

## Looking for a New Sense of “Place”: Farmers’ Opinions about Rural Transformations in Poland<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** *Countryside in Poland is currently undergoing significant social and economic transformations. One of the most important effects of these changes is the decreasing role of agriculture in the lives of rural residents. This has various consequences for the traditional institutions of social and economic development, for the changing lifestyles and the development of rural space. There is an important question of the foundations of cultural identity in the new circumstances, related to the post-socialist transition, the influence of EU policy and globalisation. Rapid structural transformations and the formation of post-productivity countryside give rise to a question of the new role of countryside in the country and region, as well as its role to the inhabitants. In Polish conditions, there is a clash between different discourses promoting different understandings of rurality, such as the media, legal or casual discourse. The primary purpose of the presentation is to show the farmers' opinions concerning the transformation of the Polish countryside, the social and economic role of their profession, their job satisfaction, and the perceptions of their own living space. The aim of the study is to define the intergenerational discourse about the changes in agriculture (in the context of the transfer of knowledge). These considerations should lead us to determine where today's farmers see the sense of “place”, whose functions and meanings are undergoing quick rural metamorphoses. Geographical analysis of the level of knowledge about agriculture is related to the territorial context. From a geographical point of view, the transfer of knowledge to agriculture can be divided into four socio-spatial levels, i.e. national, regional, local, family. It was determined that knowledge of agriculture has many sources. There are significant differences concerning the acquisition of knowledge in agriculture at the national and regional levels. Young farmers are more pragmatic. At the local level, regardless of age, there are similar opinions about the role of families and communities in the transfer of knowledge. The change in the nature of Polish agriculture makes the concept of “place” expand.*

**Keywords:** *countryside, farmers, post-socialist transition, cultural studies, Poland.*

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary Polish countryside is undergoing economic modernisation, largely owing to the structural transformation support funds from the European Union. One important element of these transformations is the functional reconstruction of rural areas towards diversity in economic activities, including agriculture itself. Multifunctional development results in the changing role of agriculture in the economic and social structure of rural areas. This activity becomes a lesser and lesser source of income for the rural population. The role of agriculture as a component in the gross domestic product is also decreasing. According to J. Wilkin (2012), approximately 60% of rural population do not have any connection to agricultural production and the use of arable land. The share of agriculture in the GDP is declining and is now around 3%. Its share in the country's production resources is also falling. However, agriculture has a very important function, i.e. it is crucial for securing food, as well as many other important goods and services necessary for the modern society. Another important change following Poland joining the EU was the increase of agricultural income. In the years 2004-2010, they were more than twice as high as before joining the EU, while various agricultural subsidies have constituted over 50% of the farmers' income in recent years (Wilkin 2012).

The social character of agriculture is also an important function. Although living off agriculture requires huge farms, there are tens of thousands of 1-2 ha farms in Poland that exist due to sentimental reasons and the provision of social and capital security.

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Polish agriculture and its contribution to socio-economic development of the country should not be judged solely from the economic and financial income viewpoint. An important role is played by the social and cultural characteristics that are associated with the residential function, values associated with building local, regional and national identity, as well as the whole complex of spiritual culture. Using qualitative methods that may serve to describe and interpret these processes is one of the important challenges faced by researchers studying the countryside (Fedyszak-Radziejowska 2012).

## 2. THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

The work is based on the assumptions of post-structuralist approach, including the sociological concept of “spatiality” (H. Lefebvre), as well as the resulting geographical concept of rural space research in a model developed by K. Halfacree (2009).

Post-structuralism in geography uses the achievements of social sciences, especially sociology, mainly in the field of theoretical basis. For human geographers, one of the key theoretical works, which led to a long and fruitful discussion, was the book “The Production of Space” by French philosopher and sociologist H. Lefebvre (1991). H. Lefebvre (1991, p. 33) constructed his work around a conceptual triad. He described various ways in which space is produced and reproduced. The elements of this triad are:

- **spatial practices** – which embrace production and reproduction, and the particular locations and spatial sets of characteristics of each social formations;
- **representations of space** – which are tied to the relations of production and to the “order” which these relations impose, and hence to knowledge, to signs, to codes, and “frontal” relations;
- **Spaces of representation** – complex symbolism linked to the clandestine or underground side of social life.

This concept was critically developed in human geography, especially within its radical orientation, which was important not only for cognitive reasons and attempts at new interpretation of space, landscape and places (e.g. Harvey 1989), but also was a very strong impulse for the development of theory. H. Lefebvre's concept of production of space was inspiring for research in human geography and sociology of space (e.g. Harvey 1989). Most of the studies were conducted on the example of urban space. Theoretical transformations in rural studies, especially the “cultural turn” of the 1990s, raised interest in new theoretical concepts among rural geographers (Wójcik 2012). The greatest credit for developing research concepts related to H. Lefebvre's basic theses should be given to K. Halfacree (1993, 1995, and 2009). He developed a model that identifies three major dimensions of rural space studies, i.e.

- **rural localities** – inscribes through distinctive spatial practices;
- **representations of the rural** – formal expressions;
- **Everyday lives of the rural** – what it is like becoming in the rural.

Studies of space experienced by people conducted by geographers have a long tradition. Many authors proposed expanding the interests of human geography towards studying the perception of the environment contained in human conceptions. In-depth studies on the geography of perception started in the 1970s as an expression of social sciences' departure from positivist models that explained spatial diversity towards socio-cultural models (Lisowski 2003). Regardless of the aspect of research of experience and remembrance of space, both in Polish and foreign geography, there is a lack of works related to the social perception of rural socio-cultural environment.

The results presented below are the first attempt at analysing research results as part of the *Models of knowledge transfer in agriculture and its influence on agricultural productivity – spatial analysis*, financed by the National Centre of Science (Poland). The main objective of this multi-faceted research project is to develop models of knowledge transfer in agriculture in spatial terms. The effect will be the development of a diagnosis of sources of knowledge for farmers and the level of its accessibility and usage by the farmers. In addition to obtaining information from formal sources, i.e. the databases of regional and local authorities, interviews with farmers, including in-depth interviews, will also play an important role. The results described in this paper come from in-depth interviews aimed at identifying ways of acquiring knowledge by farmers and its spatial (territorial) context.

The main purpose of this study is to determine the intergenerational discourse about the changes in agriculture in the context of the transfer of knowledge. These studies rely on the selection of rural

extended families, in which representatives of all generations, for example, a grandfather/grandmother, a son/daughter and a grandson/granddaughter, support themselves off agricultural work on a family farm.

The idea was to carry out long, full day interviews with the whole families.<sup>2</sup> It was assumed that 10 families will be selected from areas with similar natural conditions for agricultural production in central Poland, i.e. in lowland areas with good soils, along large river valleys (Warsaw-Berlin glacial valley).<sup>3</sup>

### 3. SOCIO-SPATIAL DIMENSIONS OF KNOWLEDGE

Geographical analysis of the dimensions of knowledge about agriculture should relate to the territorial (spatial) context. Based on the farmers’ answers we can distinguish four socio-spatial levels of knowledge transfer to farmers. These are:

1. The level of common knowledge – national level;
2. The level of regional knowledge – regional level;
3. The level of local knowledge (I) – local community level;
4. The level of local knowledge (II) – family level.

#### *The level of common knowledge*

Knowledge is the result of media coverage and the image of Polish agriculture in different media. The knowledge of Polish agriculture is part of popular knowledge. The media perpetuate or change the stereotypes. Farmers emphasize that the interests of Polish agriculture require a political struggle at the European Union level, especially in the context of the distribution of money between individual countries.

Polish farmers treat EU policy instrumentally. They see it as an opportunity to improve their living standards and maintain this standard in the coming years. This situation has a political context and is related to the recognition of which political party is able to guarantee an influence on the policy of Polish government and defend the interest of agriculture and the countryside.

There are generational differences in the responses of farmers. Older farmers interpret their general knowledge of Polish agriculture in a more sentimental manner. They see agriculture as an element that is essential for the functioning of the country (patriotism).

#### *Sample statement from a farmer (69 years old)*

*“my father always said that we were here to provide people with food and this has been the special role of the Polish countryside for centuries..., everyone should think how to make Polish agriculture strong and independent of other countries...”*

Young farmers interpret their knowledge in pragmatic terms. They see agriculture as a method of social modernisation and the improvement of living standards.

#### *Sample statement from a farmer (35 years old)*

*“...agriculture is a good profession, like any other, provided that it brings a high income..., I do not care who I sell my pigs to, Poles, Germans, Russians, as long as I make a good living...”*



**Photo1.** Protest in Szczecin in 2012. (West Pomerania region). Polish farmers demanded more rights in tenders concerning the sale and purchase of agricultural land.

<sup>2</sup> In the course of the project the results of similar study were published by Mark Riley (2014).

<sup>3</sup> The interviews conducted in 2013 and 2014

The protest was mentioned in most families.

Source: <http://www.mmszczecin.pl/416959/rolnicy-nie-wytrzymali--ciagnikow-na-ulicach-szczecina-mieszkanicy-oburzeni-film> (accessed 19.11.2014)



**Photo2.** *Protest in Lodz in 2014. In 2014, farmers' protests were held all over Poland against the Russian embargo on agricultural products.*

This was one of the main topics of conversations with farmer families, discussed regardless of the person's age.

Source: <https://www.radiolodz.pl/posts/2650-dzis-protest-rolnikow-przed-urzedem-wojewodzkiem> (accessed 19.11.2014)

#### *The level of regional knowledge (regional level)*

This level of knowledge refers to the contacts with the institutions that support and develop agriculture. The spatial organisation of branches of institutions that support the development of agriculture and the countryside plays the key role. This is due to the regional variation in Polish agriculture and the corresponding policy of agricultural development in the regions.

The result of this is the farmers' search for knowledge about the trends in regional specialisation and the organisations that can help settle on an optimal agricultural production and organisation of production. Knowledge results from the influence of institutions. Firstly, government institutions, mainly branches of state institutions (subordinated to the ministries), which redistribute agricultural aid (aid programs, agricultural advisers). Secondly, commercial institutions, offering help in improving farm productivity. This help can involve filling out and submitting applications to governmental institutions, writing business plans, information on innovations in agriculture and their application.

There are also generational differences in the responses of farmers. Older farmers interact mainly with government institutions. Young farmers largely pay commercial institutions for their help.

#### *Sample statement from a farmer (29 years old)*

*"... Every year, I pay a proven company not only to submit applications for EU funds on my behalf, but I also buy reports that give the expected trends in agricultural product demand..."*



**Photo3.** *Young farmers in line to apply for a grant for the operation of a farm in Torun*

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The Agency for Restructuring and Modernisation of Agriculture is the main institution of government distribution of EU funds for agriculture. Farmer’s statements about its role in the mediation between them and decision-makers were the main topic in relation to regional institutions.

Source: <http://www.pomorska.pl/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20140605/ROLNICTWO31/140609616>  
(Accessed 19.11.2014)

### *The level of local knowledge (I) (local community level)*

Most Polish villages are small settlements with relatively dense buildings. Villages are usually local communities with a long historical tradition, especially in the eastern, central and southern Poland. At this level, neighbours are the primary source of knowledge about agriculture. The exchange of information takes place during “face to face” meetings and observation of the work of other farmers.

There are no significant differences in the character of transmitted knowledge between statements from farmers. Direct conversations usually involve people at similar age, but there are no rules to be observed. Knowledge exchange is a historically continuous process associated with daily activities.

### *Sample statement from a farmer (35 years old):*

*“...I have lived in this village since I was born, and I know everyone here. We know a lot about one another, but the most important thing is that I can count on the help of other people. A lot of families live off farming and it brings people even closer together, as we have similar problems...”*



**Fig.1.** An example of an invitation to participation in the social integration of the countryside based on local traditions, aided by European Union’s subsidies (the grand wedding reception of Jagna and Boryna).

Regardless of their age, farmers have noticed the growing significance of initiatives going back to tradition (local history) as the source of intergeneration integration.

Source: [http://www.lipcereymontowskie.pl/images/wielkiewesele\\_plakat.jpg](http://www.lipcereymontowskie.pl/images/wielkiewesele_plakat.jpg)

### *The level of local knowledge (II) (family level)*

Nowadays, expert knowledge (innovative knowledge) is obtained outside the family. Knowledge in the family is related to one’s own heritage. This knowledge involves primarily one’s own farm. Multi-generation families have larger knowledge concerning their own family histories, as well as stronger identity. Their knowledge of agriculture is associated with the knowledge of their own land.

### *Sample statement from a farmer (46 years old):*



*“...I will not learn a lot of things outside my own farm. First of all, I will not learn the requirements of my soil, where I can sow the correct crops, where they will grow better...”*



Photo 4. Stanislaw Budzeń (Lodz region). Master in artificial cow milking (2007-2011). The head of one of the families who participated in the study. Involved in the life of the local and parish community. Represents the region in agricultural competitions.

Source: [http://www.rabkoland.pl/main/mistrzostwa\\_polski\\_w\\_dojeniu\\_sztucznej\\_krowy.html](http://www.rabkoland.pl/main/mistrzostwa_polski_w_dojeniu_sztucznej_krowy.html)

### **SUMMARY**

Knowledge of agriculture has many sources. From a geographical point of view, the transfer of knowledge to agriculture can be divided into four levels, i.e. national, regional and local. There are significant differences concerning the acquisition of knowledge in agriculture at the national and regional levels. Young farmers are more pragmatic. At the local level, regardless of age, there are similar opinions about the role of families and communities in the transfer of knowledge. The change in the nature of Polish agriculture makes the concept of “place” expand. Farmers use four meanings when speaking about place. We can distinguish the traditional meanings:

- The family home as a place – knowledge is needed for the transmission of values;
- Village as a place – knowledge is needed for the perpetuation of social relations between neighbours).

New meanings are more abstractive and we can distinguish two ways of thinking about the space (place).

- Region as a place – knowledge is needed for pragmatic purposes, i.e. to improve farm productivity);
- Country as a place – knowledge is needed to define and maintain the identification in face of the growing economic and political competition within the European Union.

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