

Shifting social structures in rural Poland

Rural Revolution

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Farmers are no longer the dominant group in rural Poland; their numbers have been decreasing over the last twenty years. They are gradually being displaced by representatives of the middle class

Most people associate the countryside with farming. All of the relevant definitions are centered around it; it is regarded as a fundamental part of the rural economy and the main occupation of its inhabitants. Meanwhile all analyses indicate that the role of farming in the Polish economy is shrinking, as is the percentage of farmers among rural inhabitants. The majority of rural households (approx. 60%) have no links with farming, with less than 30% of the rural population working in farming and just 13% depending on it as their main source of income. This relative decrease in the significance of farming has been a gradual process over the last three decades. It means that rural areas have been and continue to be subject to re-stratification – significant changes to social structure. The dynamics have varied, as documented by studies of representative samples of the Polish population.

A more bourgeois countryside

The period under analysis can be divided into two parts. The 1990s were the time of post-communist economic transformation, which brought extensive changes to social structures; after 2003, we have seen a “new adaptation” in the wake of Poland’s acces-

sion to the European Union. The direction of changes in rural areas has been constant throughout, although the dynamics have been varied. This is especially clear by combining socio-professional groups into larger wholes. Following concepts outlined by Pierre Bourdieu, I differentiate between a “middle class” (socio-professional groups 1-4) and a “working class,” comprising farmers (group 6) and laborers (groups 5 and 7-9). However, I also agree with Henryk Domański in that I do not differentiate any newly forming “upper class.” Using these divisions, the process becomes clearer: the changing percentages of both aggregates in the whole structure, and the changing composition of the working class, are marked. In 1991, one in eight rural inhabitants was a member of the middle class, whereas by 2013 the figure rose to one in four. In 1991, the proportions of farmers and various categories of laborers in the working class were almost equal, while in 2013 laborers outnumbered farmers by almost two to one. However, social structures are not identical in all rural areas. They are linked with the type of local economy: in those centered around farming, the share of farmers in the social structure is significantly higher than in regions with a more diverse economy. The main point remains, however, that farmers are no longer a dominant group anywhere.

The last twenty-five years have seen many different changes in the socio-professional structure of the Polish countryside. Of the three parallel processes – de-agrarization, gentrification and proletarianization – the first two have been the most marked. The percentage of farmers has fallen by 40%, the middle class has more than doubled, while the number of laborers has grown by just a fifth.

The most noticeable indicator of change is the drop in the number of farmers. De-agrarization of rural areas is the most pronounced in regions with a diverse economy, regarded as multifunctional or suburban.



Jacek Ostrowski

The most significant way of shifting away from farming is “self-elimination,” when many farmers (or their descendants) move to other socio-professional groups, either joining other laborers or the middle class. And even if this departure is only partial and these people retain some of their farming activities, their social identity shifts, since at least a part of their income comes now from other sources.

The second process is the proletarianization of social structures. Since there were already high numbers of laborers in 1991, this dynamic is far less noticeable. However, at around 40%, socio-professional groups of laborers remain the dominant share in rural social structures.

The most highly dynamic process is the growth of the middle class; according to Domański, their clearest attribute is their professional identity. This socio-professional group tends to be well educated, which in turn means its members have higher personal incomes. Due to the cultural capital that goes with this, which largely defines the lifestyles of members of the middle class, the process of its expansion is frequently referred to as social gentrification or *embourgeoisement* – saturating the countryside with people with a higher social

standing. This process was highly dynamic in the early 1990s, although it has slowed significantly since 2003. Additionally, the momentum and progression of this process vary greatly in rural regions: they are the highest in suburban and multifunctional areas, and significantly lower in farming areas where the participation of the middle class is more than twice lower. This is due to two trajectories of gentrification. The first is driven by growing levels of education of the rural population with increasing numbers of people educated to a higher level, which enables them to take more senior positions in socio-professional structures. The second is caused by migration of members of the middle class from urban areas to the countryside, known as counterurbanization or rural gentrification. The latter was first noted in Poland in 2000 and has remained in place since, in particular in suburban areas.

Averaging structure

To generalize the ongoing changes and their direction, I make use of the concept of *moyennisation*, coined by Henri Mendras in 1988. It was created to describe shifts in French society during the period of steady economic growth, in the paper bearing the significant title “*La seconde révolution*

Such a sight is now increasingly rare in the Polish countryside, as most (approx. 60%) rural households now have no links with farming. Shown here: Anna Stepiń, owner of an ecofarm in Kietpiń near Tuchola

The social and professional evolution of rural Poland

Socio-professional groups*	Year of study		
	PGSS 1991	DS 2003	DS 2013
1. Managers, directors, senior officials	0.4	2.5	2.8
2. Specialists	1.8	6.6	9.4
3. Technicians and intermediate-level staff	7.0	7.5	5.2
4. Administrators, office workers	3.3	5.2	4.8
5. Service industry workers, sales assistants	6.5	8.8	10.9
6. Farmers, gardeners, foresters, fishermen	46.4	37.6	27.5
7. Industrial workers, tradesmen	16.4	15.5	22.6
8. Machine and heavy equipment operators	7.8	9.0	9.5
9. Basic laborers	10.4	7.3	7.3

■ **Middle class 1-4** 1991: **12.5%**; 2003: **21.8%**; 2013: **22.2%**

■ **Popular class 5-9** 1991: **87.5%**; 2003: **78.2%**; 2013: **77.8%**

Source: author's analysis of data obtained for the General Census in 1991 and the Social Diagnosis in 2003 and 2013. Data expressed as percentages.

*The classification followed the first digit of the four-digit classification of occupations (ISCO-88) in 1991, then later followed Poland's interpretation of ISCO-88 (Central Statistical Office).

française 1965-1988. *Moyennisation* is the opposite of polarization; it is the process of the formation of a middle class at the cost of outlying groups, and the assimilation of behaviors and lifestyles. In other words, it is a process of averaging out social structures, in which the middle class starts to dominate in society, either numerically or ideologically. This "averaging out" of rural areas in Poland is somewhat overshadowed by more obvious processes: the progressing education of the upper classes, and social exclusion processes, whose observation may

form the foundation of the assertion of a "broken social structure." And yet it is this averaging process which seems to be the most fundamental in shifting rural social structures. ■

Further reading:

- Domański H. (2002). *Polska klasa średnia* [The Polish Middle Class]. Wrocław: FNP.
- Halamska M. (2013). *Wiejska Polska na początku XXI wieku. Rozważania o gospodarce i społeczeństwie* [Rural Poland at the Start of the 21st Century]. Warsaw: Scholar.