

# Anthropology of work in Poland<sup>i</sup>

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## Abstract

In this issue of AEER you will find several articles devoted to the new realities of agricultural work in Poland. I believe it would be worthwhile to define the place of these publications in the history of Polish anthropological research on work. And that is why this article was written as an attempt to sketch such a context. There has never been a strong branch of economic anthropology or anthropology of work in Polish anthropology. There are several reasons for this phenomenon, mainly historical and political in nature.

**Keywords:** anthropology of work, Poland ethnography, neoliberalism

## Introduction

In the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, when economic reflection flourished in Anglo-Saxon anthropology (Wilk, Cliggett 2007; Hann, Hart 2011), in Poland it was not only impossible to freely develop theoretical considerations (due to the necessity of functioning within the Marxism-Leninist paradigm), but it was also unthinkable to go into new research areas for political reasons, as there was no scientific freedom at that time. Ethnography was treated as an auxiliary branch of history, busy mainly with archiving disappearing forms of folk culture. The focus was on material culture, but, unlike nowadays, not on the relationship between objects and people, not on the meanings given to objects or their biographies, but on a detailed description of their appearance and, possibly, their functions, as well as on mapping their occurrence. Changes were indeed also noticed in various areas of work, but they were not treated as a starting point for describing the

essence of work. Instead, certain phenomena were recorded and the observed techniques were described in detail (pastoralism, etc.).

In the 1970s and 1980s and for a long time since, the topics of most interest to Polish anthropologists were spirituality and religiosity, which was related to the structuralist and phenomenological perspective these scholars had adopted. Meanwhile, the eastern borders opened and Polish anthropologists, just like their Western colleagues, started to investigate areas of the former USSR that so far had been closed to them. And, after a period of phenomenological and structuralist fascination with spirituality which had lasted for at least two decades, Polish anthropology became dominated by research on identity, ethnicity and nationality. Then, Polish scholars became attracted to domination, structure and resistance, which led anthropologists to carry out research at the interface between the system and the individual (Kościańska 2009).

## **Anthropology of work**

Only later came a focus on practices, and the main human practice is work. It was only during the last decade or two that local ethnologists were allowed to be inspired by Marxism and to study the Polish working class, because enough time had passed since real socialism for this issue to no longer be politically sensitive. In the last two or three decades, we can see a great influence of Western anthropologists who deal with similar issues, including those who simply conducted research in Poland (Hann 1985, Pine 2002, Dunn 2004). As a result of all these circumstances and for many decades scientists interested in work as a central phenomenon in human life had no chance to develop this kind of reflection in Polish anthropology. Initially, when ethnography focused on peasants, work was not an element of their culture that would differentiate them by regions and therefore it would not attract the attention of researchers. Work was treated rather as a necessary nuisance which made it impossible to devote more time and attention to rituals or folklore. Later, already in the post-war period, when the country was undergoing intense industrialization, few ethnographers were attracted to the vision of studying the new working class, as it would have been an area of study very strongly subjected to ideological censorship at that time.

But this does not mean that work was left completely unstudied. Even when the reflection on work was carried out as a separate field of study, it happened as a fringe exercise in the context of describing other phenomena. It appeared on the margins of other issues. For a long

time, the main effects of fieldwork by Polish ethnographers were monographs. However, these were not “Malinowski style” monographs focused on one specific institution and describing a given community through its prism, but attempts to describe a given group as a whole (according to the structure: “Social culture, material culture, spiritual culture”). In some of these books, work took up a prominent place, was described in details, although usually not problematized (e.g. Biernacka 1958, Drozd-Piasecka 1991, Dworakowski 1964, Markowska 1970, Obrębski 2007, Olędzki 1990, Pietkiewicz 2013, Witkoś 1977, Zawistowicz-Adamska 1948). Polish anthropology was at that time reduced to a descriptive approach focused on the details of abundant ethnographic materials. It did not engage in the theoretical discussions held in the West at that time, which was characteristic of Polish anthropology during the long period of the People's Republic of Poland. Nowadays, one cannot do science in that way anymore.

There were also very few studies devoted to the phenomenon of work, such as the works of Kazimiera Zawistowicz-Adamska about mutual aid and cooperation in folk cultures (1951, and also 1948b, 1976) or Anna Zadrożyńska's *Homo faber, homo ludens* (1983). But these publications also did not fit into discussions held by Western anthropologists. Since the realities they described were different from those in the West, so were their theoretical tools and, as a result, their work was largely forgotten. Zawistowicz-Adamska's book concerns such forms of agricultural work that required the cooperation of members of more than one farm. It analyses methods of cooperation and informal rules governing the reciprocity of neighbourly help in the countryside. It shows that “economic and social cooperation (...) always affects (...) all areas of social life of a specific community, because the principles of cooperation, observed in economic activities, determine in one way or another the norms of coexistence in various circumstances of the family, neighbourly and collective life of a given community” (Zawistowicz-Adamska 1976, pp. 505–506, see also Biernacka 1962). In this way, various aspects of the functioning of the local community are shown through the prism of cooperation. Of course, over the years and with the development of agricultural mechanization, methods of cooperation have changed, and the ties resulting from the need to cooperate have also weakened. Already in socialism the nature and causes of this phenomenon changed, as, among others, the circle of people involved in cooperation and exchange of favours expanded, and people from outside the countryside started to play more and more important roles - officials, salesmen, and managers in workplacesii. These changes deepened after 1989, in line with Richard Wilk's remark that where the role of gainful labour

(including production for sale) increases in agriculture, the networks of cooperation within the community weaken (Wilk 1987, p. 305, Krzyworzeka 2014). And yet the topic of neighbourly cooperation in the countryside has not become a thing of the past, only the forms of this cooperation have changed. And so, in recent years, along with the deteriorating condition of public transport in rural areas, it often includes carpooling to work (“taking turns”, i.e. a given week, one person gives a lift to the other three with her or his car, the next week the next person does, etc.) or to school (here the system is more complicated because the one who already has a driving license and a car gives rides, so that the next year, another person having reached driving age returns the favour to other younger neighbours - it is rather paying forward than paying back). As a result, the theoretical contribution of Kazimiera Zawistowicz-Adamska to the reflection on rural work and its specific aspect, namely neighbourly cooperation, is still important for contemporary anthropologists dealing with similar topics.

On the other hand, Anna Zadrożyńska's book is a great contribution to understanding the changes in how Poles relate to work. She wrote about industrialization in Poland, showing how within one or two generations a huge group of Polish farmers had to abandon rural models of work and adapt to secularized urban work in socialist factories. It is a real study on the anthropology of work and provides a great contribution to the theoretical reflection on the phenomenon of work. It is highly unfortunate that this study has not been included so far in international discussions on this subject, especially since it is devoted to both agricultural and industrial work - a very rare approach for ethnologists at the time. Anna Zadrożyńska showed how obvious work is in the countryside (1983, p. 13 et seq.) It was not a voluntary activity for peasants, or one subject to reflection or even decision, and at the same time it was all-encompassing – and this may be exactly the answer to the question of why so little space was devoted to the issue of work in classic ethnographic monographs. As she wrote, in old times work for peasants could be defined as: “Activities of high social, economic, psychological and ideological importance, (...) which organized the weekday, (...) although there needn't be a standard time devoted to performing individual activities, which were simply completed throughout the day with varying intensity, (...) these were supplemented by recreation and play, which, however, did not belong to free time, but were necessary activities, complementing work, iv, there was no free time, (...) any time outside of work was qualitatively opposed to work, it was non-working time, (...), non-working time was of equal value to working time, allowing for the recognition of both work and lack of work as

values, (...) the concept of non-work included elements of fun, rest, recreation, using content related to work in a way resembling a game or a competition” (Zadrożyńska 1983, pp. 19-20). In this context, the transition to work in an eight-hour system, depriving employees of the influence on the way they perform work and detaching them from the fruits of this work, introducing the category of “free time”, and not only “time of celebration” had to have far-reaching consequences.

Anna Zadrożyńska also emphasized extremely important references to the supernatural sphere: peasant work was inscribed in the cosmological vision of the world, it resulted from it, and this religious dimension gave work meaning and such an important place in the life of farmers. Hence also the attitude of peasants towards their land, widely described in the literature (e.g. Buchowski 2006, Bystroń 1947, Cancian 1989, Chałasiński 1938, Thomas, Znaniecki 1976, Wolf 1957), which cannot be reduced to purely economic or rational calculations and which was characterized by a sense of duty and responsibility. Another characteristic feature of the inhabitants of old time villages was their attachment to tradition, as discussed by Kazimierz Dobrowolski and Andrzej Woźniak (1976, cf. Zadrożyńska 1983, p. 16, as well as Western researchers such as Harris 2005).

Therefore, there are good Polish studies on work. However, since for many decades Polish anthropology of work developed largely independently of the theoretical influences of Western economic anthropology, it is not easy to draw from the heritage and tradition of Polish anthropology while at the same time dealing with the necessity and need to follow the international tradition. These two trends - continuing the Polish scientific tradition and drawing on the Western one - for a long time developed independently, without influencing each other. But after 1989, this started to change slowly. One of the first examples of this is the work by Michał Buchowski, who already conducted research on work and class structure in the Polish countryside (1995) in the early 1990s, and managed to combine both inspirations from Western literature and Polish ethnographic tradition. At the same time, a study by Witold W. Pieniążek and Grażyna Jaworska entitled “Contexts of economic thinking in the countryside” (1995) - intended to be an expert opinion for officials of the Ministry of Agriculture and Economy, but written on the basis of very solid ethnographic research conducted by employees of the Institute of Ethnology of the University of Warsaw and a good selection of literature in the field of economic anthropology. One of the authors was working on an unfinished doctorate in anthropology at that time. This study is worth mentioning because it not only captured the views of farmers at a very characteristic moment of

political and economic transformations, but also because their opinions and attitudes related to their work were interpreted through terms used in Western anthropology – a practice which was far from common at that time. Buchowski, Pieniążek and Jaworska continue Zadrożyńska's reflections on the deep-rooted reluctance of Polish farmers to work for another farmer. To this day, the derogatory and full of contempt Polish word “parobek” i.e. “farmhand” is used in the local community to describe a person working at another farmstead (Buchowski 1996, p. 39; Zadrożyńska 1983, p. 75; compare also Harris 2005, p. 435; Jaworska, Pieniążek 1995, p. 17; Krzyworzeka 2014, p. 198; Pine 2002, p. 87 et seq. ). This attitude conflicts with the EU agricultural policy and limits the possibility of expanding farms because, in the face of a significant increase in the scale of agricultural production, the owner has difficulties in finding employees. All these authors also emphasized the distribution of tasks throughout the whole day, characteristic of rural work (Zadrożyńska 1983, p. 20) and which actually resulted in a feeling of constant bustle (Jaworska, Pieniążek 1995, p. 16).

An interesting contemporary study on work is also the book by Tomasz Rakowski, published in Polish in 2009, entitled “*Hunters, Gatherers, and Practitioners of Powerlessness: An Ethnography of the Degraded in Postsocialist Poland*” (2016). The author describes illegal and unofficial work, which was a remedy for the then huge unemployment. He deals both with agricultural regions of central Poland and the mining area in Silesia, i.e. places most affected by unemployment. He discusses grassroot initiatives, more or less effective ways of finding a job and some income. While doing so, he shows both the former context of a stable work nostalgically remembered by the heroes of his monograph, and the contemporary functioning of work in the value system of his interlocutors. Work is therefore described here not so much as a phenomenon in itself, but through a photo negative - by its absence and the ways of dealing with this inactivity.

v. On the other hand, my book on agricultural strategies of work and survival *Rolnicze strategie pracy i przetrwania* (Krzyworzeka 2014) is a study strictly devoted to issues of agricultural work and constitutes an attempt at synthesising the Polish tradition of rural research with Western theories of economic anthropology.

The situation has, therefore, changed drastically. It is currently easier to come across Polish anthropological works which copiously draw inspiration from Western intellectual concepts and fashions, but completely lack references to Polish research. In the articles presented in this issue of AEER, the authors tried to combine these two trends without forgetting about the achievements

of Polish ethnographers, but also in order to join Western theoretical discussions. Agnieszka Kosiorowska (2019) shows how farmers were deprived of control over the milk production process (although they were not deprived of the means of production), and to what forms of resistance it led. In turn, Maria Bolek and Anna Jakubowska (2019) reflect on how traditional work models influence the modern perception of who is hardworking and who is lazy, and thus shape the actions of rural residents. Julia Harasimowicz (2019) shows how raising children to become farmers has changed over time.

Nowadays, however, work still appears in Polish anthropology rather as a context for other issues, e.g. migration (Bielenin-Lenczowska 2015) or family psychiatric care (Perzanowski 2018). There are also more and more articles and books devoted to theoretical considerations on neoliberal changes in work models (Mokrzan 2019). Researchers dealing with work face completely new problems and challenges, because work is exiting factories, and, also increasingly leaving the countryside. Other, new phenomena become more important, such as: uberization and the experience of working in international corporations (Krzyworzeka, Gaggiotti in press). In fact, it is impossible to write about the anthropology of work without subscribing to the anthropological critique of capitalism, because it is capitalism that provides the framework for most contemporary work experiences.

In my own recent research I have come to the conclusion that in some contexts neoliberal notions cannot show the whole complexity of the situation. In the years 2015-2017 I conducted a long ethnographic research in the village of Morawinka in central Poland. It used to be a fashionable summer retreat before the Second World War, and there are still many summer homes, owned mainly by Warsawians, usually well-educated and belonging to the middle class: doctors, lawyers, architects, artists, etc. I was focusing on the interactions between second residence owners and local handymen who take care of the summer houses during the winter and help repairing them from time to time. I have observed many misunderstandings – if not conflicts – between these two groups. Summer home owners have quite a different idea about the jobs they commission than locals who are hired to do them. I realized that in this case some kinds of work can have different forms or belong to different type not based on their immanent characteristics but based on the social context. Handymen in Morawinka seem to be perfect candidates to be pushed into uberization, but they resist this trend. The handymen's jobs seems to meet all the requirements of the perfect gig economy work. That is why the city dwellers, neoliberal middle class workers

themselves, expect locals to behave like uberized workers. They expect to hire a handyman, tell them what to do, get it done, pay them and thus end their relationship. However, for the locals it is an entirely different story. They don't depend solely on their handymen job done for second home owners, as most of them work in other places or are pensioners, and working for second home owners is a part time job for them. Furthermore, as the interaction takes place on their own territory, they feel they have more social power in the situation, even though on a different ground it would probably be otherwise as second home owners belong to a group usually seen as situated higher in the social hierarchy. Thus, in this particular case, handymen can more or less successfully enforce their own vision of their job. As a result they treat it as creative work, giving them the opportunity to solve problems in their own ways, not using bureaucratic, prescribed scenarios, even if the second home owners would prefer to have the job done in a standardized way. They are able to do the job with their informal, self-gained knowledge, even if their clients would rather have them formally trained. They also tend to use the job as an opportunity for building social relationships even if the other party is very much opposed to the idea (e.g. all the unwanted drinking alcohol with the handymen, chatting with them etc.).

## Conclusion

I believe that this shows the unique input that ethnography and anthropology can bring to contemporary studies of work, as we – ethnographers – have insights into very local ways in which people negotiate and play with the globalized, neoliberal context of work. We can use those rather general ideas and notions to observe their local manifestations. But the history of economic anthropology and the long war between substantivists and formalists (Wilk, Cliggett 2007) teaches us a lesson worth remembering, namely how dangerous and inadequate it is to use mainstream economic notions to describe and interpret people's actions that are embedded in social and cultural realities. It is the power of ethnographic details that allows anthropologists to go beyond a generalized neoliberal set of categories. In a way, this is exactly what anthropology has been doing from its beginnings: showing the social and cultural context of people's actions, the informal part of their everyday practices.

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<sup>i</sup> The article is partly based on research funded by the National Science Centre grant no. 2013/09/B/HS3/04302.

<sup>ii</sup> As Elizabeth Dunn notes, networks of acquaintances being engaged in one's own business "obviously resulted from the socialist economy of scarcity. People built networks by giving each other gifts and doing all kinds of favours and then used them to gain access to missing goods " (Dunn 2004, pp. 70-71).

<sup>iii</sup> In the realities of the former countryside, work was something obvious not merely to the peasants. From the researchers' point of view, it also was perceived this way. It was not a differentiating element - neither specific to groups of people nor to regions. And at that time ethnography largely focused on regional differences, therefore work may not have been the most interesting element for the authors. This situation changed over time. Perhaps most when work entered into the market sphere - such work stands out more clearly from other activities of everyday life, both in the eyes of workers and researchers.

<sup>iv</sup> As in the case of the "tłoka" i.e. a traditional form of mutual aid, which consisted in the neighbours gathering one day at the farm of the first farmer, working the fields jointly, and then feasting together. The next day the party would move to the farm of the next farmer, and the pattern was repeated. The "tłoka" was an ubiquitous form of assistance in farming work requiring more people, it was popular especially in eastern Poland (cf. Zawistowicz-Adamska 1951, 1976).

<sup>v</sup> Another book by Rakowski (2019) can also be considered a study of work, although again - work is not its main topic, but cooperation and finding new ways of operating in new economic realities. It describes the Mongolian realities, so I do not include it here.