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## Between autonomy and submission\*\*

**A review article of Maria Halamska's book *Continuity and Change. Rural Poland 1918–2018: Searching for Sources of the Present*, SCHOLAR Publishing House, 2020**

The reviewed publication is a synthetic sociological analysis of 100 years in the evolution of rural Poland that recognises the specificity of the Polish countryside and its unique social, economic, cultural and political conditions. Maria Halamska, the author of the book, had three objectives: 1) To analyse how the agricultural embedment and transformation influenced the countryside of the Second Polish Republic (1918–1939), the People's Republic of Poland (1947–1989), and the post-transformation Poland; 2) To describe the adaptation and transformation processes in rural Poland, depending on the socio-institutional background of the three identified periods; and 3) To present the regular aspects as well as the peculiarities of the institutional order in rural Poland in the discussed periods. The book contains sections on the evolution of demographic and social structures, rural farming and the multifunctional rural economy, rural communities and their institutions, rurality and rural influences on the national and popular culture, and the future prospects for the Polish countryside. The work is based on

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a comprehensive and in-depth literature review, with each section offering relevant statistical data.

Instead of continuing with this rather 'dry' description of the book's contents, I would like to focus on what I find most fascinating in Maria Halamska's latest publication. In her book, the Polish countryside emerges with all its complexity and diversity. It is no longer a community embedded in a given territory and defined by its agriculture, but a complex and, most importantly, dynamic construct that consists of local institutions, households, various types of spaces, economic functions, relations with the city, and national culture. What particularly caught my attention was the description of the dynamics and the complex origins of rural Poland. Generally, authors of locality studies can easily become captivated by what seems to be permanent while searching for institutions of *longue durée* and the echoes of the past. However, Maria Halamska provides not only an in-depth historical analysis, but also identifies contemporary processes that shape the Polish countryside. A motif which is particularly interesting from the perspective of this article, and which continues to resurface throughout the entire book only to be clearly articulated in the final sections, is that of cultural flows and the relationship between the centre and the peripheries or semi-peripheries. This motif constitutes a key aspect in the discussion on the extent to which the Polish countryside has been the object or the agent of change. To what extent are the inhabitants and institutions of the Polish countryside capable of controlling and steering their own transformation, and to what extent do they adapt to trends emerging in other places? The intention of this article is to draw attention to the traces left by Maria Halamska, which may help us tackle these questions.

Following the teachings of the historians from the *Annales* school (Sonnenfeld, Flandrin and Montanari 1999), everything that we have learned from observing and experiencing the countryside in Europe, either in its centre or in its peripheries (the physical space of rural areas, nature, economy, social relations, and political agency), has, since the late Middle Ages, been largely shaped by strong relations with the administrative and political centre (e.g. the city). Echoes of these relations of power, domination, adaptation and, albeit much less frequently, resistance, can also be found in Maria Halamska's book. She focuses on the response of rural communities, economy, and institutions to processes of change. The changing character of rural communities, impossible to capture within clear-cut ethnographic

or anthropological frameworks, is already evident in the first chapter of the book, dedicated to demography. The author highlights the nineteenth-century economic migrations and post-war industrialisation processes responsible, on the one hand, for the draining of rural populations and, on the other hand, the emergence of a rather unique social group of peasant-workers (in Polish: *chłoporobotnicy*). The processes of first peasantisation and then depeasantisation of rural areas or, more recently, the gentrification of suburban villages, have largely been a response either to state policy or to social and economic processes external to the countryside. These trends seem to have two opposite vectors: while the former have increased the homogeneity of rural areas, e.g. by unifying the social structure, the controversial gentrification (Zwęglińska-Gałęcka 2020) seems to be contributing to the social expansion of the rural fabric by attracting new groups of inhabitants.

A similar path emerges in the case of economic change and its key process of deagrarianisation. In the social imaginary of urban middle classes (Kerrigan 2018), the countryside is frequently associated with family farming and the rhythm dictated by nature. Needless to say, the reality is much more complex. Numerous factors, such as farms of insufficient size which are consequently incapable of sustaining themselves in the Second Republic of Poland, the crisis of the Second World War, the post-war collectivisation attempts, and the immense industrialisation pressure, provided the groundwork for the processes, as a result of which rural inhabitants started turning their back on agriculture. In her book, Halamska discusses the emergence of the multifunctional rural economy along with the processes of professionalisation, changes in the institutional environment, and the rural structure. She writes in a very interesting manner about specific forms of institutional support for these processes, such as systems of quasi-cooperatives, local and regional marketplaces, farming organisations, and networks of institutions to develop farmers' knowledge. She also addresses problems related to the evaluation of non-production functions of agriculture.

While the described processes of economic change (depeasantisation, deagrarianisation, new functions of agriculture), despite their different rhythms and timings, resemble changes in the agricultural or rural structures in other European countries, the historical and cultural processes seem to have produced a unique Polish triad of the village, the parish and the commune (in Polish: *gmina*), which the author refers to as the territory of power. Evident hierarchies of rurality may be observed both in the past and the present.

Historically (Leszczyński 2020), villages in Poland would frequently be concentrated, both spatially and functionally, around land estates. In modern times, this power element around which villages are orientated has been replaced by the theoretically self-governed local communes and parishes. Such an organisation has an impact on participation processes and people's involvement in the lives of their local communities, with the somewhat authoritarian algorithms of rural structure affecting the rural community.

The social history of the countryside is intertwined with the present and is partially responsible for the consolidation of the clientelistic relationship of power in rural Poland. It coincides with the ongoing fragmentation or the socio-psychological detachment of an individual from the rural community at the expense of that community's economic value. In light of this, the reviewed publication presents a non-sentimental vision of a complex and dynamic community that features its particular spatial and institutional (e.g. parish-based) specificity but is not homogeneous. It is the countryside whose community is shaped by exogenous processes, but whose vectors of development are also influenced by the *longue durée* structures strongly embedded in history. It seems to be a community that operates on the local event horizon, at the intersection of the endogenous and exogenous processes and structures.

Maria Halamska's depiction of cultural changes in the countryside is equally interesting. Adopting a non-sentimental perspective, she describes the disappearance of the autonomous peasant culture whose elements penetrate the culture of the folk class or the national popular culture. Migrations, both international and internal (to the city), the growing importance of the mass media, including digital media, the collapse of the patriarchal family system, the changed role of the land, and the emergence of new external consumption patterns, have transformed the landscape of Polish rural culture, as evidenced by numerous studies on cultural practices conducted by anthropologists and sociologists of culture (Szlendak and Olechnicki 2017). Their research shows that the cultural practices in the countryside are similar to those of the folk class in the city. The practices may differ in quantity and accessibility, but not in terms of quality or character.

The qualitative participation (or lack thereof) of people from rural areas in cultural practices such as reading, listening to music, and attending cultural events is comparable to that of people living in urban areas. Rural residents may participate less frequently due to the limited infrastructure of cultural

institutions in the countryside or problems with access to Netflix because of connection speed limits. However, it is not the 'urbanity' or 'rurality' that defines the nature of these practices, but education and social class. At the same time, urban and rural motifs continue to intertwine across different types of culture. Today's Poland is experiencing a renaissance of interest in transformed rural themes within the elite cultural sub-worlds. Rural motifs are present in alternative music, a specific variety of Polish magical realism in literature (Rak 2021), and reportages (Pobłocki 2021). This trend marks a shift towards folk history that is visible in the narratives of more elite-like segments of popular culture. It is a process characteristic of the countries in this part of Europe, which I refer to as the folk turn and define as a turn towards processed folk culture in search of a national or regional identity that allows a culture to stand out in the global market of cultures. However, this shift applies only to a limited area of culture. Both in the rural and urban culture of the folk class, rurality is essentially reduced to largely ceremonial rituals, mostly certain kinds of festivities, which offer a unified idyllic product that fakes 'locality'.

All these motifs find their culmination in one of the final sections of the book when the author decides to confront what she calls 'Polish people's issues with (their own) rurality'. Maria Halamska highlights the complex nature of imaginaries of rurality in Poland, which combine extremely different approaches to rurality such as the still prevalent, albeit largely refuted by Jan Sowa (Sowa 2011) and Andrzej Leszczyński (2020), stereotype of Poland as a granary of Europe and the power of the manorial-serfdom economy. New assessments of serfdom indicate similarities between this system and colonial slavery. In her book, Halamska encourages us to look at the Polish countryside through the prism of processes typical of semi-peripheral regions. She points out that the Polish countryside-orientated imaginary is psychoanalytically incoherent. It is composed of both strongly idyllic motifs, which romanticise the countryside, and the naturalistic ones. The Polish psyche of the countryside encompasses both *Dom Zły* [The Dark House] and *U Pana Boga za Piecem* [In Heaven as It Is on Earth]. Following Katarzyna Chmielewska, Maria Halamska emphasises the emancipatory, nostalgic, or stigmatising nature of such narrative conflicts.

Another equally important trail in the book is the reflection on the status of the countryside in the national and European system, as well as various typologies of Europe and transformation processes in its peripheral part,

i.e. Central-Eastern Europe. As a result, the author juxtaposes two types of cultural system adaptation employed by the peripheries, observing that the transformation of the Polish countryside under the influence of variously defined centres may lead to: 1) Cultural deformation, where the content from the centre is simplified and filtered through the prism of locality; and 2) Cultural amalgamation, where the contents from the centre and the peripheries collide, resulting in a creative hybrid of cultural models.

These observations shared by the author towards the end of her work seem to reflect both the continuity (*longue durée*) and the change in the Polish countryside. The latter is a complex and multi-aspect process that affects objects and spaces, as well as people and institutions. It includes processes which are universal for the European countryside, such as deagrarianisation, depeasantisation, gentrification, and transition to multifunctional rural economy. At the same time, this change is also local in character, as reflected, for example, by the role of the church in the countryside, the specific shape and function of local self-governments, and the history of peasant and later rural social and political movements; it results from the specificity and the history of this part of Europe. However, what I find particularly interesting is how the above-mentioned change relates to cultural patterns and the psyche of Polish society. Rurality is frequently associated with contradictory trends: the strong pressure on the economic modernisation of peasant farms and the modernist discourse on the countryside are clashing with the traditional perception of the function of rurality. The denial of rurality and the narrative of the peasant origin (Leder 2014) are contrasted by ever-bolder attempts to discover the local in culture and literature. Global and mass consumption models and cultural practices are being cracked by the renaissance of the local and the regional. Depending on the social class, this Polish rurality is either being denied, commodified, or reinforced. It is a rurality that is somewhat torn and semi-peripheral in relation to its European counterpart or the urban core. It is also a rurality whose elements incorporate the mutually intertwined continuity and change.

Finally, I would like to emphasise the value of the reviewed publication. The author offers an exquisite synthesis of 100 years in the history and the social dynamics of the Polish countryside. The structure of the book, its argumentation, and the use of source material and statistical data allow the reader to follow the processes of rural change and continuity without difficulty. Their understanding is also largely facilitated by the high-quality edition and

layout of the table of contents. In summary, the reviewed book is a valuable read, both for people who are only just beginning to learn more about the Polish countryside and researchers who analyse specific phenomena. Last but not least, the book has been published in two language versions, Polish and English, which should have a positive effect on its reception in the rural research community. As such, it is an absolute must for anyone interested in Polish or Central and Eastern European rural areas.

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