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The Polish milky ways A socio-historical case of the human-nonhuman relationship

Polskie drogi mleczne. Społeczno-historyczne studium relacji ludzi z istotami nieludzkimi

Introduction

The main aim of this article is to discuss the ways in which farmers in Eastern Poland are engaged in milk/dairy production and raising dairy cattle. The objective is to explore human-nonhuman relationships and (trans)formation within different historical and social constellations and networks. This refers to a broader discussion on how the changes in agriculture and politics reshaped the landscape of Polish small towns and rural areas by changing the relations and networks of various agents: people, products, animals and spaces, as well as how these aspects are remembered by farmers today.

In this study I attempt to look at the local community through the lens of one product: milk. The analysis is based on Warren Belasco's concept of social superfoods, which refers to products that hold significant social and economic importance within a community (2002). This is inspired by studies, such as Marek Kurlansky's historical analyses of the social history of specific condiments (salt) (2002) or fish (cod) (1997), a fascinating monograph on beans by the historian Ken Albala (2007)

or Sidney Mintz's famous study on colonisation shown through the history of sugar (1986), Daniel Miller's analysis of Coca-Cola (1998b), and Theresa Preston-Werner's analysis of the identity aspects of gallo pinto (2009). Closer geographically, studies by Nancy Ries (Russia) (2009), Neringa Klumbyte (2009) and Zsuza Gille (2009), devoted respectively to the role of the potato in Russia, the Lithuanian sausage and peppers in Hungary, constitute interesting analyses with the product as the starting point.

The theoretical foundation is also drawn from the field of "multi-species ethnography" (ME) which emerged to investigate "how the human has been formed and transformed amid encounters with multiple species of plants, animals, fungi, and microbes" (Gatto, McCardle 2019: 14, 15). This perspective considers species, such as dairy cattle, and materialities (milk) as active cultural agents rather than passive matter to be explored. I use this approach to think about certain chosen aspects within sets of relations between humans, animals and milk, and space in view of the Latourian actor-network theory (Latour 2005), proposing to frame this set of dependencies in the term "milky ways".

Methodology and field

This article is based on ethnographic data gathered in July and August 2019 among rural communities in Eastern Poland, but also on the insights I gained during previous years of research in this region.[1] I visited and interviewed farmers in villages around the town of Dąbrowa Białostocka who kept dairy cattle, both those who made it their main source of income and those for whom it was one of many pursued economic activities. I talked to some of the largest local producers, who maintain herds of around a hundred cows (there were only a few of such producers in the area), as well as those who kept fifty or so animals. A notable group of farmers were these who had around ten to fifteen cows and engaged in local activities and networks.[2] There was also another, aging and quickly diminishing group of farmers, namely those who kept one or two animals and consumed milk within their homestead. This last mode of cow raising is rooted in history and pervasive despite its questionable economic viability,

1 In 2019 I visited cow-raising farmers and people engaged and specialising in milk production/processing/sale among whom I conducted 25 semi-structured interviews focused on both the history and the present day aspects of milk production, consumption and exchange. This article is based primarily on research within a project "Social memory of Polish village and small-towns' inhabitants. Anthropological perspective on food and postsocialism" carried out in 2018–2019, financed by the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology. I also refer to data collected during my previous stays in the region and extensive research on food production between 2010–2014 (a.o. NCN 172028 "Cultural and Social Features of Food Production and Consumption among Local Communities in View of Recent Geopolitical Changes. An Ethnographic Monograph of Dąbrowa Białostocka and its Surroundings" and research trips financed by the Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology University of Warsaw), which amounted to around 300 interviews.

2 All these farmers fall into the category of VAT farmers, whom I describe later in the article.

perhaps because it could also be inscribed in the idea of self-sufficiency of "peasants". Milk, and keeping even a single cow, were once a pillar of this self-sustenance.

The method of research included participant observation, multisensory participation (Pink 2015) as well as conducting semi-structured interviews. My research participants included farmers who raised cows, members of a local association of dairy producers, in whose work I also participated, as well as veterinarians and retired farmers who related their memories of the olden ways of dairy farming. During my research trips, I lived either at a small farm or in Dąbrowa. I visited local farmers, their farmsteads, barns, meadows and fields, I saw their animals and I participated in numerous local initiatives centred on local food production.

The area of study included villages around a small town of Dąbrowa Białostocka in the Polish borderland region of Podlachia (Podlasie), just 25 kilometres from Belarus, on railway routes to Lithuania and Russia. Its exact location is important, since historically this region has been the embodiment of the stereotype of Polish farming. There, farming was the most fragmented and was perceived to be most "traditional". It is, unsurprisingly, also one of the poorest regions of the country: the once-popular jokes about people who would split matches into four out of thriftiness were about these communities, and even today this imagery of poverty and marginalisation is still present not only in the media discourse, but also among the local farmers themselves. One of them told me: "We live just like the Indians, where the ghosts of our ancestors are".

Dąbrowa is a small town with a population of around 5,600 heads (https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/D%C4%85browa_Bia%C5%82ostocka), which forms a community with the neighbouring villages; the town and the countryside are linked by numerous personal, familial, economic, institutional and spatial bonds.[3] Historically, Dąbrowa was a market town in a region perceived as part of the multicultural "Wild East", the Eastern Borderlands (Polish: *Kresy*) – Poland's nostalgic, backward, multi-religious, rural utopia. *Kresy* was a Poland-centred historical notion authored by Wincenty Pol, which described the state's "peripheries" (Mędrzecki 2018). 19th-century ethnographers would go there to "emerge in the past", to seek the "archaic remnants of Slavic beliefs". As a historical and cultural term, *Kresy* were the object of not only academic or literary interests, but also of political tensions and power games. Józef Piłsudski, the chief of state and political leader with undisputable input into regaining of Polish independence in 1918, after nearly one and a half century of partitions, sarcastically referred to Poland as *obwarzanek*, that is, a bagel: a country where all that was good was located at the peripheries/outskirts (https://www.histmag.org/Ochrona-pamieci-Marszalka-czyli-spor-o-obwarzanka-7792).

3 Although it may seem questionable to define a community so broadly, I argue that as a result of certain historical shifts such a group does, in fact, form a closely connected network.

In fact, Dąbrowa used to be a *shtetl*, as most of its inhabitants were Jewish, though it is not referred to in this way locally or in literature. The town's social geography was thus dominated mostly by the Jewish community. In the interwar period, there were also some Catholic church estates located in the town and several landowners had their estates in the vicinity (Bujnowski 2009). The nearby villages were inhabited by small-scale farmers, who were primarily Catholic, although a substantial Orthodox minority was present as well. There was also a notable minority of Tatars, a Muslim group which inhabited these regions since the 17th century. These groups lived side by side, and although before the Second World War intermarriages were practically nonexistent, all these groups were linked by the place, economy, everyday life, as well as by numerous other factors. It was this combination of poverty and multireligiousness, of traditional farming and small-scale trade, of being a borderland region as well as a periphery, that constituted the uniqueness of this region.

The anthropology of milk

The choice of milk as an ethnographic research subject to be reviewed here was no coincidence, since looking at this product enables an insight into the everyday, private, informal economies, as well as into the supra-local, state level and even global phenomena like mass production and even heritage creation. Milk is a product which because of its material bio-qualities (i.e., it spoils quickly) can be a perfect lens to show the dynamics and temporalities of local relations and economic dependencies, as well as the farmers' dependence on (state- or globally regulated) technologies and the way in which farmers are attached if not tied to the land (the *terroir*).

Milk, and thus the "milky ways", traditionally linked a farming family and was the foundation of its economic security within peasant communities. Local narratives up to now contain the figure of the "breadwinning cow", which is associated with femininity and inscribed on the farm. But milky ways also meant economic links which extended beyond the homestead, since milk was a product which could patch the holes in the family budget (this aspect has continued until today).

Interestingly, in farming/peasant communities cows were associated with women – not only in the symbolic sense, and not only in regards to work division (traditionally, it were mostly women who tended the cows), but also in the economic sense. As far back in time as the memory of my research associates reached, women would bring a cow (at least one) as dowry into a family. I heard a story that circulated locally, about a man who "sent his wife back to her father" because she did not bring a cow with her into the marriage. It would indeed be difficult to imagine the survival of a family without a cow, i.e., milk. In the past, milk was a staple, a basic drink and food. Meat was rarely eaten; it were dairy products which constituted an important source of protein.

Milk is a product of universal consumption and it is a popular staple in the Podlachia region. It is a mediator food, one that adds taste to other dishes and transforms them into edible or comfort foods. Numerous dishes are consumed "with milk" (i.e. a glass of regular or, rarely, curdled milk). To my surprise, I noted that many regarded eating cake, pancakes, fried potatoes etc. without milk as impossible. Cream or milk is added to most of that soups that are eaten daily. Sour cream is also a base of a popular cold soup eaten with fried or boiled potatoes.[4] Milk is often consumed raw, especially where a family still keeps a cow, and as curdled milk, which is possible to produce naturally only with bacteria present in unpasteurised milk. Milk is also consumed for breakfast as porridge or "milk soups", or simply with breakfast cereal. Thus, it was the milky ways which connected the family in everyday commensality.

Changes in the milky ways: before the Second World War and in the period of Socialism

Despite the backward imagery connected with the notion of *Kresy* (see Mędrzecki 2018: 10–11), as well as ascribed to Podlachia itself, historically this region was also perceived as a land "flowing with milk and honey", the place from where the truly delicious, truly Polish, truly "traditional" food originated. It is also a place, like many others in the Polish countryside (Straczuk 2016; Chudzyńska 2016), where locals define themselves through the food they produce, "our" (Polish: *swoje*) food, for instance saying that "our milk is healthier and better than anywhere". Notably, it is also this region from which comes nearly a third of the Polish milk production.[5] The president of one of the largest dairy and milk producers in Poland stated: "Milk production in this region – commonly called 'Poland B' – despite its objective historical backwardness, emerged victorious from the period of difficult transformations. The development of technologies in cow raising and milk production is simply pivotal" (https://www.portalspozywczy.pl/mleko/wiadomosci/podlasie-slynie-z-mleka,138412.html).

Before the Second World War, as far back as the memory of my research participants reaches,[6] milk production technologies differed from today's. Milking was mainly a manual process and farmers would milk cows individually, collecting the product

4 I.e. the traditional *kwas*, which is a soup made from sour cream diluted with cold water, with some vinegar or lemon juice added, as well as some salt, chives, spring onions, or chopped cucumbers. This is a popular traditional summer dish.

5 "The region can boast not only developed dairy processing, but also the highest milk production on the Vistula River. In the first ten months of 2016, farmers in Podlachia accounted for almost one-third of the milk bought back then for purchase in Poland" (https://www.regiony.rp.pl/archiwum/art17573811-miliardy-plyna-z-mlekiem).

6 The time period of interest is the one that is remembered and passed down in local narratives. This period often begins with the "before the war" era, which is often described in mythical terms.

in pails. The understanding of genetics and selective breeding for dairy cattle was less advanced. Dairy farms primarily raised traditional local breeds (e.g. the Polish Red), which may not have been as specialised for high milk production as the breeds popular today (e.g. the Holstein Friesian, Simmental) (Sarek et al. 2004). Mechanisation on farms was very limited. Additionally, milk production was subject to greater seasonal variations. Cows produced substantially more milk during the spring and summer months, when they had access to fresh pasture, and much less during the winter when their feed was of lower quality. In terms of basic health management, veterinary practices and disease management were less advanced. Farmers relied on traditional remedies and practices to address common ailments in cattle. Most importantly, in my view, milk cooling methods were very limited; they included cooling in streams and wells. Due to this, and to the absence of widespread refrigeration, milk had to be consumed or processed quickly to prevent spoilage. Additionally, the lack of reliable cold storage influenced the scale of dairy operations, i.e. the territorial scope of "milky ways" with cow owners being even more tied to the land than it is nowadays. On the other hand, cow raising was governed by a different social logic and was an inherent socialising space for young generations, as due to different land divisions common pastures were prevalent (see Matus 2000). Moreover, owing to "milky ways", a per-son would also join the community at the very early stage of life. It was cow raising which created a key socialising space for pre-war generations of peasants. Pastures had been communal for a long time, and only the socialist and pre-war land reforms ended this practice. Young people from the village would meet and spend many hours a day tending the cows. While doing this, they would also make fires to keep warm, find and prepare food, tell each other stories and play. Pastures were places-institutions which figure in the memories of the elderly as symbols of the village's past unity and sociality (Matus 2000).

These technological and geographical factors, as well as the surrounding local networks of infrastructure before the war, made the countryside heavily dependent on the local small town of Dąbrowa. On Tuesdays, which used to be the day of the local market, the market square in town would draw its inhabitants, as well as the residents of surrounding villages. Peasant men would bring their cattle, while women would transport and sell cheeses, butter and many other foodstuffs that they had produced. Sometimes milk was sold as well, although it was difficult to transport. The market day would begin at dawn, around 4–5 o'clock, for the reasons of organisation and logistics; my research participants explained that it had been better to travel at night and in the chilly morning hours because the produce would not spoil. Historically, small towns in Poland were located within a day's travel on horseback from each other, which was approximately 30–40 kilometres. Farmers would typically travel no more than 15 km to sell their produce and animals. However, travelling to the town was always risky as there was no guarantee of finding customers.

Networking or enclosure

Let us now consider the more general framework of work, money and foodstuffs exchange within this community, to show how milk and dairy products circulated within this wide material-human network. According to scholarly debates, peasants produced only for their own consumption (Straczuk 2006: 170) in consonance with the idea of self-sufficiency and self-reliance. Within this logic, they were uninterested in placing their goods on the market or investing in the farms. Their work (as members of a non-capitalist or "pre-capitalist" society) would stop "when they had enough, they would not work to maximize profit because it was simply not their mentality (i.e. rational mentality)", as Aleksander Chayanov (1966) defined the consumption-labour-balance principle.

This pattern was interpreted as post-serfdom legacy, when the size of the peasant farmstead was set at a level enabling only survival and paying state taxes. A minimal size of the land was to guarantee a stable supply of cheap labour (Bukraba-Rylska 2008: 129). Limiting the size of the farmstead was not only the intentional policy during the serfdom era, but also continued well into the communist times. In a famous 1948 speech on private ownership in the Polish economy, the then deputy prime minister Hilary Minc, referring to Lenin's notion of the "permanent rebirth of capitalism", announced the transformation of the Polish economy into a socialist one. The process of restructuring Polish agriculture was officially presented as protection for small farmers, whose position the rich kulaks allegedly endangered. The restructuring was supposed to take place in the "fire of the class struggle". Minc saw the kulak as a "village capitalist", who "exploits other peasants" (Markiewicz 2010: 53). Given this imprecise definition, the Polish United Workers' Party officials decided that a Polish kulak was a farmer whose farm was larger than 15 hectares (8 to 10 hectares in southern and eastern Poland). Those farmers who had two or more horses were also identified as kulaks. This made any farmer who was not frantically struggling for mere survival a potential kulak.

In effect, these post-war socialist policies which aimed to fight the kulaks (thus eradicating any official forms of workforce outsourcing, as the kulaks were also often defined as any farmer who employed seasonal workers), limited farming to a family concern, consequently equating a single family unit with a homestead, an *oikos*, in a more indistinguishable way then during the period of serfdom. This process increased the state's control over the countryside and simultaneously, quite paradoxically, strengthened the mechanism of individualisation of *oikos* and single-family homesteads.

As I explained elsewhere (Mroczkowska 2022), peasants had, in general, very limited opportunities to sell the bulk of their produce. There was no market for their products. As older inhabitants of these villages told me, some of the lucky or more resourceful farmers would sell their products to the Catholic school in the neighbouring

town, or in the town of Grodno (now Belarus), or in the neighbouring Sokółka; most of them, however, would manage their trade at a level which only sustained their basic needs, enabling them to buy the most necessary items, ones that could not be produced at the homestead, like salt.

To consider milk: it seems that if keeping dairy cattle was so common, selling milk would be easy. There existed a substantial town community of mostly Jews, but also Poles, who were not farmers and who might seem to be "natural" recipients of product marketed by farmers. However, as I would like to show, this imagined economy was quite far from the remembered and probably also actual economy. Farmers could take milk and cheese they produced to the market which for centuries had taken place every Tuesday in the small town of Dąbrowa. They would leave their homes very early usually at night to arrive at the market square at 4–5 in the morning when the trade commenced. Yet, as I pointed out, there was no guarantee they would sell their produce, and the milk/cheese might spoil during the course of the day.

Jews who lived in the town until the Second World War, when they were first placed in the town ghetto and later exterminated by the Germans, were legally not permitted to farm. However, many Jews kept cows at their farmer neighbours' barns; the Catholic or Orthodox farmers would thus tend the animals and take them to the pasture. Jews would also have their own gardens, their own slaughterhouses, etc. The economic ties between the farmers and the Jewish community were strong, as the Jews would sell things which farmers were unable to produce within their own farmsteads, but to purchase these, farmers needed ready money, which was quite difficult to obtain. Thus, as I would claim, the market on which farmers could operate was only vestigial.

As was clear from my ethnographic research, the effort invested by peasants into saving the greatest possible part of their produce for sale was enormous; yet the profits made were usually insufficient to invest them back in the farmstead. There was also no guarantee the farmers would be able to sell these products. The network of connections was uprooted by the war, and the state – understood as a modernist Socialist project set out to construct roads and railways, and to rebuilt the town of Dąbrowa by setting up state plants and state local farmer unions, and by controlling the trade – entered where previously there existed neighbourly relations and connections between the landholders/peasants and the Jews.

Socialism, post-Socialism and the present day

Milk played a crucial role under the Socialist rule; it was the basic source of protein for the entire nation. An idea developed in a country where the political role of food shortages, particularly the shortage of the ever-lacking meat, was so salient was to make milk the meat substitute (Brzostek 2010). These government actions during

1960s, 70s and 80s turned out to be a partial success – the average per capita milk consumption in the People's Republic of Poland was 400 litres annually (now it is ca. 170 litres per capita) (www.przystanekhistoria.pl/pa2/tematy/demonstracje/85210,W-PRL-szklanka-mleka-dla-kazdego-ucznia-a-w-Lodzi-Marsz-glodowy-kobiet.html). Numerous educational projects were introduced in schools and in the media to raise milk consumption.

Concurrently, the milk industry became modernised, industrialised and standardised; a network of dairy plants was built around the country. As my interlocutors narrated, milk distribution networks were set up to reach every village. Even the smallest amounts of milk, for instance just two litres, could be collected at the local milk collection point (Polish: *skup*). A local *skup* became a place-institution, a point of communication where the locals would meet every morning, engaging in conversation in wait for transport. From a nearly non-marketable product, milk became highly marketable.

The state was the agent of modernisation and technology, but it was also the most important exchange partner. It created the market for milk and enabled the small-scale producer to if not to thrive, then at least to survive. Additionally, under Socialism, many farmers would find a more accessible market in neighbouring small and larger towns, despite the illegality of such procedures. Many farmers remember this time as more "market-like" then capitalism which followed in the 1990s, and they would repeatedly describe this time as one when "everything was for sale".

The basic paradox of the "post-Socialist period" and the present time[7] is that owing to further development of technologies, milk production in Poland was, and still is, rising. Milk constitutes 82% of animal products produced in the country (Kowalska et al. 2020). It would even be possible to speak of an overproduction of milk on a global scale. Yet the demand for milk on the local market is diminishing (the Polish average consumption is 170 litres of milk per person). Joining the European Union in 2004 was an important caesura if not actually the end of "post-Socialism". The abolition of EU milk quotas further contributed to lowering of milk prices. As a consequence, the only farmers who are, at least seemingly, able to sustain themselves on the market are those with economies of scale. This, however, should not be taken at face value.

With the current local diet, milk obtained from one cow amounts to a quantity which the average farming family would find difficult to consume on their own. In such families, milk would be consumed on a daily basis and its surplus distributed among neighbours and family; milk could even be added to animals' feed. On the other hand, my interviewees reported that it was not profitable to produce milk for the dairies,

7 It is debatable whether Poland is still in post-Socialist era (see Cina, Solova 2022) where much of Western ethnographic research would continue to place it. However, as my research does not extend beyond the period of the Covid-19 pandemic and recent political transformations, I choose to use this term to describe the period between the end of Socialist rule and the year 2018, from which most of my collected data originate.

because then they would have to comply with rigorous EU requirements, prices would not guarantee a return, while risks were high. In their view, it was no longer profitable to breed more cows, in line with EU and state regulations:

> F:[8] These farmers who wanted to sell milk to dairy plants had to meet the requirements, and these who did not sell milk to dairy plants didn't. I keep three cows, and I don't sell milk to the diary plant, I milk them traditionally, like my mother did before, by hand into milk pails, and there comes this woman who buys this milk and she produces these traditional cheeses and sells them at the local marketplaces, hard cheeses. This is how it works. And I have some money this way, 90 grosz per litre, this is much less than from a dairy plant, they give 1.40 zloty. But I cannot sell to the dairy because I do not meet the EU requirements. And I don't want to, because meeting these requirements is really, really horrible.[9]

For this reason my research participants, similarly to many farmers in the region, usually kept only one cow throughout the years I have known them. Cottage cheeses were produced in the homestead and, like other valued foodstuffs, were the subject of exchange. They were given to the city-dwelling children when they came to visit, or sometimes distributed among friends and neighbours. This shows how the production of goods that used to be in high demand is now moving the sphere of production and trade into the informal economy. It becomes more convenient for people to redirect the "milky ways" to local routes as the supra-local and European ones become obstructed. Yet, despite the reduction in cheese production and cow breeding, an overproduction of milk (as in the case of other produce like fruit and vegetables) is still observed. It must be assumed that before the Second World War, it would have been quite inconceivable to feed milk to farm animals.

An unusual technique, which I perceive to be a coping strategy against stringent European Union regulations and requirements on the one hand,[10] and on the other as an innovative way which enabled the sale of dairy products according to old recipes, thus strengthening local "milky ways", was the creation of the "Local Product"

8 F: – denotes a female research participant, M: – male.

9 Polish: K: No to ci, którzy chcieli zdawać, to w tej chwili musieli spełnić, a ci, którzy nie, tak jak ja, ja nie zdaję mleka do mleczarni. Ja znaczy, jak mam trzy krowy. Ja te krówki doję, tradycyjne, tak jak kiedyś moja mama, ręcznie do konewek i przyjeżdża do mnie taka pani, która robi sery, takie żółte i ona ode mnie te mleczko bierze, robi te sery i sprzedaje na rynku, na takich bazarkach. O, w ten sposób. A ja mam pieniążki za to. Ja mam od litra płacone, 90 groszy, to jest o wiele mniej niż w mleczarni, bo w mleczarni złoty czterdzieści, ale ja nie mogę sprzedawać do mleczarni, bo nie spełniłam wymogów unijnych. I nie chcę, bo spełnić te wymogi to jest bardzo, bardzo straszne...

10 These include, among others, requirements stemming from the Common Agricultural Policy; especially these including the book-keeping, record-keeping and enhancing the living conditions of animals were under critique, also such mechanisms as the milk quotas, which until 2014 involved penalties for the overproduction of milk if a specific limit was exceeded (see also Kowalska et al. 2020).

Association (https://www.dabrowa-bial.pl/strona-3362-dabrowskie_stowarzyszenie_produktu.html). Even more interestingly, the Association, which on some level is a sign of resistance to the current political/economic system, was created thanks to the impulse that came from the local authorities. One of the local leaders once suggested in a private conversation with one of the local cheesemakers that she and other similar women should form an association; this would prevent women from being chased out of the marketplaces by the municipal guards. The same leader later helped at other stages of the Association's operation, enabling the acquisition of knowledge about running this form of activity. Once again, the informal mechanism of local ties and local ways of acting was revealed here. Following Michael Herzfeld's concept of cultural intimacy, it must be stressed that personal contacts and talks behind the scenes are often one of the most effective methods of keeping the system running (2007). In this way, by means of informal private initiatives an enterprise that started out as, in fact, deCertaunian "poaching" became a thriving local organisation.

There also exists an informal milk trade in the countryside outside the aforementioned association. It is easier where the milk is not contracted (i.e. sold to collection points). This to some extent blocks the possibility of sharing it with neighbours, since farmers are required to deliver quite strictly the declared amount of milk or face penalties for not meeting the previously declared level of supply. However, where a cow is kept to collect milk only for private consumption, this informal "milky way" connecting farms is visible. It is inscribed in the routine schedule of everyday duties and imbued with trust that allows a farmer to leave an empty milk bottle at their neighbour's doorstep and pick it up full after the milking.

Ontological unity

The relational nature of "milky ways" was more than simple networks of dependencies; it was, in fact, a path to the farmstead becoming ontologically united.[11] This mode was rooted in the past, but at the time of my research it functioned strongly, perhaps fuelled by current politics. Farmers would be one with the farmstead. The farmstead was operated by the family, by people with physical, biological, genetic connections, "blood connections" as they called it. Their relations were marked by gender complementarity, where, in this traditional worldview, the work, skills and knowledge of both genders would complete each other. Moreover, family roles would simultaneously be vocational, professional roles. The word *gospodarz*, which means a farmer, or the man of the house, would also denote the "father", the male leader of the farmstead with very finely defined responsibilities: farming the land, operating machinery,

11 I detailed the ontological unity, sameness and interconnectibility of animals, farmers and their farmsteads in another article (Mroczkowska 2014).

slaughtering large animals, etc. The words's feminine counterpart, *gospodyni*, meaning the lady of the house, was also the "mother", the female leader of the homestead who would be responsible for the home and the garden, for tending to smaller animals and for numerous other tasks assigned specifically to her knowledge and skill. This interconnectedness had its longstanding tradition. Reminiscing about his childhood in the 1930s, an older interlocutor narrated:

> **M:** People respected horses, they respected cows. All these animals were ours, our own. The sheep were respected because we live off them, they served us, they gave us life.

Another interlocutor remarked:

> **M:** Well, because if someone is focused on [keeping] dairy cattle, you know that he must give [care] to this cow, and she must give to him. It works both ways. Because if he won't give her [care], that is, she won't give milk.

Secondly, people and animals would be linked by their common space. Traditionally, the farmstead was the basic source of nourishment and profits. These mutual interdependencies enabled survival of all actants. This is still true today, even considering the large differentiation of profit, work and employment among people who consider themselves farmers (Polish: *rolnicy*). The farmers' space is an extension of them, it is marked by their objects, it can be used in ways the farmer deems necessary. On the other hand, despite technological advances, the farmer is tied to the land and space on account of the biological qualities of animals and milk. Animals must be fed twice a day, a task which may under some circumstances be delegated to others or slightly moved in time. However, cows need to be milked twice a day, and unlike other farming activities, this task can hardly be negotiated. Any delay here may endanger the health of the animal; any smallest deviation in the way this task is accomplished or the person executing it may mean failure, and thus become a risk to the animal's wellbeing. This task can be delegated to those who not only possess the necessary skills but also whom the animal trusts. It is for this reason so many interlocutors told me that they were "tied to the land", their only excursions being to the nearby church on Sundays. Many indicated the difficulty posed by travelling to longer family gatherings like weddings, because finding replacement for that time was extremely difficult, and travelling to such events even for a short stay was always connected with the animal's pain.

Traditionally, farmers who raised dairy cattle were linked to space because of milk's biological and temporal qualities. To put it simply, if not stored in very specific conditions, milk spoils quickly; it changes its chemical qualities minutes after being acquired. This formed an even closer link between a farmer and space: the farmers had little time to deliver milk to the dairy plant collection point. It was, of course, all

the more difficult for them to sell milk and milk product by themselves, transporting them to the nearby town. This quality also determined why milk was for so long a very private, homestead product which circulated in the narrowest circles of family and neighbours. Only the top-down politicised changes in technology enabled milk to exit the homestead and to become a product of supra-local circulation. These changes included building country-wide networks of distribution, milk collection points in every village and town, a complicated network of milk deliverers; all these processes intensified under the Socialist rule. With the fall of central economy, they were later replaced by privately owned companies which imposed their own terms on farmers with little negotiating capital. Many of my interlocutors expressed underlying nostalgia for the Socialist era, where milk collection points became "places of gathering" with communal character marking the landscape of every smallest village. In this manner, the milky way formed also a pathway of sociality and neighbourly relations in the region.

Thirdly, symbolically but also biologically, farmers are one with their animals. Not only is their wellbeing interdependent, but they are physiologically united: animals eat food rejected for farmers' own consumption, in turn becoming food for farmers. What is more, the very basis of economic existence stands on the wellbeing and productivity of animals, and the other way round: the number of farmers' family members is the equivalent of the number of workers servicing the animals. The number of animals kept in a homestead corresponds strictly to the family situation. Additionally, there seem to be numerous ritual activities and beliefs which support this situation, for example, sharing the holy wafer (Polish: *opłatek*), and thus breaking bread, with all farm animals during the Christmas Eve. I also witnessed a local custom, performed after pig slaughter, of throwing cut-off nipples of a slaughtered pig into the pigsty to guarantee the "fertility of the farmstead"; thus a cycle of life was symbolically upheld. There exists also a practice of reading the slaughtered pig entrails, namely the spleen, and telling fortune of the whole farmstead for the next year based on its shape and colour. In this way, the animals become one not only with the farmstead but also with the people inhabiting it. They nourish farmers, give them life, and the farmers' future is physically and representationally inscribed in the animals' bodies.

Another way in which farmers, territory and labour are intertwined is the notion that milk as a product of a farmer's labour is safe for the farmer. It is a social and a generational marker of homeliness, endemity and locality. While there is a heated debate about the safety and legality of selling raw unpro cessed milk in Western Europe (see Mincyte 2014), in the Polish countryside, where it legal to market fresh unprocessed milk, no controversies about this type of product are encountered. In the perception of my interlocutors, however, raw milk is a biological marker between the city folk and the countryside folk, the healthy strong farmer working the land and the feeble city dweller whose sensitive body is unable to stomach the fresh milk "straight from the cow". The farmer is "one with milk" – the raw unprocessed milk is

something that does not make the farmer sick, it can be ingested, consumed without fear, because, as they believe, the farmer is "used to it", i.e. used to the bacterial micro-flora, which might be lethal to the outsider:

> **F:** Look how many impurities, chemicals, everything, is in these products. Milk, simple milk – we drink milk "straight from the cow", and you [in the city], you drink pasteurised milk, which, as I read, can be used for a month, it can stand for a month! Well, somehow I can't imagine that milk could be kept open for a month here! There are some preservatives added [to the processed milk], and it is not healthy.
>
> **M:** If you are from Warsaw, we won't show you how to milk a cow, because here a friend of ours brought a Varsavian once, he was an engineer in Warsaw, and he brought his wife here. And when she saw how her mother-in-law milked a cow, she said "I will never drink milk again".

Many a time I have come across assertions that "milk makes outsiders sick". It is with that phrase that the unity of the farmers' bodies, their environment (the countryside), (physical) work, and their animals was voiced.

The well-being of milk/dairy producers

The first, narrow group of milk producers are so called VAT farmers,[12] who specialise in milk production and limit other forms of agricultural activity. They constitute a very minor group among my interlocutors (owners of three farmsteads). They follow the capitalist principles and embody the traditional capitalist ideal of increasing profit and development; they take loans, apply for EU subsidies, and invest in new technologies. However, my research points to the fact that it is exactly because of this specialisation they become less flexible and are most susceptible to failure and bankruptcy. Similar conclusions were reached by Amanda Krzyworzeka, who noted how significantly recent changes in agriculture have influenced the manner in which modernised farmers operate under free-market conditions. She highlighted profound shifts in depopulated regions, where farm expansion through land acquisition

12 To switch to VAT, the farmer needs to submit a declaration (known as VAT registration – R) to the tax office responsible for the holding's location. He also needs a REGON and a NIP-7. The transition to VAT for farmers is associated with several obligations, in addition to the ability to reduce output tax payable by input tax on the basis of VAT invoices documenting their purchases. As a VAT taxpayer, the farmer is obligated to apply the appropriate VAT rates to the supply of goods and services, issue invoices, maintain records of VAT supplies and acquisitions, submit periodic (monthly/quarterly) VAT returns, and pay the tax on time if it is shown in the settlement for a given month/quarter. In Podlachia, VAT farmers are a minority, and an even smaller minority among my research participants. It is usually profitable to become a "VAT farmer" only with farms over 50 hectares or with a substantial investment; see https://www.farmer.pl/finanse/podatki-rachunkowosc/czy-rozliczac-vat,108159.html.

or leasing has resulted in increased frustration, fatigue and loneliness among farmers who faced problems with employing wage workers and a suffered from diminished support from neighbours and family (Krzyworzeka 2021: 64–65).

As the milk market is unstable and milk production capricious due to diseases, changing prices and also the weather, the lives of cow-raising farmers and dairy producers are unpredictable as well; yet their daily routines consist of a long row of repetitive actions. Dairy producers take no holidays or days off, as cows need to be milked twice a day, every day. There is no one to replace a farmer on a daily basis. One of their recurring statements were that "we can never leave this place", "we could not function without the state's help". Indeed, the VAT farmers are the group that is most dependent on state distribution and they patch the holes in the budget with the 500+ social benefit.[13]

The other group are the non-VAT farmers, who constitute the largest fraction of farmers in the region. These farmers enjoy the less formal ways of operating and do not register the sale of their products. There is also another specific group among these farmers, namely, a successful smaller subgroup of who I would call "local culinary-heritage activists". They are farmers (mainly women) who keep 10 to 15 cows and sell dairy products, including cheeses, based on historic local recipes. Most of these women are united in the local heritage association. Their budgets are maintained through selling milk and milk products to a defined local and sometimes supra-local network of customers. They usually do not sell milk to the dairy plants, preferring to process milk themselves. The applicable legal regulations (which are rather loose, since they are not VAT farmers) allow them to balance between the informal/formal market, as well as to enjoy the satisfaction of becoming local culinary activists.

The question to pose here are who are the potential winners within this network, and who benefits from dairy herding the most. Whose actions have the power to negotiate relations within this intricate network of land/people/animals? Is it the large-scale farmers, the ones who seem to follow the capitalist way, ones focused most on profit maximisation? This is, paradoxically, not so: those who follow the "capitalist" path, abandoning the local concepts of flexibility and self-reliance, become what I would call "new serfs". They are tied to the land, they are tied economically by credit loans, and they are in a dangerous line of work with no freedom understood as flexibility. Interestingly, this very local and traditional idea of farmers' (peasants') flexibility and self-sustenance is what makes the "heritage activists" more adaptable to the neo-liberal reality.

The results of my research indicates that those who seem most happy with their life-stance, whose subjectivities reflect the feeling of wellbeing, are, firstly, the non-VAT culinary activists. They are economically embedded in the local community; they can diversify their production; they are based at the *oikos* homestead. Their work

13 This is a family benefit for parents of children under 18, amounting to 500 Polish zloty per month for each child under care.

ideals are not so much economic – at least not in the sense of investment maximisation – because they have no more labour resources to invest, but based on satisfaction that comes from work and from the social networks (i.e. the fact that they are not alienated). Secondly, this subjective sense of well-being seems to be voiced by farmers whose at least one child plans to continue their work and "remain on the land" (see also Matysiak 2021; Bilewicz, Bukraba-Rylska 2021).

On the other hand, I would argue that for the majority of farmers I have interviewed, their main work and life ideals are being challenged in today's socio-political reality. These ideals include work as a non-profit-making activity, flexibility understood as the ability to freely diversify work and production, and the homestead as the traditional family-based unit of production. It is these farmers who most strongly voice opinions which that have been quoted above. It is also they who feel the most marginalised.

Concluding remarks

Having established the symbolic and ontological unity of farmer/farmstead/animal and milk, it becomes clear that all top-down interventions of the state, the EU or, more generally, the socio-historical establishment may unbalance to this network. For example, EU regulations fracture neighbourly relations in that it becomes impossible to share milk within these informal relations: all milk must be accounted for. External regulations of dairy-plant cooperatives, on the other hand, pressure farmers not to exceed the declared production levels (as per the milk quota), as they recently have penalties imposed on them for that. In this system, the perspective of the farmer who considers the welfare of animals to be intimately linked to his own is no longer valid. The animal becomes the ball and chain tying the farmer to the land but offering no expected rewards. Numerous paradoxes arise as a result; for example, striving for the milk yield and robustness of farm animals becomes pointless if it does not ultimately benefit the farmer and the farmstead as a whole. The human-nonhuman relation is thus not a one-direction vector, but rather an interaction full of tensions and changes in a Latourian ecosystem encompassing animals, humans, spaces and materialities.

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Summary

This article discusses the socio-historical case of the human – non-human networks of Polish farmers engaged in milk production and cow herding. "Milky ways" is a term referring to various ways, networks and social constellations which determine the socio-political landscape of Polish milk and dairy production and cow herding. The analysis includes ways in which, in various timeframes (before the Second World War, during Socialism, in the present time), milk is remembered to have linked a farming community and served as ways of sustenance for various types of farmers and local inhabitants (e.g. Jews, townspeople). The article explores what actors (people, products, spaces, and politics) formed the milky-way network, bringing into question the well-being and coping strategies of present-day farmers. Data for this study was collected during ethnographic fieldwork in Eastern Poland in the summer of 2019, as well as between 2010 and 2014 in villages around a small Podlachian town.

Keywords: Poland, Podlachia, milk, cow raising, relations, homestead, farming, food anthropology, countryside-small town relations, milky ways

Streszczenie

Niniejszy artykuł omawia społeczno-historyczny kontekst ludzko-nieludzkich sieci relacji polskich rolników zajmujących się produkcją mleka i wypasem krów. „Drogi mleczne" (milky ways) odnoszą się do różnych sieci i konstelacji społecznych, określających społeczno-polityczny krajobraz produkcji mleka i nabiału oraz hodowli krów w Polsce. Analiza obejmuje sposoby, w jakie w różnych ramach czasowych (przed II wojną światową, w okresie socjalizmu, w teraźniejszości) mleko łączyło społeczność rolniczą i służyło jako sposób na utrzymanie różnych typów rolników i lokalnych mieszkańców (Żydów, mieszczan). Artykuł omawia również, jacy aktorzy (ludzie, produkty, przestrzenie i polityka) tworzyli sieć dróg mlecznych, kwestionując dobre samopoczucie i strategie radzenia sobie współczesnych rolników. Materiały do artykułu zostały zebrane podczas etnograficznych badań terenowych we wschodniej Polsce latem 2019 r. oraz w latach 2010–2014 we wsiach wokół małego podlaskiego miasteczka.

Słowa kluczowe: Polska, Podlasie, mleko, hodowla krów, relacje, sieci, gospodarstwo, rolnictwo, antropologia jedzenia, relacje wieś-miasteczko, „drogi mleczne"

Translated by K. Michałowicz