

## Editors' Note. Social Aspects of Agrarian Transformation – the Voices of Young Polish Scholars

In this special issue, we present a collection of articles by young scholars who discuss different aspects of transformations occurring in Polish agriculture. The idea for this special issue originated from the series of seminars on “Social aspects of agriculture” organised in the Institute of Rural and Agricultural Development, Polish Academy of Sciences, together with Koźmiński University.

Agriculture in Poland has been facing a radical transformation since the economic transition of 1989, and especially since the country joined the EU in 2004. The establishment of the free market for agricultural products and the implementation of the CAP triggered deep changes in the Polish agricultural landscape. Due to many factors, such as peri-urbanisation on one hand and the depopulation process of remote rural regions on the other, the area of arable land has quickly decreased. Rapid deagrarianisation has many aspects, such as the diminishing percentage of the labour force engaged in agriculture. The countryside faces depeasantisation, proletarianisation and gentrification (Halamska 2016a). Small farms have been closed down, abandoned or become deactivated (see Ploeg van der 2008) while the number of large-scale, commercial farms and agricultural holdings have increased. These processes are profoundly changing the rural social structure (Halamska, Michalska and Śpiewak 2016; Halamska and Zwęglińska-Gałecka 2018).

As Maria Halamska (2016b) writes, the process of deagrarianisation began during the Polish Peoples' Republic, and unfolded more slowly than in Western Europe (2016b, p. 73). Deagrarianisation accelerated after 1989, when the number of people working in agriculture halved (Halamska 2016b, p. 74). Halamska notes two kinds of development trajectory of farms resulting from those transformations: the first involves tightening their relationship with the market, intensifying production and enlarging the farm; the second entails dissolution or marginalisation (during the years 1989–2010, 600,000 farms disappeared, as their owners mostly joined

the rural working class, Halamska 2016b, p. 76). Moreover, we have been witnessing an emergence of inactive farms keeping a low level of production or informally leasing the land just to receive subsidies (2016b, p. 77) or other public support. This contributes to the emergence of the so-called “subsidy culture” (Kovacs 2019), which has not yet been described in the Polish context. Thus we can summarise that the traditional Polish rural structure is being dissolved, although farms up to five hectares still predominate in the agrarian landscape.

Despite the significance of the transformations described above, their agricultural aspect has rarely been a subject of analysis in Polish social sciences (with some notable exceptions, however, covering the beginning of this period, see Fedyszak-Radziejowska 1992; Gorlach 1995; Podedworna 2001). Moreover, the changes in agriculture have mostly been analysed from their economic perspective while their social and cultural aspects have been largely disregarded. This is a serious omission, considering the fact that economic changes in Polish agriculture have fundamentally transformed the rural structure, and, consequently, the way in which farmers and non-farmers understand their work, relations to each other and relations with the city. These processes are peculiar to Poland and cannot be fully compared to what happened in Western Europe in the course of deagrarianisation, mainly due to the history of Polish agriculture, marked by failed collectivisation in the 1950s and the long-lasting preservation of an agrarian structure based on small-scale, peasant farms until 1989.

The reasons for the rare occurrence of the topic of agriculture in Polish social sciences are manifold. It seems to be connected to the lack of interest in agriculture in the Polish public sphere. Since the farmers' protests in the early 1990s, the issues of agriculture have rarely reached a wider audience. However, the situation has recently begun to change. Firstly, agriculture has been an important topic in the Western public sphere. For example, the new CAP perspective is widely discussed in relation to issues such as of its (un)sustainability. In contrast, large-scale farmers' protests have been occurring on the streets of Europe (see Ploeg van der 2020), among others concerning regulations aimed at sustainability. Also in Poland (although for different reasons, such as the discrimination against Polish farmers on the local market) farmers have been taking the street since 2013, and recently, in 2018, the AGROunia social movement emerged, the spectacular actions of which have provoked a growing interest in social media and beyond (see Bilewicz 2020). These protests triggered interest in agriculture among journalists and publicists, but also academicians.

There is a considerable body of literature on agrarian transformations in various different parts of the world (for most notable examples see Akram-Lodhi and Kay 2009; Bernstein 2010). However, recent literature on this matter

has mainly concerned countries of the Global South and Asia, and only rarely refers to the European, and especially Eastern European issues (see e.g. Akram-Lodhi and Kay 2009; Rambo 2017; Hopkins 2019; Rigg 2019; Mkodzongi 2020, for the historical exception see Richards 2020). In this context, our special issue dedicated entirely to Poland can be seen as one of the few contributions on agrarian transformation and its social correlates in Eastern Europe.

The history of the process of deagrarianisation and change in the agrarian structure has prompted us to ask the question concerning the future of family farms and of the countryside as a whole. Is the social fabric of the countryside “irreversible”, as Władysław Grabski, the founder of Polish rural sociology, claimed? (Grabski 2004). How have the transformations of agriculture since the WWII affected rural communities? Does deagrarianisation threaten the existence of the countryside itself? How does the social structure of the countryside change under pressure of agricultural transformations? And how do farmers react to these transformations? Last but not least, how do these transformations shape farmers’ worldviews, lifestyles and modes of work?

These questions are addressed by the authors of papers presented in this special issue. The articles have been written by young scholars from different disciplines, such as sociology, social anthropology and economics.

The article by Aleksandra Paprot-Wielopolska entitled “Post-war Agriculture in Żuławy versus Changes in the Region’s Cultural and Social Landscape in Source Materials, Diaries and Farmers’ Narratives” describes the process of adaptation of newcomers from the former eastern parts of Poland to the specific character of local agriculture and multi-ethnic cultural heritage. She describes how the new residents had to learn to farm on lands that are below sea level, typical of the region. The settlers differed in farming skills and culture, and their move into the new geographical and social setting often resulted in lower productivity. The author writes: “The settlers thus had to develop new ways of cultivating the land, adjusted to the climate and economic conditions but also to local industry” (Paprot-Wielopolska, this volume: p. 25). The newcomers had to learn how to “read” the new landscape, but they also had to reinvent their identity. Paprot-Wielopolska shows how the agrarian and social structure of the Żuławy region, deeply affected by the WWII operations, was further changed after the settling of newcomers, originating mostly from the eastern part of Poland.

The subject of post-war transformations of agriculture is also present in Jolanta Kluba and Barbara Szczepańska’s article “Ownership Changes Through the Eyes of Workers on Large Farms”. The authors investigate how workers on the large farms, former PGRs (State Agricultural Farms) perceive the structural changes of their workplaces. The article revolves around the history of PGRs, which suffered a deep

crisis during the economic transformation of 1990s and were closed down or privatised. Szczepańska and Kluba outline the history of transformation of the farm throughout the communist period until the present day. In addition, they show the role of leaders in the functioning and restructuring the PGRs. The interviewees, for example, recount the blurring of boundaries between private and state property during the People's Republic and the reshaping of PGRs after the transformation, which forced them to become profit-oriented.

The ethnographic work of Amanda Krzyworzeka concerns the change in farmers' mode of work in Poland's eastern region of Podlasie. She argues that recent transformations of agriculture have fundamentally shaped the way farmers work (those who modernised their farms and were able to function under free-market conditions) and how they understand their labour. The author presents an outline of the traditional mode of work in the Polish countryside and then describes deep changes that she noted during her fieldwork. She shows that in this region affected by depopulation, farm enlargement due to land purchase or lease has led to growing frustration and fatigue (due to the reluctance to work on somebody else's farm there has been a low rate of employment of wage workers) and also a feeling of loneliness, partly due to the fact that farmers can no longer count on the help of neighbours, children or other family members. Krzyworzeka argues that changes in the mode of work deeply influence the rural community. This entails exacerbating social inequalities. Due to technological changes, large-scale farmers have lost control over their produce. In general, as she concludes, farmers' work has become bereft of its social character and has become an alienating element.

Another contribution to this volume deals with the attitudes to farming of young university graduates living in rural areas. The author, Ilona Matysiak, investigates how these young people perceive farming in the era of deagrarianisation and ongoing modernisation of farms in Poland. Matysiak shows various factors that encourage young people to pursue farming as well as the factors that discourage them. Among the encouraging factors she notes family obligation, while low profitability, low quality of arable land, associating farming with low social status and a negative perception of farmers and agriculture discourage young graduates from taking over the farm. The young people who have decided to run a farm "claimed that only large-scale highly modernised farms provide sufficient income and are worth the effort" (Matysiak, this volume: p. 92). This shows that they have internalised the modernisation paradigm that predominates in Poland in the era of deagrarianisation.

Only a few of Matysiak's interviewees said they were engaged in farming or planned to take over a farm. This is further elaborated in the final article of this volume entitled "Does a Demographic Crisis Threaten European and Polish

Agriculture?”, by Michał Dudek and Tomasz Wojewodziec. The authors analyse policies aimed at countering the demographic crisis at EU level, with a special regard to Poland. Basing on legal acts and an analysis of statistical data, the authors reveal that the policy of support for young farmers in Poland has been rather unsuccessful. As they write, it is nowadays hard to claim that financial support for young farmers solves the problem of farms without successors and contributes to rejuvenating the farming population.

Despite the different disciplines and different approaches of the contributors to this issue, we can attempt to draw a general picture of the transformations in the Polish agriculture. In the era of deagrarianisation, depeasantisation and urbanisation, farms are facing rapid modernisation, as large entrepreneurial units supersede smaller, family farms and traditional ways of farming. As Krzyworzeka has shown, the farmers' mode of work changes as they modernise their farms. This modernisation, however, has its economic and social costs. Agriculture faces a demographic crisis, and those who continue farming experience work overload, frustration and loneliness. As the gap between owners of small, often stagnating farms and the entrepreneurs widens, the social fabric of the countryside erodes, as mutual help and social life decreases.

The contributors to this special issue describe in detail how these processes unfold in different regions and contexts. We hope that the contributions in this volume can be an inspiration for the reflections on the future of farming and the society affected by these rapid transformations.

*Aleksandra Bilewicz (editor of the issue)*

## References

- Akram-Lodhi H., Kay C. (eds.) (2009). *Peasants and Globalization: Political Economy, Rural Transformation and the Agrarian Question*. London: Routledge.
- Bernstein H. (2010). *Class Dynamics of Agrarian Change*. Halifax and Winnipeg: Fenwood Publishing; Sterling, VA: Kumarian Press.
- Bilewicz A. (2020). Beyond the modernisation paradigm: Elements of a food sovereignty discourse in farmer protest movements and alternative food networks in Poland. *Sociologia Ruralis*, 60, 754–772.
- Fedyszak-Radziejowska B. (1992). *Etos pracy rolnika: Modele społeczne a rzeczywistość*. Warszawa: Instytut Rozwoju Wsi i Rolnictwa Polskiej Akademii Nauk.
- Gorlach K. (1995). *Chłopi, robotnicy, przedsiębiorcy – „kłopotliwa klasa” w Polsce postkomunistycznej*. Kraków: Uniwersytet Jagielloński.

- Grabski W. (2004). *Socjologia wsi polskiej*. Warszawa: Szkoła Główna Gospodarstwa Wiejskiego.
- Halamska M. (2016a). The evolution of family farms in Poland: present time and the weight of the past. *Eastern European Countryside*, 2, 27–51.
- Halamska M. (2016b). Struktura społeczna ludności wiejskiej na początku XX wieku. In: M. Halamska, S. Michalska, R. Śpiewak (eds.), *Studia nad strukturą społeczną wiejskiej Polski*, vol. 1: *Stare i nowe wymiary społecznego zróżnicowania* (pp. 11–96). Warszawa: Instytut Rozwoju Wsi i Rolnictwa Polskiej Akademii Nauk, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar.
- Halamska M., Michalska S., Śpiewak R. (2016). *Studia nad strukturą społeczną wiejskiej Polski*, vol. 1: *Stare i nowe wymiary społecznego zróżnicowania*. Warszawa: Instytut Rozwoju Wsi i Rolnictwa Polskiej Akademii Nauk, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar.
- Halamska M., Zwęglińska-Gałęcka D. (2018). *Od wsi chłopskiej do robotniczej*. In: M. Halamska, M. Stanny (eds.), *Ciągłość i zmiana: Sto lat rozwoju polskiej wsi*, vol. 1 (pp. 214–238). Warszawa: Instytut Rozwoju Wsi i Rolnictwa Polskiej Akademii Nauk, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar.
- Hopkins N.S. (2019). *Agrarian Transformation in Egypt*. London: Routledge.
- Kovacs E.K. (2019). Seeing subsidies like a farmer: Emerging subsidy cultures in Hungary. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, published online, 1–24.
- Mkodzongi G. (2020). *Land and Agrarian Transformation in Zimbabwe: Rethinking of the Rural Livelihoods in the Aftermath of Land Reforms*. London: Anthem Press.
- Ploeg J.D. van der (2008). *The New Peasantries. Struggles for Autonomy and Sustainability in the Era of Empire and Globalisation*. London: Earthscan.
- Ploeg J.D. van der (2020). Farmers' upheaval, climate crisis and populism. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 47 (2), 589–605.
- Podedworna H. (2001). *Polscy farmerzy i ich świat społeczny*. Warszawa: Szkoła Główna Handlowa.
- Rambo A.T. (2017). The agrarian transformation in North-eastern Thailand: A review of recent research. *Southeast Asian Studies*, 6 (2), 211–245.
- Richards E. (2020). *A History of the Highland Clearances*, vol 1. *Agrarian Transformation and the Eviction of 1746–1786*. London: Routledge.
- Rigg J. (2019). *More than the Rural: Textures of Thailand's Agrarian Transformation*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.