

The socioeconomic impact of transformation on rural Poland

A Vanishing Class



Prof. Maria Halamska,
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studies processes
of transformation
in rural areas and
regional development

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The economic transformation in Poland has led to the emergence of two extremely different types of farms: strong, entrepreneurial farms yielding 80% of all agricultural output in terms of value, and small farms supplying the just farmers' own needs, very numerous yet insignificant from the standpoint of the market economy

Certain sociological definitions define a "rural" region in terms of the predominance of agriculture above other types of economic activity, the presence of peasants and peasant society, with its very distinct mechanisms of internal regulation and its distinctive attitude towards so-called global society. That is why

changes in agriculture and the farming population are always pivotal for any description of transformations in rural areas.

Forty years ago Henri Mendras published his *La fin des paysans* (published in English as *Vanishing Peasant* - 1971), a brilliant synthesis of fundamental change in agriculture in the flourishing industrial society of France, proclaiming the end of the peasants and touching off great discussion and controversy. The notion of the "end of the peasants" then gradually spread throughout Europe: it signifies a vanishing peasant way of farming and the gradual absorption of the peasant economy into the capitalist economy, as farm functioning and reproduction become subordinated to the mechanisms of market economics. Out of the vast numbers of farms, a smaller group of robust, strong, entrepreneurial, "professional" farms emerges and ends up absorbing other farms, whose users then abandon agriculture. Once there are no more peasant farms, with their specific functioning and reproduction, there are likewise no more peasants. While this scenario for the

Two-fifths of Poland's farms - or one million of them - are quasi-peasant farms producing to satisfy their own needs. They are not subordinated to processes of modernization and state aid policy is reinforcing this state of backwardness and farm fragmentation



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evolution of agriculture in fact took a slightly different track in the West, seeing as alongside the “professional” farms a “part-time farming” group also emerged, the function of this latter group, too, is nevertheless governed by market principles.

Transformation of rural Poland

Poland’s case of transformation in agriculture has only partly reflected this Western scenario of change, and for various reasons. Without a doubt, one set of reasons lies in the distinctive situation that was present in communist-era Poland. While family agriculture was never successfully collectivized in Poland, it did not have any stably defined economic space – its rationale differed from that of the socialist economy, yet at the same time it was subject to the control of the latter. Briefly put, although family agriculture functioned within a certain niche, it remained symbiotic with the socialist economy.

Poland’s economic transformation, initiated in 1989, ushered in market economics with all the consequences thereof, including for family farms – entailing changes in the entire existing system of farms’ external relations and internal mechanisms. Farmers were subjected to a brutal process of adaptation to the new conditions, felt by their owners to be a kind of “oppressive liberty.” Especially in the early years, such adaptation proceeded in quite unbridled fashion, without the necessary support in the form of appropriate state agricultural policies. Three overarching trends can be distinguished here. Firstly, farms became differentiated in terms of their relation towards the market. Secondly, there has been a process of polarization in terms of farm size, with the middle-sized group gradually disappearing from the statistical breakdown. Lastly, land has distinctly come to be concentrated in large farms.

Adaptation or marginalization

Polish agriculture has essentially become two-track, with each group consisting of farms with differing characteristics, rules, and objectives. These factors, defining farms’ stance with respect to the market, are also crucial for how they are integrated into the national economy. The statistics are very telling here: 20% of currently extant farms supply 80% of all agricultural products in terms



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of value, another 50% of farms produces 15% of agricultural product value, and a final 30% of farms generates the remaining 5% of value. This twofold path of transformation in agriculture has given rise to a specific “end of the peasants” in Poland, proceeding along two trajectories: one via the adaptation/absorption of farms by the market economy, the other via marginalization.

The group of strong market-oriented farms now emerging (including also privatization of the state sector) is not absorbing the small farms because the latter are not succumbing to market rationale, having other, non-agricultural sources of financing. Such absorption instead affects medium-sized farms, which are gradually being eliminated, leaving behind great numbers of small, quasi-peasant or quasi-sustenance farms (producing food solely for the family), functioning – or rather existing – thanks to a specific rationale, neither peasant nor entrepreneurial. These farms form the basis for the emergence of a distinct social group: quasi-peasants. This group represents a new output of the “end of the peasants,” a product unknown to Western modernization. The timing of agricultural modernization is crucial here: in the West it occurred during times of forced industrializations that absorbed migrants abandoning agriculture, while in Poland it has come during a post-industrial phrase and a period of economic transformation involving high unemployment. Poland’s quasi-peasants “absorb” part of that unemployment, easing social tension.

Quasi-peasants

The size of this numerous group varies depending on the definition adopted. If we choose the restrictive criterion of mainly sustenance farming (self-supply), then quasi-

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peasant farms constitute more than two-fifths (more than 1 million) of the overall number of farms in Poland, with 3.7 million individuals affiliated with them. If we look at farm size instead, small farms with up to 5 ha account for nearly three-fifths of all farms over 1 ha. The problem of small farms and their owners is by no means an imagined one: they are the ones who give rural Poland its distinctive character, even though they are not decisive for the country's agricultural output or its food supply. This group of farms and their owners represent Poland's modern-day "peasant question," which can be resolved only via political and social means.

This abundant group of small farms poses a special challenge for rural development. Since these farms and their owners exist as they are, for political reasons efforts are not made to resolve the issue. Instead, efforts seek to legitimize their presence and thus rationalize their continued existence. The concept of multifunctional rural development (which has its limits, especially in Poland) is promoted, and discussion focuses on the possibilities of organic farming, functions in relation to the natural environment, maintaining its condition, ensuring stable development, and functioning according to the canon of sustainable agriculture. Nevertheless, research shows that these roles are played much better by larger farms. The only role that truly remains for small farms – a role we

can hope is transitional – is therefore that of absorbing overt unemployment, manifesting itself as concealed unemployment.

Poland's peasant question

This existing solution comes at a price, not just economically (as KRUS, the special, highly state-subsidized system of farmer's social security, facilitates grey-zone employment and the exclusion of agricultural income from the general tax system), but also socially and politically. Farmers' role in Poland's transformation is to inhibit such change. The large numbers of farmers, predominantly consisting of quasi-peasants and "part-time farmers," are capable of forcing income redistribution that is favorable for them, above all serving their social needs. This logic of redistribution impedes the internal dynamics of change in agriculture – a fact that is all the more disturbing because it is spreading to the rules for distributing EU aid. In the political aspect, it transforms into ordinary political clientelism and a self-driving mechanism encouraging socio-political demands, which consolidates a populism that threatens the nascent mechanisms of democracy. ■

Further reading:

Halamska M. (2004). A different end of the peasants? *Polish Sociological Review*, 3, 245–268.