not formulate their own claims about this group’s social position, identity, or place in the structure, but merely mentioned it as context or background for other issues.⁵ A significant proportion of the articles that formally meet the search criteria do not, in reality, offer an in-depth sociological analysis of farmers – this symptomatic marginalisation will be discussed in detail in the analytical section.

⁵ This group, mentioning farmers only contextually and not subjected to further, in-depth analysis, includes, among others, works on the middle class and lifestyles, stratification, capital and social reproduction, ideological divisions, and the transformation of rural areas: (Bielińska, 2024; Bogunia-Borowska, 2015; Donati, 2020; Flaszynska, 2021; Grabowska, Buler, 2019; Karwacki, Szlendak, Lepczyński, 2023; Kwiatkowska et al., 2016; Nawrocki, Bierwiazek, 2020; Radzińska, Pustułka, 2021; Stempień, 2017; Szewczak, 2020; Trembaczowski, 2018; Zarycki, 2018).

The final corpus of 16 articles directly analysing farmers as a social group reveals several dominant ways of conceptualising this category. The qualifying articles were subjected to a critical content analysis based on several dimensions. The analysis examined how the category of ‘farmer’ is defined and conceptualised: whether it is treated as an occupational, class-based, or cultural category. The dominant theoretical perspectives applied by the authors were identified. The position of farmers within the broader social structure was reconstructed: whether they are presented as a marginalised group, as part of the middle class, or perhaps as a category of uncertain status. Finally, the empirical and methodological contexts of the studies presented were analysed, which made it possible to assess the extent to which the theoretical conceptualisations are anchored in social reality.

4. Research findings

4.1. ‘The great invisibles’

Analysis of the collected research material reveals an ‘absence’: farmers, although formally present in Polish sociological discourse on social structure, remain marginalised as a category and analytically underspecified within it. In a substantial share of the texts analysed, farmers appear merely as a statistical-demographic category, stripped of any sociological characterisation. These articles concentrate on issues such as farm succession, the ageing of the farming population, or changes in the size of this group (Dudek, Wojewodzic, 2021), treating farmers chiefly in economic or demographic terms, without an in-depth analysis of their social position, identity, or the mechanisms of stratification. In this perspective, the farmer is above all an entrepreneur managing a holding according to market logic, while the socio-cultural traits of this category are relegated to the background or omitted altogether. Paradoxically, although the literature on farm management, the professionalisation of the farming occupation, and the pursuit of a status comparable to other occupational groups is relatively extensive (Kołoszycz, Wilczyński, 2025; Krzyworzeka, 2021), this is not translated into the inclusion of farmers in broader analyses of change in social structure.

At the same time, there is a noticeable tendency to treat farmers as a homogeneous collectivity, devoid of internal differentiation. Although some articles take up the question of farmers’ changing values and processes of professionalisation (Krzyworzeka, 2021; Michalska, 2021), they often simultaneously lack a precise distinction between the different categories of people connected with agriculture, from large-scale agricultural entrepreneurs to owners of small, subsistence-oriented holdings. This homogenisation of the category of ‘farmer’ produces a simplified

picture in which important status-based, cultural, and economic differences within the group are erased. Farmers thus function as a monolithic category, which stands in clear contradiction to the conclusions of research on the contemporary countryside, which repeatedly demonstrates the considerable social, economic, and cultural differentiation of rural areas (Halamska, 2015; 2016a; Kaleta, 2021; Nowak, Gorlach, 2015; Szafraniec, 2015).

In the texts analysed, farmers often appear as just one of many segments of the social structure, mentioned only in passing in the course of broader stratification analyses, without a detailed discussion of the specific nature of their situation. They are placed at the bottom of the social hierarchy, usually alongside unskilled workers, with reference to a low level of education, limited cultural capital, and a peripheral position within the economic structure. In sociological discourse they thus remain a static group, 'frozen' at a particular position in the social structure. This staticness is especially striking against the background of the intense economic and social transformations that Polish agriculture has undergone since 1989, and in view of the dynamic adaptive processes and differentiated modernisation trajectories described in the literature on the contemporary countryside. The disregard of these processes does not stem from their marginal significance, but from a narrowing of the field of analysis.

The literature on the subject reveals a striking consistency: in studies devoted to the Polish middle class, these two issues, rural areas and farmers, remain almost entirely invisible. In research on the middle class, both in studies of social structure (Cebula, 2019; Domański, 2017) and in analyses of lifestyles and consumption, an urban perspective consistently dominates, one focused on white-collar, professional, and entrepreneurial occupations ('white collars'). Farmers, even those with a relatively high economic status and level of education, remain outside this discourse. As a result, the middle class comes to be defined through location in the city, a type of work characteristic of the service sector, and a set of cultural practices deeply rooted in Western patterns of modernity. Such a construction of the concept, although often treated as neutral and objective, may in practice function as a mechanism of structural exclusion. This peculiar 'invisibility' of farmers in debates on the middle class is particularly puzzling in light of the international literature, which takes up, for example, the question of the 'embourgeoisement' of farmers and the change in their place within the class structures of contemporary societies.

The omission of farmers becomes especially problematic in the context of work on the contemporary countryside. Research by Halamska (2015; 2016a; 2016b), Szafraniec (2015), Nowak and Gorlach (2015), and Kaleta (2021) repeatedly demonstrates that rural areas are neither a reserve of tradition nor a monolithic socio-occupational structure. They are a space of dynamic transformation, differentiated

modernisation trajectories, and multidirectional adaptive strategies. And yet, in the literature on the middle class, almost no attempt appears to empirically capture a potential rural middle class (the exception being the publications by Halamska and Zwęglińska-Gałecka [2023; Zwęglińska-Gałecka, Halamska, 2024]). Farmers, even when they are the subject of separate studies, function as a distinct category (generally, when the analyses employ the EGP class-division index, which divides society into six classes [Domański, 2016; 2017; Domański et al., 2024]) that is not analytically linked to the middle class, even though many of their practices, aspirations, and ways of managing the holding as an enterprise (Kołoszycz, Wilczyński, 2025; Krzyworzeka, 2021) could provide the basis for such an analysis.

This conceptual invisibility suggests that the middle class in Polish sociology is not merely a descriptive tool, but also a normative construct that presupposes urbanness as a condition of social modernity. In this sense, the exclusion of farmers stems not from their supposed ‘modernisational immaturity’, but from a definition of the middle class mediated by Western urban patterns. In describing the middle class, and more broadly today’s social structure, Polish sociology attends to only ‘half’ of society, reproducing the urban stereotype of modernity and reinforcing the town–country dichotomy, instead of analysing the potential continuity and interpenetration of forms of class.

As a result, farmers in the sociological discourse of the last decade find themselves in a ‘grey zone’, and this marginalisation does not reflect a genuine absence of change within this group, but rather reveals the methodological limitations of the dominant way of thinking about the social structure of contemporary Poland, a way of thinking that assumes contemporaneity, modernity, and membership of the middle class to be the domain of cities and non-agricultural occupations.

4.2. Farmers in Polish sociology: Modes of conceptualisation

4.2.1. *Transformations in farmers’ identity: From the ‘peasant’ to the ‘farmer-entrepreneur’*

In areas where farmers do become an object of researchers’ interest, the theme of identity transformation predominates. Szczesniak (2022) shows convincingly that the process of moving away from the category of *chłop* [‘peasant’] towards professional categories began under the Polish People’s Republic. The attempt to replace *chłopskość* [‘peasantness’], burdened with connotations of feudal subordination and social inferiority, with a new identity as *rolnik* [‘farmer’] was ambivalent and incomplete: modernising aspirations coexisted with the experience of a lasting symbolic devaluation. Present-day analyses document the continuation

of this process under market conditions. Kołoszycz and Wilczyński (2025), for example, show that dairy farms articulate needs characteristic of enterprises, such as the pursuit of better work organisation, a work-life balance, or investment in renewable energy sources. This is a significant departure from the traditional model of the peasant holding as a self-sufficient, universal unit of production embedded in a logic of being and place (Kaleta, 2021). Krzyworzeka (2021) analyses this transformation through the lens of change in the model of work. The old model, dominated by communality, agrarian values, and family cooperation, is being displaced by a rationalised model subordinated to the logic of efficiency, competition, and market flexibility. The relationship to work itself is also changing: it ceases to be defined as something more than a source of livelihood, which points to a profound shift in mentality and value system. As a consequence, farmers themselves are coming to perceive their activity in occupational terms, rather than as an element of a broader socio-cultural mission (Krzyworzeka, 2021). Sociologists, in trying to keep pace with these changes, make use of the category of occupation, directing attention to farmers as a group undergoing 'occupationalisation' (Michalska, 2021), referred to as professional farmers (Halamska, 2015; Podedworna, 2018) or as managers (Drąg, Gorlach, 2019). Sobczyk (2022) proposes a shift in analytical perspective: from the farmer as holding-owner to the farmer as worker, which may provide the basis for an argument about membership of the working class or, given suitable conditions of income and stability, of the middle stratum.

Nonetheless, self-reliance is inscribed in the occupational specificity of farm work, and it shapes farmers' professional networks, their reluctance to cooperate, and their fear of dishonesty on the part of others (Nowak, Gorlach, 2015; Pilichowski, 2018). Labour relations in agriculture are conceived relationally, as social interactions taking shape in the process of agricultural production and assuming a dual character: on the one hand they are determined by traditional family ties, particularly in family farming, and on the other by market mechanisms and the formal regulations of the CAP (Podedworna, 2018). Institutions dealing with agriculture, through the process of bureaucratisation, contribute to the devaluation of the traditional, quasi-sacred character of farm work, and the social changes taking place lead to a rupture in the intergenerational transmission of agricultural knowledge and skills (Dudek, Wojewodzik, 2021).

The process of professionalisation documented in the literature is neither linear nor unambiguously beneficial. Będzik, Gołąb, and Będzik (2025) show the mounting psychological burdens involved: stress connected with market uncertainty, pressure to work beyond the norm, dependence on weather and economic factors, and growing social isolation. They also point to an increased risk of professional burnout, a phenomenon rarely associated with agriculture in public discourse, yet clearly

present. At the same time, Malak-Rawlikowska (2018) describes the structural weakness of the sector: farmers are caught up in asymmetric block to relations with suppliers and buyers, which limits their autonomy and their capacity to accumulate capital. A paradox thus arises here, one that the literature rarely confronts: farmers are simultaneously presented as professionalising entrepreneurs and as actors who are systemically weakened and economically dependent. This tension remains untheorised, perhaps because doing so would require moving beyond the dominant model of entrepreneurship as an unambiguously emancipatory category. Might farmers, then, be forming a new formation: peripheral professional entrepreneurs, among whom aspirations to professionalisation collide with the chronic uncertainty and instability characteristic of today's precariat? Perhaps these paradoxes are an expression of incomplete professionalisation.

4.2.2. The internal differentiation of farmers and its consequences for class analysis

While the literature on the contemporary Polish countryside consistently challenges the notion of a homogeneous category of farmers, this knowledge remains largely enclosed within rural sociology and does not permeate the mainstream discourse on social structure, which is one of the central problems diagnosed in this article. Szafraniec (2015) points to a strong differentiation of attitudes, ranging from modernising to protectionist orientations, whose roots reach back to the Polish People's Republic (Szcześniak, 2022). Nowak and Gorlach (2015) bring out generational divisions in readiness for cooperation and forms of collective organisation, while Halamska (2016b) emphasises the spatial differentiation of the rural population, linked to historical divisions (the former partitions) and to types of functional area. As a result, it is difficult to treat 'farmers' as a homogeneous category: it encompasses both the owners of modern holdings capable of capital accumulation and development, and farmers maintaining subsistence-oriented holdings, as well as pensioners who hold the status of farmer only formally. In the texts analysed within the sociology of social structure, farmers are most often treated as a distinct class: Halamska (2015) locates them within the 'folk constellation' (*konstelacja ludowa*), while Ruszkowski, Przestalski, and Matuszewski (2018) classify them as an 'old-type' propertied class defined by land ownership. This internal differentiation makes it difficult to grasp the group theoretically and raises the question of whether the unitary category of 'farmers' is not, in class analyses, an excessive simplification that obscures the processes of advancement and decline taking place within this population.

4.2.3. Symbolic marginalisation and the middle class's post-peasant heritage

Despite the processes of professionalisation, farmers remain situated on the periphery of the social structure. Domański consistently locates them at the bottom of the status hierarchy, and research on cultural tastes points to a low level of cultural omnivorousness, which, in Bourdieu's logic, signals limited cultural capital. Kaleta (2021) situates this peripherality within the *longue durée* of history, arguing that peasant culture took shape as a culture of exclusion, marked by the experience of marginalisation and isolation.

Gołębiowski (2018) proposes a different perspective: in his view, the contemporary Polish middle class has a 'post-peasant' character; that is, it derives genealogically from the peasantry and carries within it its cultural heritage, being a group not yet equipped with a mature cultural capital and balancing between folk culture and mass culture.⁶ In this framing, the question 'do farmers belong to the middle class?' is inverted: it is the middle class that is, in part, the product of a multi-generational transformation of the peasantry.

In the political dimension, however, farmers remain a significant collective actor. Ruszkowski, Przestalski, and Matuszewski (2018) identify them as part of a broad 'bloc of acquiescence', while Wenzel (2023) documents the continuity of mobilisation, from Samoobrona ['Self-Defence'] to contemporary protests, confirming that a peripheral position does not mean an absence of agency. Farmers' readiness to protest can be seen as an expression of subjectivity and agency within the social space. Foryś (2015) shows that between 1989 and 2014, farmers skilfully carried out 'frame adjustment', drawing on national, religious, and peasant values depending on mobilisational needs, and by extending these frames (for instance, folding agricultural problems into the whole set of negative effects of the transformation that were widely felt). This most often led to the generalisation of agricultural issues and their transfer to the national level, and placed farmers in the same rank as other social groups fighting in defence of national interests, which were, de facto, the interests of their own group (Foryś, 2015; Wenzel, 2023).

⁶ It is worth noting that the simplified picture of farmers in the discourse on social structure also overlooks the specificity of the peasant economic paradigm, in which the logic of economic action departs from capitalist rationality. This distinctiveness of economic rationality has significant analytical consequences for the classification of farmers within the social structure, and its absence from the texts analysed constitutes a further dimension of the simplification being diagnosed.

4.2.4. *New research threads: Gender in agriculture*

Current trends, in world sociology as much as in Polish sociology, are leading to the emergence of new fields of research, and farmers appear as social actors in only a (small) part of them. Such areas of analysis include, for example, those relating to farmers in the context of the construction of rural masculinities (Gospodarczyk, 2019) or the position of women in agriculture (Drąg, Gorlach, 2019; Wilczyńska et al., 2025). These have a similar source: traditional agriculture perceived as a male domain, with the figure of the farmer identified with physical strength, the ability to master nature, and to operate machinery. This hegemonically perceived masculinity may be giving way to a dialogic masculinity, allowing for greater flexibility in defining gender roles. In turn, the growing role of women in agriculture, not only as helpers but also as managers and holding-owners, is leading to a redefinition of their occupational position. Whereas women and men tend to perceive family roles in a rather conservative and traditional manner, in the case of occupational and public roles, gender is a visible differentiating factor (Michalska, 2020). Today's gender inequalities in agriculture appear to stem chiefly from entrenched mental and cultural norms rather than from technological barriers. Gender issues in agriculture thus turn out to be not only a matter of gender equality, but also a significant dimension of the transformation of the social structure of the Polish countryside.

5. Conclusion

The aim of this study was to reconstruct the ways in which the category of farmers has been framed over the last decade in reflection on social structure. The analysis of the literature published in five leading academic journals produced results that go beyond the original research assumptions. It turned out that the key discovery is not so much what Polish scholarship says about farmers, but what it does not say, or says only in a fragmentary, superficial, and unsystematic way. Farmers rarely become a fully-fledged subject of in-depth sociological analysis that takes into account their place within a dynamically changing social structure. Of the 58 texts containing the keywords 'social structure' and 'farmers', only 16 actually engage in a discussion of who today's farmers are as a social group, what stratification positions they occupy, and how they participate in processes of structural transformation. This is an expression of deeper assumptions shaping today's discourse on change in social structure. Over the last decade, Polish sociology, by focusing on the middle class, its aspirations, fears, and processes of precarisation, has produced a research optic in which modernity and social dynamism are implicitly equated with urban space and service-sector occupations. Farmers, by contrast, constitute

here an archaic, anachronistic category, seemingly irrelevant to understanding the key social processes of contemporary Poland.

Particularly telling is the almost total absence of farmers from the literature on the middle class, which is consistently defined by urbanness, higher education, intellectual occupations, and a set of consumption practices characteristic of big-city milieus. This definitional narrowing means that even affluent, educated farmers who run modern holdings and lead lifestyles close to urban standards remain outside the field of vision of middle-class researchers. Including farmers within the middle class would require not so much new empirical research as a revision of the fundamental assumptions about what social modernity is and who can be its bearer.

Researchers of the last decade have left a distinctive blank spot.⁷ By concentrating on the middle class and urban stratification processes, and by marginalising or omitting farmers, they have reproduced a particular vision of modernity and social hierarchy, a vision in which the countryside and agriculture remain symbolic peripheries. The consequences of this analytical absence extend beyond the discipline itself. An inadequate or simplified picture of farmers in recognised academic work has a symbolic dimension: it reproduces the stereotype of the countryside as a space of tradition and backwardness, thereby legitimising the exclusion of farmers from conceptions of social modernity. It also has a practical dimension: the sociology of social structure omits a significant segment of Polish society in describing the mechanisms of stratification and hierarchy, which translates into incomplete social diagnoses; these, in turn, can shape collective conceptions and indirectly influence public policy. Meanwhile, the dynamic transformations taking place in agriculture, the processes of professionalisation and economic differentiation, and the transformations of identity and lifestyle, suggest that this may lead to a far from complete picture of the social structure of contemporary Poland.

⁷ It is worth noting here that in recent years, the humanities and social sciences have seen the emergence of the so-called folk/peasant turn (*zwrot ludowy*) (Leszczyński, 2024; Stobiecki, 2022; Zysiak, 2023), which brings the peasant question, and its place in Polish history and culture, newly to the fore. This turn remains, above all, a historical-cultural project: it focuses on memory, trauma, and the symbolic heritage of peasantness. As such, it does not translate into an interest in farmers as a collectivity embedded in today's stratification processes. This creates a paradox: at the very moment when the humanities are 'discovering' peasantness as a foundation of Polish collective identity, research on social structure marginalises farmers as active participants in class transformation. The folk/peasant turn thus supplies a cultural and social background that makes this topic especially significant: an analysis of the past can serve as a starting point for understanding farmers' present place in the social structure, the mechanisms of their symbolic devaluation, and the modernisation trajectories they are following.

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