

Farming means headache. Everyday challenges of dairy farms in Podlasie

Mateusz Sarnacki

University of Warsaw

Abstract

Do external regulations imposed on Podlasie milk farmers limit their agency? This article addresses the issue of economic and social aspects of running milk farms in the west Podlasie region in east Poland. I am trying to answer the question whether farmers from the Sokoly commune and the neighboring areas are agent actors, intentionally functioning within their daily reality and in the face of challenges posed by the said reality. I consider the professional awareness of farmers and what really motivates them to work. I analyze the problem through descriptions in the area of economic anthropology and such notions as informal lease, investments, EU grants, loans. I also explain the paradox of enlarging cow herds and the arable land, which does not necessarily result in the growth of farms.

Key words: agency; economic anthropology; agriculture; dairy farms; investments; credit; EU donation; land lease; Poland.

Introduction

This article is the result of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the villages of Sokoly and surrounding areas in 2016 and 2017.¹ During interviews with the local inhabitants I did not use a ready-made questionnaire. Thanks to this, I was able to reach those issues that were important for my interviewees, by touching on the subsequent threads of the ethnographic interview until my research topic has clarified. I was determined to reach people of varying age and gender, but also practicing different ways of running milk farms. Meeting the farmers at their homes or on the farms was usually done with no prior appointment. Regardless, I was accepted and willingly talked to.

When conducting my first field interviews, it was hard for me not to notice the testimonies to the hardships of farming life. The emotional load emerging in the testimonies

¹ All field research material is stored in the archives of the Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, Warsaw University (the article's interview references are related exactly to those materials). Names of interviewees have been altered.

suggested on one side resistance and rebellion against farmers' domestic situation, and on the other hand helplessness as to the state of affairs, an attitude that was summarized in the sentiment: *it is as it is*. The issue was the basis for formulating my research problem – attitudes and activities of farmers in confrontation with problems of milk farms.

My starting point was a series of questions about the state of individual farms which was frequently confronted with the description of the larger, neighboring, foreign ones. Initial interpretation of the collected material, still at the stage of conducting the field study, drew my attention to the limitations that the Podlasie milk producers, the largest group among my interviewees, needed to face. For this reason, I analyzed those aspects of farmers' lives which were referenced in a negative way or at least ambivalently. The categories within this group are: loans, advisory agencies, profitability – they are often analyzed in the rural context not only by anthropologists but also sociologists and other social science researchers (see: Jaworska and Pieniążek 1995; Krzyworzeka 2008; Gibson and Gray 2013). I quickly became convinced of the multi-aspect character of the problem by listening to conflicting and mutually exclusive opinions on the same issues. The existing friction and incoherencies proved to me the potential hidden in the chosen research area. It was also the starting point for a closer look at the agency of Podlasie farmers in the ethos of “working for oneself” and in the face of free market mechanisms, often making specific decisions necessary over others.

During my research, I often wondered whether Podlasie milk farmers need to constantly adjust themselves to the imposed requirements or whether they can find themselves in the multitude of regulations and be aware and active players on the free market for farming goods.

Agency is a research category which is important to me. As an important aspect of individual subjectivity, agency became deeply rooted in the post-colonial and post-structural reflection of anthropologists and sociologists. They saw its traces in ideology, language, discourse, therefore all actions of an individual were seen as a sort of consequence of the three areas of life (Aschcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin 2007, pp. 6-7).

The issue of individual autonomy and freedom of choice is stressed by Elizabeth Dunn. In her book *Privatizing Poland: Baby Food, Big Business, and the Remaking of Labor* she shows the impact this area of individual life receives from macrosocial order (Dunn, p. 167).

The testimonies of my interviewees do not allow me to simply accept the assumption that their behavior and ways of running their farms reflect state regulations. Elizabeth Dunn's remarks allow me to see the tension between the practices of the individual milk producers and the imposed legal regulations. The practice, the daily work, more precisely narrations related to it, are where I see potential traces of agency. I think that in the case of Podlasie farmers this

is the most important one, unlike Susana Narotzky sees the traces of agency in patterns of consumption with their meaning-creating potential, shaping the identity (Narotzky 2005, p. 83).

Expressing one's agency does not need to be spectacular or even open. Daily means of resistance, such as commenting, using proverbs, telling jokes and legends, practicing rituals, may be an efficient answer to submission. These practices were described by James C. Scott, who researched Malaysian farmers. *Weapons of the Weak* (1985) is a monograph in which the daily tactics of farmers are described as symbolic resistance against the ideological hegemony of the dominant groups. Granted, I find it difficult when trying to consider the situation of Podlasie farmers as the result of Scott's class conflicts. Nevertheless, stressing the role of the individual social actor as the foundation for anthropological analysis is close to my methodological point of view.

The recurrent metaphor of a vicious circle that my interviewees voiced, used to look at the farm as a whole, brought to my mind the limited goods theory presented by the American anthropologist George Foster. His *Peasant Society and the Image of Limited Good* (1965) is the effect of field study among the farming communities of western Mexico. Foster saw that having some good at the disposal of a member of the community (these goods being means of survival, love, prestige, power, influence) in larger amounts than those at the disposal of others causes the belief of limited character of resources. Similarly, many of my interviewees, when speaking about land lease, treated the land as insufficient good that serves some to accumulate large capital, so that others do not have the full potential for developing their farms.

Hunger for the land

Cow specialization, a polarized activity of a farm based on raising milk cows comes with the consequence of the need to have ample land where mainly corn is grown (used for animal feed). The best conditions for growing corn are where the arable land is in one section; then, there is no need to travel to additional plots which saves time and fuel. Additionally, meadows situated in the vicinity of the farm allow the possibility of letting the animals graze in the summer season, which is beneficial for the cows' hooves, allows access to daylight necessary for the organisms to produce vitamin D and lowers the risk of udder inflammation.² One plot also makes it less problematic to book allowances and helps avoid conflicts with the owners of neighboring fields.

² <http://www.farmer.pl/produkcja-zwierzec/bydlo-i-mleko/wypas-na-pastwisku,35935.html> [accessed 3.12.2017]

Falling prices of milk induce farmers to increase the count of their herds so that the current financial situation of the farms does not deteriorate. This is always associated with the need to increase the land area so that the farm animals can be fed.

Following my interviewees, we assign the description of “hunger for land” to a state where the demand for additional area surpasses the supply. This creates the belief about the land being a limited accessibility good.³ During my ethnographic study it was but all impossible to avoid the recurring metaphor⁴ of a vicious circle, appearing in the interviews in the context of the factors that influence the functioning of their farms. The words “the circle closes” create the image of a closed system, within which the cow owners can function and make decisions. Such hermetic character is not mirrored in my observations, which show an image of rather free circulation of knowledge and material resources, creating varied possibilities for action. The belief of limited availability of natural resources (here: land) assumes a specific determinism of this limitation which influences specific farming practices reflected in the competition for extra area. A family, creating one farm, may in such a model improve their situation only at the cost of others (Foster 1965, p. 297).

Purchasing land in the Sokoly commune is problematic for a number of reasons – high prices, higher popularity of renting. Above all, increasing the number of cows in a farm, mentioned above, is irreversibly associated with the needs to farm additional areas of land.

It is interesting that farming additional areas of land does not need to be followed by accumulation of goods. In the words of the farmers, lack of stability of prices of milk is what causes farms to grow so that they receive additional funds to pay off loans and maintain the *status quo*. Also, polarized specialization of farms towards milk production, which causes all the Podlasie area to be called “the milk field” causes each piece of land to be worth all the money. The value of one hectare of land reaches – according to my interviewees – even a hundred thousand zlotys and this is not necessarily land of the highest agricultural land classification.⁵ Those who – for whatever reason – decide to sell their land set the highest

³ We may refer this belief to a wider spectrum of notions, such as health, honor, status, agency, safety – these have been brought up by e.g. George Foster in his article *Peasant Society and the Image of Limited Good* (Foster 1965, p. 296). In anthropology, the theory of limited good means that land, money, and other resources are treated as being available in finite amounts. Therefore, if one person gains, someone else loses.

⁴ Following Kirsten Hastrup, I am treating this metaphor as an “extension of reality” (Hastrup 1995, p. 13).

⁵ According to the classification of arable land in Poland, there are nine classes of soil, among which first class is the best. According to the 2016 Integrated Program for the Revitalization of the Sokoly commune, I found the following record related to the soil structure in the area: “According to the Condition Study, the Sokoly commune is characterized by very good properties of farming quality of production areas (indicator of 53.7 as opposed to 50.8 points in the *powiat* of Łomża and 54.3 points in the Podlasie voivodeship). Higher classes, III-IV, can be found in arable land, making 55.3% of the areas, green areas are weaker, as the soil of class II-IV encompass only 33.4% of the area.”

possible prices. The negotiating party is usually at a losing position as the demand for the land surpasses the supply.

Yet another factor which makes the purchase of the land problematic is largely a result of petite gentry descent of the majority of the Sokoly commune (see: Biernacka 1966, Drozd-Piasecka 1991). The land which has been inherited over generations is assigned the emotionally-loaded name of “patrimony”. It is inherited from the ancestors, not easy to sell but rather to sell out – betray for one’s own material gains.

Possessing land in itself also provides a sense of security, so the monetary transaction of selling the land would result in lack of safety for the future.

The amount of possessed land limits the free choice of farm specialization. My research experience shows that some farmers would eagerly change their farming profile towards crops if the whole endeavor was profitable and if they possessed enough land.

Oral contract

Difficulties in purchasing land are associated with the lease, popular in the Sokoły commune. Expiration of farms and their eventual liquidation, often resulting from lack of successors, cause retired farmers to frequently lease out their land.

I would like to focus on a specific form of lease, which I will call – mirroring my interviewees – an oral contract. It is an informal activity which brings varied possibilities and threats. Contrary to appearances, the subject is discussed openly, with no specific discretion or lowering of the voice. This is most likely due to the popular character of such strategy.

The very fact that the phenomenon is referred to in a colloquial way mirrors the informal character of the lease, understood as “mutual coming to terms”. This is yet another example of the agency of my interviewees who express their lack of acceptance for legal systemic solutions in the area of unofficial practices. A notarial act is, as a rule, signed for specific time, often counted in tens of years, and needs to be paid for. From the very definition, leasing the land does not make it owned by another person. What is interesting, in Poland lease can also be effective in spoken form, with exceptions. Profits of a farmer from leasing the land are also subject to income tax, as specified by the Polish legal system.

Notrial lease “on paper” does not enjoy popularity, as – according to my interviewees – it does not provide security from unexpected termination by the leasing party. Tomasz told me about a half-year notice period of such a contract. If, however, he planted the field with “expensive crops”, he would be able to prove in court that he busied himself with a special area of farming which would make it impossible for the owner of the land to terminate such lease.

I became interested in how one may get to know that someone wants to lease out the land. Anna, with a spontaneous smile on her face, referred to “the grapevine” (interview 45). With this response, I understood that the declared apathy towards the situation of the neighbors’ farms is all but illusory. I got the impression that farmers know a lot about who owns which field. Rumors about leasing, which are definitely not printed in press or online, create opportunities for competition, conflict of interest, negotiations. This is exemplified by a farmer who, following a major accident, was no longer able to run his farm. He did not decide to lease the land but to sell it. When an acquaintance farmer got to know about it, he offered some advance payment. He also asked not to spread the news about the owner’s intention to sell the land, as competing farmers would raise the price. However, potential buyers with the intention to double the advance payment, appeared. Reacting to this, the initial buyer discredited the competitors in the eyes of the seller, claiming they will not be able to pay the declared amount, as they are inclined to abuse alcohol. Finally, the seller remained loyal to the initial buyer, despite further attempts to raise the price.

An oral lease contract brings mutual duties. Usually, the agricultural subsidy land allowances are collected by the owner, while taxes are paid by the lessee. That latter also pays the lease, reaching – according to some – even a thousand zlotys per hectare annually. There have been rare declarations that instead of paying the lease, the lessee may work the field – e.g. reap the crops if the owner does not have a harvester (and if some land remains with them). Then, the value of the performed work is the result of the number of hectares reaped or the number of hours spent on rendering services. Tomasz, who agreed on such a form of repaying lease, took into account prices which were consistent with a price list of contractors offering similar services. When I asked him whether he used higher rates on occasion, he replied that he tended to use lower rates for friends (interview 34). The character of such service is different from mutual help and cooperation described by Kazimiera Zawistowicz-Adamska, who claimed:

Having common goals, the same possibilities of offering and reciprocating assistance, introduce a factor of balance of services to the institution of neighbor help, besides the factor of reciprocity. Today you help me, tomorrow I will help you – until recently, this has been a popular domestic (and not only) justification of neighbor assistance (Zawistowicz-Adamska 1951, p. 24).

The author of *Pomoc wzajemna i współdziałanie w kulturach ludowych* [Mutual help and co-activity in folk cultures] defines the title notions of her monograph in the stream of

Bronisław Malinowski's functionalism, treating neighbor assistance as an institution, a cultural phenomenon serving an important function to the social system as a whole.

I would like to point at the fact that the singularity of such lease payments as the one indicated by Tomasz is not the consequence of its unpopularity among my interviewees. Lease is paid with money because the owner gives up further running of the farm, so they do not work the fields anymore.

Oral lease contract, because of its informality, causes a sense of uncertainty among my interviewees. I am not using the word "risk" here on purpose, as according to Frank Cancian, a person making a decision in the condition of uncertainty is not capable of defining its consequences, even with low probability, unlike with risk that can be initially assessed (Cancian 1980, pp. 163-164). A farmer who leases the land is therefore faced with unpredictable future, often depending on the whim of the land's owner.

The uncertainty is also related to the free will of the leasing party who may terminate the agreement at any time. Therefore, it is so important to maintain good neighborly relations.

The need to maintain good relations with other farmers was also mentioned by Sutti Ortiz. She writes about access to land as the effect of interacting with others (Ortiz 2005, p. 68).

A young farmer told me about his neighbor, who worked the leased land for ten years running, enriched it and sowed grass for the next year; he selected a more expensive cultivate of grass, paying a sizeable amount for the seeds. After the meadow has been sown, the owner terminated future lease, disregarding the input of the farmer who was forced to submit to the will of the owner. He commented on the whole situation in the following words: "If you're on your own, you're free to do as you please but if you sow another's land, you know how it is. On your own, you're sure." (Interview 34)

Owning land does not only bring security from the abovementioned precedent but also builds one's position among other milk farmers. My attention was also focused on the motive of enriching the land, fertilizing it and lack of potential to use thus fertilized land by the dismissed farmer who invested their capital but has no possibility to cash on it in the future.⁶

Excessive land fertilization is a counterargument to lease out the land short-term. Halina questioned this practice also because of its lack of profitability (Interview 29).

⁶ I found a similar case in an article in *Culture, Agriculture, Food and Environment. The Journal of Culture and Agriculture*. Namely, a farmer from Kansas, in the USA, selling seeds, declared he would not lime the leased land so that the pH level of the soil was changed in order to achieve the optimal conditions for the growth of the crops, if the owner of the land does not extend the contract for another year. He motivated this by potential gain that the invested funds would bring to the new lessee (Gray, Gibson 2013, p. 92).

Not only the neighbor of my interviewee met the fate of being dismissed from the leased land. Konrad and his wife Agnieszka faced the same problems. They stored bale-pressed and foil-wrapped silage – cow feed – on a narrow strip of land. One day, the owner of the field informed them that he was planning to sow it, so he forced them to move the silage to a new location. No free space on which to store the feed caused the couple to have to buy additional land area.

There is yet a larger potential problem when a contract with the Agency for Restructuring and Modernisation of Agriculture specifies a piece of land which is orally leased out. Based on the declared area of farmland, a farmer may purchase a farming machine suitable to work the area – e.g., the assistance program does not allow the purchase of a high-power tractor to work the farmland of a small area. During the contract, the declared land area cannot change. If the owner discontinues the lease, the farmer needs to buy or lease out missing hectares, if they do not want to face penalties from the Agency.

Cows – if not, what else?

Jacek has been breeding cows for almost twenty years. He started off by running a multi-specialization farm. Diversification of farming production was an economically justified method of running the family farm. Openness to Eastern markets made large-scale potato crops reasonable, the existence of a sugar refinery in the nearby Łapy made sugar beet crops a good option, low season in the pork cycle made the prices of pork rise. Unfavorable market conditions, embargos placed on farming produce, the closing down of the Łapy sugar refinery in 2008, restrictions on raising cows and pigs in one cattle shed, repeated emergence of contaminated zones – the area within three kilometers of animals declared diseased, in this case caused by African swine fever strain that the local farmers called “business disease” – all this caused farmers to transform to cow raising. The path of Jacek is a common experience of my interviewees. The decision to produce milk is largely a consequence of profit and loss calculations.

Despite the fact that cows are time-consuming livestock, this area of production is chosen most often. Changeability of milk prices is an unwanted phenomenon but because of lack of influence it needs to be taken into account. The key argument lies in monthly profits which are practically impossible to achieve with other types of farming production. Therefore, crops of chokeberry or currant which additionally require large areas, despite accessibility of purchasing centers in Poświętne or Białystok as well as the possibility of farmers to enjoy time

off, are not seen often and are additionally treated as ecological farming, with ambivalent approach of the community.

“Mlekovita” Dairy Cooperative, “Mlekpól” Dairy Cooperative, and the Łapy Dairy Cooperative are the main buyers of milk from the Sokoły farmers, although it is the first one that enjoys the highest popularity. As we can see, farmers that I was able to speak with do not function within a monopolized market. Despite this, in the villages of the Sokoly commune, next to the plaques with house numbers we can most often see Mlekovita tags. The fall of the dairy cooperative would therefore mean the downfall of the farms, as testified by Anna.

Farmers were faced with lack of alternatives as to the choice of a more secure and more profitable area of production. Sometimes, even the question about a hypothetical change of the area of farming if circumstances warranted such change was met with consternation. “There will be nothing to live on, no livestock, nothing to live on” (interview 46). Quite often, however, farmers expressed the possibility of ceasing to raise livestock if another, equally profitable, branch of farming arose. I also encountered testimonies expressing lack of agreement to the current state of affairs and calling for the possibility of running a farm with any specialization, equally profitable.

The abovementioned lack of alternative is a metaphor to a degree, although it does not mean that external factors, such as price, sales market, economic situation, made farmers from the Sokoly commune raise cows. The conditions offered them no choice.

Specializing in milk livestock opened the possibility of using the services of feeding specialists and milk examination from the Polish Federation of Dairy Livestock and Milk Producers [*Polska Federacja Hodowców Bydła i Producentów Mleka*]. Most of my interviewees makes use of lactagogue feed and some practice inbreeding among their cows. Even though such mating system may raise objections, its sensible use is, in my opinion, a sign of knowledge and awareness of genetic fundamentals of animal breeding and is thus an expression of drive towards professionalization of farming activity. Unfortunately, higher efficiency is often achieved at the cost of the animals.

Ideas also arose to introduce additional sales of dairy products – cheeses – apart from totally reorienting the production. My interviewee said, however, that this possibility depends on the appearance of a daughter-in-law on his farm – she would be able to take care of the additional activity.

Investments

An investment is a term that was inflected by all the possible cases in my interviews. It is understood in many ways – as doubling one's ownership or purchasing extra machines (Interview 39), taking a loan (Interview 28). Farmers invest not only when they raise new buildings but also when they finance the education of their children (Interview 23).

I had the impression that for many farmers from the Sokoly commune farming is never-ending investment in their workshop. It is bound with daily life, so the aging of machines is compared to the aging of farmers. Constant building, purchasing of machines, is for the 45-year-old Marek a chase in which the human element is only in the background (Interview 28).

Locating one's capital in farming is also motivated by competition, perceived as the force which finishes off "dying" farms – where farmers do not invest in anything, rather wanting just to reach retirement age. Over twenty years ago, when the results of Grażyna Jaworska and Witold Pieniążek's research were published, competition was rather conceptualized in the categories of injustice, making lives harder (Jaworska, Pieniążek 1995, pp. 34-36). One can therefore see a shift in the definition of this notion from the ethical and moral sphere into the economic sphere, associated with market forces

The goal of making investments is to develop the farm, and seeing the return on investment. For this reason, many of my interviewees, most of them young farmers, gave up the lump sum tax in favor of submitting VAT forms on each level of goods exchange.

While investing is a sign of creativity and entrepreneurship of farmers, some milk producers told me about the unnecessary phenomenon of over-investing. Michał, while trying to explain to me what the mechanism of the phenomenon was, drew my attention to a vicious circle, which one can enter overestimating one's capabilities and losing liquidity (Interview 35).

When conducting my research, I have not met a single farmer who would talk about their own farm in terms of over-investing. Maybe this is a consequence of the applicability of this term only to those farms that were subjected to execution sale.

Until 2015, when farmers needed to abide by the so-called milk quotas – milk production limits whose exceeding resulted in a financial fine – many of my interviewees were forced to pay a few thousand to a few hundred thousand fines for oversupply. However, even in this context, no mention of over-investing could be heard, most likely because my interviewees associated increased production of milk with the increase of monthly income.

Only once did I encounter a testimony of milk quotas stabilizing prices. In other cases, the quotas were considered an injustice and limitation of capabilities.

Marek appreciated the freedom of choosing a farming machine when he applied to EU's SAPARD farming program. Currently, other programs make it an obligation to purchase a machine whose parameters and size result from the farm's area. Marek, aware of the changing technologies, considers the predefined parameters for his target tractor an incomprehensible supervision that does not allow for running farm prospectively.

It is difficult to seize progress if investment is neglected. Spending thousands of zlotys on a new farming machine may be called an "invisible" location of funds. Therefore, such outlays or sunk costs are often considered wasted, impossible to gain back, but necessary. This is also one of the reasons why the purchase of a corn harvester is rarely considered – such a machine will be used only once a year, so a question as to the number of years when the investment provides a return is raised.

Donations – free money

The issue of donations, in case of a start-up grant⁷ (100 thousand zlotys) but also other means of external financing is conceptualized in a special way. The farmers from the Sokoly commune, my interviewees, used the category of "free money" in reference to external funds. Additionally, spending of this money, requiring matching invoices that confirm the funds have been well spent, is a blow to the independence and freedom of activity of those Podlasie milk farmers who agreed to give me an interview. Therefore, such "gifts" are seen in negative light.

I also consider it important that the voluntary character of applying for extra finances is becoming a necessity because of fluctuation of prices of milk. Therefore, some decisions of the farmers may seem obligatory, resulting from the current situation.

"Free money" from the EU, transferred to the farmer's bank account as allowance per hectare or per a piece of livestock, build unhealthy dependence in the eyes of the farmers. Receiving funds from an external source causes in my interviewees the need to reciprocate or at least the feeling of gratitude. According to Aleksander Brückner's *Słownik etymologiczny języka polskiego* [Etymological dictionary of Polish language] the word "darmo" meaning free, is derived from "dar" – a gift. Mauss's observation that a gift made out of a certain thing always retains in itself an element of the gift-giver (Mauss 1973 [1924], p. 227) makes it easier to understand my interviewees' reluctance to accept external finances. Receiving finances may

⁷ Intended to help young farmers set up and develop their business.

provide them with a new identity – that of a beneficiary of international economic-political structures.

Paradoxically, the voluntary character of applying for EU funds is not a counter-argument here. I have met no farmer who would declare their opposition to the EU by giving up reimbursements. Many were actually eager to get the funds into their bank accounts. Thanks to them, they were able to pay for fertilizers, oil or pesticides. EU funds were therefore used to invest in things needed to work the fields.

Submitting for EU reimbursements is not a problematic issue. Even when there are difficulties, farmers use the support of the personnel of the local Ośrodek Doradztwa Rolniczego [Farmers' Advisory Center] who assist in filling in the necessary forms at a fee. A farmer is not left with no assistance – if they are unable to fill in the forms themselves, they can count on the support of the experts from Szepietowo.

Yet another issue is the “injustice” with handing out allowances. It is often a topic of ethical and moral dilemmas among my interviewees. Anna, who, with her husband, signed over their farm to her son, supported the granting of allowances only to those farmers that actually produce something (Interview 45).

There may therefore arise a situation in which a farmer only owning land which they do not farm is able to get money from the EU. It is a possibility which receives pejorative assessments, with negative emotions. Therefore, Anna sees the solution in financing milk production, not only owning land. Money would be granted only to those who actually produce a specific good, such as milk, on their farm. Currently, milk producers can submit for allowances not only according to the hectares owned but also according to the herd count, if it is sufficiently high – in 2017 from three to 20 heads.⁸

Injustice is also seen in the amounts of allowances, in comparison to French and German farmers who – according to one of the farmers – receive even 50% more money than Poles (Interview 41).⁹ This undermines the rule of equality and support of the EU to less developed member states. Also, farmers from the Western member states are described as having guaranteed prices for their products, even at times of natural disasters, while in Poland during storms and hailstorms the farmer can only “blame God for low crops and less income.”

⁸<http://www.tygodnik-rolniczy.pl/articles/pieniadze-i-prawo/zmiany-w-doplatach-w-kampanii-2017/> [accessed 10.1.2018]

⁹ According to the data from the: <https://www.pb.pl/w-18-z-28-krajow-ue-doplaty-bezposrednie-dla-rolnikow-sa-wyzsze-niz-w-polsce-813145> page [accessed 13.1.2018], the average rate of area allowances was ca. 50% lower than in Germany and ca. 30% lower than in France.

Debt

When I asked my interviewees about the possibility of borrowing money from their neighbors, the answer was usually negative. A need for extra funds usually causes farmers to visit a bank. The attitude towards borrowed money is shaped somewhat different from that towards free money, as described in the previous section. There have been testimonies to the necessity of getting a loan, without which the development of the farm was impossible but at the same time the interviews are characterized by fear and reluctance to go into debt.

A debt of a farm is grounds to reevaluate the work ethos “on one’s own”. A farmer looks differently at things purchased from their own money versus things purchased on credit, making it obvious that they will be forced to use not-their machines that will need to be paid off in the next years or tens of years so that the farmers “come out on top.”

The risks offered by the loan agreement are more often taken by young farmers. Those who are approaching retirement age were often fearful of something going off wrong. The most significant persona in those testimonies was that of the court executive officer, auctioning insolvent farms – the heritage. The older generation of milk farmers values a credit-free situation of their activity. I have heard numerous testimonies of parents who, having signed off the farms to their children, spoke proudly of signing over a debt-free work environment, additionally stressing their strategies of farming that did not require a loan to prosper.

Initially, I associated the need to take a loan with limited agency of farmers. However, Tomasz, and later Bogdan, drew my attention to the individual character of decisions in this regard (Interviews 32 and 46).

It would be unfair to say that a credit controls farming activities. It may even stimulate the development of the farm, seen through its modernization. Those who pay a visit to the bank make decisions based on their individual situation. I would even go a step further and claim that a credit, in many situations, shows the professional awareness of the farmer. The fairness of the decision can be verified through appreciability noticeability of payments. If the amount deducted from monthly milk income is nothing to worry about, it means the financial situation of the farm is stable, so the credit is not additional burden. The situation looks somewhat different if the decision to get a loan is the result of wanting to purchase a better machine than that possessed by a neighbor. None of my interviewees associated themselves with the situation, they offered this example to stress the greed of farmers or their propensity to fall into temptation; farmers who over-invested in their farms with no right to exist in the nearest future.

The loan is usually the domain of those who decided to enter the path of modernization and development. My interviews also contained a motive of “catching up” with another farmer, associated with the feeling of competition (Interview 29).

Conclusions

The goal of this article was to take a closer look at the degree to which daily practices of the Podlasie milk farmers are the result – according to their declarations – of conscious consideration informed consideration, based on reflection, and to what degree they are the result of habits and feeling of lack of control over the changing farming situation. For this reason, agency became an important research category, expressed in action through intentionality and consistency towards undertaken activities. From the methodological viewpoint, I consider the analysis of farmer testimonies a much more measurable method of getting to know the volitional aspect of their actions than observing them would be able to reveal. My initial remarks were the reason for my thinking that the social structure and legal institutions limit the milk farmers, or even that they determine the farmers’ activities. However, with the progress of my study and deepening analysis of the collected materials, I concluded that farmers from the area of Sokoly do not only focus on coping with the limitations but are also able to find, in the widely understood farming policy of Poland and the EU (legal regulations, financing, loan terms) a stream of possibilities for creative activity. Therefore, speaking of the determination of Podlasie farmers by forces outside their control seems a harmful, reductionist simplification that does not explain much.

The research shows that profit is one of the largest motivators to running a farm in a specific way. Naturally, many other factors come to play, such as having a family, market situation (prices of milk, the free market game of supply and demand), having an adequately modern machinery. Farmers calculate, even when they declare they do no bookkeeping and balance sheets. They see the profits from purchasing a new tractor, they try to forecast when an investment will bring return, they consider profitability at practically each step of their activity, starting with purchasing or leasing land, through decisions to cooperate with feeding experts.

The selection of production specialization on a farm is not a necessity, but rather a well-thought-out decision, based on profit and loss calculation. Additionally, farmers often factor into their decision the individual preferences. Therefore, in the villages of the Sokoly commune and the neighboring Łapy commune, apart from the dominant model of activity – dairy production – there are also chicken farms, swine farms, ecological farms and sellers of aronia.

Increasing the farming area and increase of the herd count are, above all, a specific answer of farmers to unstable prices of milk, a strategy that allows them to maintain financial liquidity in their home budgets. My research shows that building one's prestige among other farmers in this way is of secondary concern, or at least difficult to assess because of my adopted method of ethnographic study. However, taking a loan in order to modernize their farms is, in my opinion, an informed decision, an expression of professionalism, rather than mindless mirroring of the activities of neighbors. Therefore, in my opinion, young farmers are more prone to taking a risk associated with loans than older farmers. The former may rely on receiving a non-returnable premium of 100 thousand zlotys, and the loans they take are on preferential terms (e.g. with lower interest).

Many of my interviewees expressed their willingness to change the profile of their farms, if the new setup was as profitable as selling milk. I did not hear testimonies to abandoning milk production only on the grounds of work- and time-consuming character of the specialization with perspectives of lower income. When asked about the potential of transforming the farms, one of the farmers compared the farm to a ship, whose course is hard to alter, as this activity requires the reconstruction of the barn, reaching for knowledge about the target specialization, and passion. As can be seen, resisting change is not a good explanation, also in this respect.

The expert character of my interviewees is also evidenced in them ridiculing EU regulations and requirements. It is the farmer who knows what machine is suited to their farm. Therefore, my interviewees do not agree to tractors being sized for the area of land owned, which is the case with EU farming programs.¹⁰ Similarly, rules of the notary-confirmed land lease – the necessity to pay taxes, paying the notary, duration of lease – are unfavorable and inadequate to the reality of farming to the degree that my interviewees make oral arrangements. In this practice, I see a form of farmers defending themselves from limitations on their freedom of work, rather than drive at avoiding extra costs, although this can be a reason for some. Maybe this is also a modern form of mutual help, as the informal transaction benefits both sides – the lessee has an area to grow e.g. corn, and the owner receives annual rent (and does not run a farm themselves usually).

¹⁰ The rules of selecting farming machines within the 2014-2020 Rural Area Development Program can be found at https://www.arimr.gov.pl/fileadmin/pliki/wnioski/PROW_2014_2020/MGR/2015/Zasady_doboru_maszyn_PROW_2014-2020.pdf [accessed 17.2.2018].

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