

GABRIELA JARZĘBOWSKA

State Capitalism as a Crisis of Imagination.
Factory Farms in the Polish People's
Republic in the 1970s

In this article I will discuss the first, failed attempts to introduce factory farming in Poland in the 1970s and locate them within historical changes in social meat-related imaginaries. My main hypothesis is that the spread of wide-scale meat consumption in Poland was a consequence of emulating Western, capitalist patterns of food production and its accompanying discourse. I argue that the logic of capitalism that dominated food production in the 1970s dramatically changed interspecies relations and promoted meat as something unlimited, available on a daily basis.

Keywords: factory farms, Poland, state capitalism, meat, animals

In this article I will discuss the first, failed attempts to introduce factory farming in Poland in the 1970s and locate them within historical changes in social meat-related imaginaries. My main hypothesis is that the spread of wide-scale meat consumption in Poland was a consequence of emulating Western, capitalist patterns of food production and its accompanying discourse. Consequently, it can be understood as a manifestation of a crisis of socialist imagination and the conceptual failure of its East European incarnation. My argument is based on two assumptions, namely: 1. The economy of the Polish People's Republic (hereinafter, also: PRL, the abbreviation for *Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa*), although formally socialist, displayed certain characteristics of state capitalism and, consequently, its animal agriculture to some extent followed capitalist patterns; 2. The logic of capitalism that dominated food production in the 1970s dramatically changed interspecies relations and promoted meat as something unlimited, available on a daily basis.

Before moving on, I would like to specify what I mean by state capitalism, a term which I use to describe certain aspects of the PRL economy. I understand it as a system in which the government controls the means of production without challenging capitalist premises about the economy and social relations. I am aware that this term has a long history and has been subject to numerous discussions and controversies, which I have no space to discuss at length here. I should clarify, though, that I do not follow the understanding of this term proposed by Pollock (1941), which seems to have formed a cornerstone of how state capitalism is commonly understood today – namely as interventionist capitalism (see also: Rothbard 1973, Bremmer 2009, Dahms 2011, Nowakowski 2014, Gangl 2016). Instead, I refer to the original term, proposed by Engels and developed later by Lenin (1917), who used the notion of state capitalism as a transitory stage between capitalism, which forms current economic relations, and communism, which will create new economic relations in a distant future (see also: Szelegieniec 2014). In other words, state capitalism was meant to be a step forward from liberal capitalism on the ascent to communism. However, my analysis is rooted in more skeptical, revisionist views (mostly, but not only, of a Trotskyist background), specifically Goldman's (1935) critiques of the Soviet Union as a country which never actually abolished capitalism but which created a new moneyed class of party leaders and bureaucrats and whose economy was deeply embedded in the logic of capitalism (this attitude has been further developed and critically discussed in a number of papers, e.g. Cliff, Harman 1974, Bellis 1979, Howard, King 2001, Resnick, Wolff 2002, Korolczuk 2017, among others).

I will commence my argument with a brief methodological and literature-oriented section, where I position this text within the existing body of literature and elucidate its connection to my own research thus far. I will then present a brief outline of the general historical context related to the economic history of the Polish People's Republic. Subsequently, I will present a short and tumultuous history of attempts to introduce industrial farms in the 1970s, endeavoring to highlight the primary reasons for their implementation and the ultimate failure. The subsequent part of the article adopts a synthetic-theoretical nature. In this section, I attempt to address the question of the characteristics of the meat economy of that period (alongside its accompanying discourse) that warrant its designation as paracapitalistic. I also posit the hypothesis that the new mechanisms in the so-called animal production which became prevalent in the 1970s formed the basis for a profound change in consumption practices in Poland—and consequently, also in societal perceptions regarding farm animals. I conclude with a summary in which I contemplate the limits of imagination hindering the escape beyond the consumptive paradigm of capitalism, even in a centrally planned economy.

Methods and literature

This article is part of my larger research project on changes in human-animal relations in postwar Poland, specifically in relation to the concepts of progress and modernization. I have so far conducted archival research, study visits to former state-owned farms (PGR), as well as analysis of cultural and media representations (novels, films, newspapers, Polish Film Chronicle). I also analyzed all the back copies of the influential Polish agricultural journal *Przegląd Hodowlany* from 1945 to 1989 in order to trace processes and discontinuities in farm animal exploitation patterns and their accompanying discourse. While some more detailed, focused analyses based on specific case studies have already been published (Jarzębowska 2023a, Jarzębowska 2023b), this article is intended to provide a meta-analysis and an initial, broad conceptualization of this phenomenon. Nonetheless, it is still based on preliminary, work-in-progress research. Its conclusions should therefore all be considered only as working hypotheses, aiming at opening a discussion on modes of modernization in Poland and their relationship with the environment and animals.

Before continuing, I should clarify my standpoint as an author. I am not an economic historian, but a critical animal studies scholar, and this

field forms the broadest conceptual basis for my research (specifically theoretical and ethical ramifications of the history of factory farms and their relations with the logic of capitalism, such as works by Franklin 1999, Fitzgerald 2003, Young Lee 2008, Lavin 2009, Imhoff 2010, Leder 2012, Nibert 2012, Twine 2013, Stanescu 2013, Foer 2013, Genoways 2014, Anderson 2019 and Blanchette 2020). I also employ philosophical analyses of the relations between capitalism and the environment. Moore (2015) and Bellamy Foster, Clark (2020) particularly helped me to understand the specificity of capitalist appropriation of the natural environment. In their perspective, capitalism is not confined to human-centered economic relations. On the contrary – it is intricately interwoven with the biosphere. The concept underscores the profound and dynamic interactions between human societies and the broader web of life, emphasizing that nature is not a mere backdrop but an active participant in the historical and ongoing processes of capital accumulation. As I will demonstrate, similar mechanisms occur in command economies.

Considering the topic of my research, I also drew extensively from the works of historians of economy (Fallenbuchl 1983, Winięcki 1987, Kaliński 1995, Koryś 2018, Budziński 2018, Kaliński 2021, Koryś, Tymiński 2021) and agriculture (Fekete 1974, Grochowski, 1976, Bajan 1984, Seremak-Bulge 1985, Woś 1987, Dzun 1991, Kierul, Majewski 1991, Gorzelak 2010). The apparent paradox of the Soviet addiction to Western capitalist technologies undertaken by Hale Dorrell (2015), Sanchez-Sibony (2014) and, to some extent, also Harrison (1996) and Leigh Smith (2014), made me rethink the relations between Soviet-type economies with global capital flows of capital in agriculture. Specifically, Leszczyński's (2013) analysis of peripheral modernization as emulation was critical for formulating my final argument. I should also mention two authors whose research was fundamental for the conceptualizations undertaken in this research: Kochanowski (2005) and Jarosz (2019) provided the first historical analyses of how the symbolic status of meat in Polish culture was interrelated with political tensions before 1989. Last but not least, Fleishman's (2020) groundbreaking analysis of the pig industry in East Germany was the first expression of the argument that animal agriculture in a (technically) socialist country was, in fact, a form of state capitalism – the argument which I follow and elaborate on in my analysis.

Historical context

The decisions made at the Yalta Conference brought Poland, together with most East European countries, under Soviet influence. After a few years of consolidating power, communists finally took command of the entire country and introduced a Soviet-style economy. One of the first moves undertaken by the pro-Soviet Polish Workers Party was the land reform (beginning in 1944), whose aim was to eliminate the landed gentry and spread ownership among peasants. The reform covered 6,070,000 ha, which translated into 29.7% of all Polish farmlands (Ratajczak 1970). The main project of agricultural production during Stalinist times was cooperatives (the equivalent of Soviet kolkhozes), complemented by State Agricultural Farms (PGRs, the equivalent of sovkhozes). Although the attempt to collectivize the entire agricultural system failed, resulting in the disappearance of cooperatives, state farms became an important part of the sector until the political transformation in 1989. They cultivated huge areas (10% of all arable land), employed vast numbers of workers (0.5 million by 1989), and obtained huge financial resources (at least 50% of the public funding allocated to agriculture). As a result, they played a leading role in agricultural production. Some scholars even perceive PGRs as a reincarnation of the earlier agricultural estate, with complete dependence of workers on the livelihood it provided and their alienation from agricultural production (Koryś 2018, 306).

As for international relations, in the late 1940s Poland became a closed country. Its political isolation, mostly from the West, reached an extreme under Stalinism (1949–1953) (Koryś 2018, 271). Economic development at that time was focused mainly on heavy industry, developed in close connection with the USSR. Industrialization was meant to be an unavoidable process of modernization and catching up with the West (Kaliński 1995, 31). It was also based on accumulation of resources for industrial investment, which was expected to provide the springboard for social change and curbing individual consumption (Koryś 2018, 277–278). In other words, the economic growth of the Stalinist-era economy was a result of the brutal accumulation of capital through the collectivization of agriculture and taking over the surplus agricultural production in the form of compulsory supplies (Koryś 2018, 296).

The sweeping changes in Eastern Europe following the Khrushchev Thaw precipitated a political détente and economic decentralization in Poland. The idea of maximizing the accumulation of capital was incre-

asingly replaced with that of maximizing wages and consumption. As for agricultural production, it was based on the idea of food autarchy, although it was never completely implemented (Kaliński 1995, 103). In 1968 the government adopted the strategy of so-called “selective development” based on prioritizing the development of certain selected branches of industry and groups of commodities (Fallenbuchl 1983, 11). However, this did not appear to be economically viable either and, consequently, led to political crisis.

Finally in 1970, after a period of serious political tensions, the new party leader Edward Gierek came to power, putting forward a new development model that was supposed to revive the Polish economy. Its main concepts were withdrawal of the strategy of selective development, improvement of society’s living conditions by increasing investment in consumption and housing, and mobilization of international trade (mostly with capitalist countries) by means of Western investment loans (Kaliński 1995, 150). It also introduced the new idea of Great Economic Organizations, industrial and agricultural plants modelled on huge corporations (Budziński 2018). The program was based on the idea of importing advanced technologies from the West, adopting them to increase industrial production in Poland, and repaying debts with final products (Koryś, Tyimiński 2021). This strategy enabled Poland to galvanize economic relations with the West and increase the dynamics of capital production without direct financial transfers (the Polish zloty was an unconvertible currency).

As a consequence, the first half of the 1970s saw one of the most extensive investment programs in postwar Poland. In contrast to Stalinist times, however, this time economic acceleration was coupled with efforts to enhance standards of living and consumption among all classes of Polish citizens. These two aims – accumulation and consumption – would have been impossible to achieve without Western loans. In 1970, the total Polish debt amounted to 1 billion dollars in today’s prices. By 1976, this figure had climbed to 12 billion (Koryś 2018, 302), and in 1982 it had reached 26 billion dollars (Kaliński 2021).

Until the middle of the decade, investment expansion seemed effective. Yet serious difficulties began to appear as early as 1974. They resulted from overinvestment, but also the adverse geopolitical situation (oil crisis), unfavorable weather conditions affecting agricultural output, and also, importantly, bad management at both the national and local levels. Technology transfers without investing in national innovations turned out to be a short-term strategy, as they soon faced barriers of innovation and imitation (Winięcki 1987). Licenses only partly contributed to

modernization, as they were usually not creatively developed, and consequently turned out to be a barrier for implementing Polish technological ideas (Kaliński 1995, 91).

As the crisis developed, the excessively wide investment front slowed down, finally coming to a halt and resulting in many unfinished infrastructural projects (Fallenbuchl 1983, 17). What is more, dependence on Western loans and technologies turned out to be disastrous for the Polish economy. The political upheavals that ensued in 1976 and later in 1980 (resulting in the establishment of the Solidarity movement), and their suppression with the introduction of martial law the following year, transformed Poland's geopolitical situation. This led the USA to introduce economic sanctions against Poland, suspending its favorable trade status and restricting access to new technologies (Woś 1987, 105). These sanctions, coupled with the decrease in the prices of coal (which was the main Polish export product at the time) and the growing economic recession left Poland unable to repay its debts (Koryś 2018, 275), bringing economic and political disaster and leading to the collapse of the entire system in 1989 (Kaliński 2021).

Factory farms in Poland (and why they failed)

I will now attempt to outline the context of introducing the first industrial animal farming systems in the Polish People's Republic. I will endeavor to elucidate the reasons behind their implementation, the dynamics of their adoption, and the factors leading to the abandonment of this mode of production merely a few years after its initiation.

Let us first define the term "factory farms" (also known as industrial farming, intensive farming or concentrated animal feeding operations – CAFO). It refers to a form of farming system involving crowding large groups of animals into confined indoor spaces, based on the total control of their lives. Every stage of the animals' lives is closely controlled and supervised – from artificial insemination to pregnancy, fattening, and death. All these stages are thoroughly designed according to specific guidelines based on scientific research in order to maximize the animals' efficiency and, as a consequence, profits. The entire logic of factory farming is deeply rooted in the logic of industrial process – with animals being both objects to be processed and machines to produce particular goods (milk, eggs) (see Hribar 2010, Leder 2018).

One needs to stress that the intensification of animal production in Poland until 1970 did not fall under this definition. Certainly, after the

The intensification of animal production in Poland until 1970 did not fall under this definition.

war (and, specifically, after the creation of state-owned and cooperative farms), animal breeding, fattening and killing gradually became large-scale, intensified, mechanized and based on industrially produced animal feed, which severed their relationship with the soil. Large farms of this kind were common especially in the areas taken over from Germany, where they were nationalized and turned into huge PGRs. However, apart from the production of broiler chickens, which began in 1961 (Kosowska, Zwolińska-Bartczak 1999, 119), this sort of production did not fall into the category of industrial farming per se – because, except for their sheer size and the mechanization of some (but not all) activities, they did not form concise, rational and all-encompassing machines for processing animal lives.

Both in scientific and popular media discourse, this delay was described as unacceptable backwardness, leaving the Polish food production policy in urgent need of catching up with the rest of the developed world.

This was delayed in comparison with not only Western capitalist countries, but also other countries from the Eastern Bloc. Both in scientific and popular media discourse, this delay was described as unacceptable backwardness, leaving the Polish food production policy in urgent need of catching up with the rest of the developed world (Węcławowicz 1970). The perceived urgency of the situation was compounded by social and demographic issues. Post-war industrialization intensified social migrations from rural areas to the cities, making the new working class urbanites. Moreover, the baby boomer generation was beginning to start families and enter the job market. Consequently, the demand for meat products increased and the size of the skilled rural workforce declined – specifically as animal labor was commonly perceived as the most unpleasant, unrewarding and least prestigious form of work even among PGR workers (for more about the low social status of animal workers in PGRs see: Seremak-Bulge 1985, 39, Dzun 166-167). The ready-to-use systems of industrial farms, providing significant output of meat and dairy products with a limited number of workers involved in the production, seemed like a perfect solution for decision makers.

This trend significantly gained momentum after Gierek came to power. Continuous and widespread access to meat products for citizens from all classes and walks of life became a priority for the government. As a consequence, the government felt forced to drastically increase animal production as quickly as possible. Although the first experimental factory farm, based on a license of the Italian company Gigi, was built in Kołbacz as early as 1967 (Kosowska, Zwolińska-Bartczak 1999), during the first half of the next decade the number of newly built factory farms soared. In 1972, just 2% of the total number of pigs and 1% of dairy cows in Poland were kept in factory farms (which meant 23,000 pigs were held in two farms, and 800 dairy cows were kept in one farm).

Over the next few years their number surged. By 1981, factory farms kept a third of the total number of pigs who lived and died in Poland at that time (1,310,000 animals kept in 78 farms) and one sixth of the cows (116,716 animals kept in 201 farms) (Kierul, Majewski 1991, 119). The dramatic rise in the number of bred and slaughtered animals meant a rapid increase in the meat supply over just a few years – both for export and for the internal market. This rapid growth was made possible by positive trends in international trade, the consequences of planned austerity in the previous decade, and favorable weather conditions that enabled exceptionally large harvests in 1970 and 1971 (Bałtowski 2009). Additionally, extensive loans, both from the Soviet Union and Western countries, played a crucial role, providing Polish authorities with the opportunity to “import consumptionism” (Zaręba 2003).

It soon became clear, however, that the factory farms were not as efficient as they were meant to be. Above all, the construction of hundreds of farms over just a few years incurred high costs, which were meant to be offset by increased animal production. However, the animals refused to be as efficient as the planners had imagined. Although their efficiency was slightly greater than that of animals kept in more traditional state-owned farms, it was still much less efficient than in small, private-owned animal farms (Lewandowski 1983, Kierul, Majewski 1991, 121). The relations between expenditures and profits in factory farms therefore turned out to be disadvantageous. What is more, it soon became clear that they were detrimental to the environment. Although the issue of methane production was not a subject of debate at the time, the problems with utilization of manure and slurry which contaminated the environment were commonly known and recognized as problematic by both scientists and agricultural planners (Cena 1972).

The most acute problem, however, concerned the scarcity of animal feed. Vast discrepancies between animal and plant production were already seen as early as the 1960s. While the former increased significantly, the rate of production of the latter was substantially slower and, after reaching its peak in 1973, it stagnated and then began to slow down (Urban 1981). Consequently, the total amount of plant products failed to meet the nutritional demands of both human consumers and a growing population of farmed animals (mostly grains). In other words, unreasonable and short-sighted food policies created a mechanism of metabolic rift (Bellamy Foster, Clark 2020) – Polish agriculture did not manage to produce enough grain to feed everyone. Although the problem was known to agricultural scientists at least from the mid-1960s onwards, little was done to close the rift. On the contrary – further investments

in meat and dairy production were undertaken. The problem of grain scarcity was solved in a manner that reflected the dominant premises of the government politics of that time: expanding grain import, mostly from the US and Western Europe, which made Poland increasingly dependent on the world markets. While the total number of grain imports in 1970 amounted to 2 million tons, it grew to 9 million in 1980 (Bajan 1984, 51) and soon began to increase the indebtedness of Polish national economy to 1.5 billion dollars per year (Woś 1987, 85). As a consequence, the overinvestment in animal production turned out to be disastrous for the Polish economy, specifically in the face of the economic crises that were to come.

The final blow to Polish factory farms was dealt after the introduction of martial law in 1981 and the sanctions placed on the Polish government by Western countries. This resulted in the closure of most factory farms, as they were unable to operate on the basis of fodder taken exclusively from Polish crops. The outcome, of course, was the so-called feed crisis and, consequently, a meat crisis. Meat was in short supply again, as Polish agriculture, severed from supplies of Western grain, could not meet society's consumption demands on the level stimulated by the 1970s. It was not until the late 1990s that farms that we might call CAFOs opened again – this time in the entirely different conditions of liberal market and, after 2004, also generous EU subsidies. The forced and rapid introduction of factory farms without attention to the social, economic and ecological context turned out to be a dismal failure, even though, in the short run, it succeeded in providing a large amount of meat for Polish society for a few years of prosperity in the 1970s.

(Para)capitalist food production in a (formally) socialist country

Before I proceed to the final conceptualizations of my research, I would like to answer the question: can meat production during the mature period of the Polish People's Republic be characterized as a form of state capitalism? And if so, which of its characteristics could form the basis for positing such a thesis?

To assess whether the hypothesis regarding the capitalist dimension of the Polish People's Republic economy is valid, it would be pertinent to begin by addressing the question of the definition of capitalism. A conclusive response to this question exceeds the ambitions of my modest study. However, I situate my considerations within the theoretical tradition that points to the omnipresence of capitalist logic in the trajec-

ories of modernity (see: Goody, 2013, Giddens 2020, among others). In this broad sense, capitalism is a system based on the capitalization, monetization, and exploitation of human and non-human actors, constituting a kind of matrix dialectically reproduced even in the logic of socialism – which emerges from it and attempts to transcend it. Capitalism in a narrower sense would denote a free-market economy. In this sense, the concept of state capitalism of course appears as an explicit oxymoron. However, if we understand capitalism in a broader sense, namely as all-compassing logic that permeates virtually all aspects of modern social practices, it does not necessarily conflict with a centrally planned economy.

Analyzing the practices of mass industrial meat production, it is impossible to abstract from their capitalist origins. Industrial farms and modern slaughterhouses with their disassembly line are quintessential expressions of capitalism, as their logic insists on the characteristic scientific management (Taylorism) of reproduction, fattening, killing, and processing of animal bodies. This issue has been raised repeatedly by researchers in the field of critical animal studies (see references in the methods and literature section). These ready-made farming systems, most of them based on capitalist technologies, were implemented in Poland in an entirely different political, social and ecological context.

This is related to another phenomenon, namely the close connection of the PRL economy to global markets and well-developed economic cooperation with capitalist countries. I do not elaborate on this issue, as it has been sufficiently well-explored by economic historians (Koryś 2018, Fallenbuchl 1983, among others). However, it constitutes a crucial context for understanding the analyzed problem, especially considering that these economic connections had a specific goal: catching up with “developed countries” (a euphemism often used to refer to capitalist countries). This pursuit of catching up with the West in the economic and consumption sphere, elaborated by Leszczyński (2013), was clearly visible in so-called animal production as well.

Moreover, one of the key research categories that emerges from my analysis of the industry discourse in the PRL is the category of profit/profitability of production. More broadly, it involves the extreme economization of the language describing animal breeding and processing. Theoretically, the fundamental difference between capitalist and socialist economies boiled down to the fact that the ultimate goal of the latter was not so much the multiplication of profit but the increase of societal well-being. In practice, however, this pursuit of satisfying societal needs

amounted to the multiplication of profit. As one author astutely observed, “social needs manifest themselves through market demand” (Babiak 1978, s. 15).

The issues discussed above are reflected in the language of literature from that period (not only strictly economic but also zootechnical and popular science). The names of working farm animals, still common in the 1950s, especially in the context of animal labor competitions (e.g., “model-worker cows”), are gradually replaced by numbers, or they even disappear altogether, replaced by concepts such as “animal material,” “slaughter material,” “elimination of defective and low-efficient specimens from production,” and “improvement of calf quality” (for more about this issue see: Jarzębowska 2023a). This is an entirely new, capitalist language that redefines the relationship between humans and farm animals, and their processed and consumed bodies.

Therefore, I contend that the animal production in Poland of that time exhibited distinct capitalist characteristics. Despite being rooted in a command-based economy, it concurrently emulated a production model based on the logic of capitalism—with its pronounced objectification of animals, fetishization of profit, and briefly inflated consumerism. While industrial farms did not withstand the prolonged confrontation with the constraints of the centrally planned economy, the societal perceptions about meat proved remarkably enduring, as I will demonstrate in the next section.

State capitalism: the cornerstone of the Polish meat fetish?

It is important to consider the social, cultural and interspecies consequences of the failed experiment with factory farms. My working conclusion would be that what happened in the 1970s is at least partly responsible for the dissemination of new patterns of meat consumption in Poland. Although deeply rooted in the traditional concept of meat as something desirable and an indicator of social status, it also seems to have displayed new trends in food consumption that are still at play today.

First of all, in the popular imaginaries, demand for meat has come to be perceived as people’s struggle for their basic rights. Meat as the basis of social welfare – and access to meat as a human right per se – began to dominate the cultural landscape of the time (see also: Kochanowski 2005). As a result, the authorities gained relative social acceptance only if they provided unlimited access to cheap animal products (which

Despite being rooted in a command-based economy, it concurrently emulated a production model based on the logic of capitalism—with its pronounced objectification of animals, fetishization of profit, and briefly inflated consumerism.

In the popular imaginaries, demand for meat has come to be perceived as people’s struggle for their basic rights.

was rarely the case). In every situation when the government decided to put up prices for meat or to limit access to it by introducing meat coupons, political upheaval followed – even when the rise in prices was the consequence of objective environmental or geopolitical factors. At the same time, periods when meat was abundant (the early 1970s may be the only credible example) were perceived as times when social demands were finally met.

I do not mean to suggest that other issues, such as political freedom, were not crucial factors shaping social discontent in Poland before 1989. However, constraints in consumption, specifically of meat, were almost always triggers that sparked political unrest. In other words, the prices of meat were publicly perceived as a yardstick for the authorities' willingness or reluctance to meet society's demands. Consequently, meat turned into a fetish – desirable, not always available, yet considered something to which ordinary people are entitled.

This last characteristic differentiates this attitude from the popular pre-war (or even pre-modern) meat-related imaginaries, in which meat, rarely eaten, was perceived as something unique and exceptional. I do not mean to idealize human-animal relations in traditional peasant economies. Indeed, they were (and are, where they still exist) full of cruelty and indifference to animal suffering (see Berger 1980, Serpell 1986, Noske 1997, Bulliet 2005, Vogt-Kostecka 2016). They were, however, based on embodied relations with non-human others – relations that formed the material basis for consumption restrictions (“I will kill this particular pig, divide the meat among my family and neighbors and eat it. There will be no more meat than this pig is built of. To have more meat I would need to kill another one. But then I will have no more pigs to raise and breed”). Even the urban working class often obtained meat from their relatives living in the country throughout much of the 20th century (“I will go to visit my aunt. She will kill a hog and give me some meat. It will do for a while”). Modern animal production which began with the creation of large state-owned farms, and fully developed in the 1970s, changed this mentality markedly. From now on, meat was transformed into something disembodied, dismantled, ready-to-cook, and – most importantly – available on a daily basis. This perception of availability may be understood as an effect of society's alienation from the process of meat production. As a consequence, the concept of objective, metabolic restrictions of the food system seem to have gradually vanished from the social and individual imaginary. Restrictions were now perceived as something that the authorities impose on society (out of mismanagement or out

Restrictions were now perceived as something that the authorities impose on society and, consequently, as something that can and should be done away with in order to provide people with unlimited access to meat.

of spite) and, consequently, as something that can and should be done away with in order to provide people with unlimited access to meat.

Of course, this turn in meat consumption was more of a process than a sudden breakthrough. Industrial technologies in animal exploitation were not implemented overnight, while the disembodied language describing their life and death did not entirely replace pre-modern human-animal imaginaries. However, a diachronic analysis of both official documents and media coverage between 1945 and 1989 clearly shows that the material-discursive shift in human-animal relations accelerated markedly in the 1970s. Although the first signs of this economic, disembodied, capitalist discourse can be traced back to the 1950s, it was in the 1970s that they finally dominated professional zootechnical and agricultural science. This language reflected the harsh realities of animal husbandry at that time, where both non-human and human workers of “meat factories” were alienated from the production process, becoming small cogs in a food machine (Seremak-Bulge 1985, 93-95, writes about the dehumanization of workers in factory farms; interestingly, however, she does not mention that the same mechanism is at play with animal bodies).

The authorities seem to have performed an ambiguous role in this process. On the one hand, they tried to curtail the meat demand among Polish society due to constant food shortages (Jarosz 2019). On the other, however, they seem to have played the meat game with society, knowing that an increasing supply of cheap animal products can assure (or, at least, reinforce) social acceptance towards the government’s policy and decrease the probability of political upheaval. Yet while the dynamics of supply/shortages politics remained relatively stable until 1970 (in the sense that, even in times of relevant prosperity, stimulation of consumption was kept within limits), the early 1970s saw the overstimulation of meat consumption patterns. While in 1950 the per capita consumption of meat in Poland amounted to 36.5 kg – in 1960 it was 43 kg, and in 1970 52.6 kg, it rapidly soared in the 1970s, reaching its peak in 1980, when the average Polish citizen ate as much as 74 kg. After the crisis of the 1980s and 1990s, when the consumption of meat rapidly decreased, it did not reach the level from the 1970s until 2006 (Michalska et al. 2013). Today, consumption of meat per capita in Poland is 70.5 kg – around 4 kg less than in 1980 (Statistical Yearbook of Agriculture 2022, 314).

Of course, meat consumption patterns over the last five decades can indeed be seen as an indicator of social prosperity (in fact, analysis of data showing that the average meat consumption in 1990 was higher

than in 2000 does provide a significant contribution to discussions about the social costs of political transformation). It has only been in the last decade or two that the ideas of vegetarianism and veganism have gained popularity, due to environmental, ethical and/or health reasons, and even when they did, they were (and still are) restricted mostly to the class of well-educated young urbanites (Straczuk 2022). Therefore, the conclusion that in the 1970s meat consumption in Poland was highly overstimulated seems counterintuitive, as in the popular imagination the times of the Polish People's Republic are still perceived as an era of scarcity. However, if we consider the current controversies surrounding industrial meat production – not only environmental and animal welfare concerns, but also the recommended level of animal protein intake – it is not difficult to conclude that what happened in the 1970s is not just about meeting consumption demands, but also about buying Polish society's political support by means of ethically dubious, ecologically disastrous and economically unreasonable methods. While public support towards the government appeared wobbly and short term, the meat consumption patterns of the 1970s – commonly, even if subconsciously, perceived as a benchmark of what access to meat should look like – remained persistent in Polish society. They are still clearly visible today, as any proposal to curb the average consumption of animal protein (mostly due to its detrimental environmental impact) sparks outrage in society.

If we consider the current controversies surrounding industrial meat production, it is not difficult to conclude that what happened in the 1970s is not just about meeting consumption demands, but also about buying Polish society's political support by means of ethically dubious, ecologically disastrous and economically unreasonable methods.

Progress as imitation and beyond: lessons for the future

In his groundbreaking book *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination*, Laurence Buell (2009) described the current environmental crisis as a crisis of imagination. Although rooted in literary criticism, the idea soon caught on in environmental humanities (Yusoff, Gabrys 2011, Oakley, Ward, Christie 2018, Herbert 2021, Hammond 2022, Jasikowska Pałasz 2022, among others). What this means is that, while struggling with finding ways out of the crisis, people tend to follow the same patterns of behavior that led them to it. In other words, we, as humans, lack imagination. Or, to be precise, humans who live in the capitalist world lack the imagination to envisage non-capitalist ways of establishing social, environmental and interspecies relations (Fisher 2009). Although communism initially seemed to have provided an alternative, it soon became part of the capitalist system, with its economy strictly ruled by capitalist values and

described by purely capitalist language. Modernization processes in Polish agriculture meant catching up with the West by emulating capitalist solutions and their forced implementation in an entirely different political, social and environmental context. The Polish government's food politics before 1989 displayed an inability to go beyond the global system – one not just divided by a porous, nylon curtain (instead of an iron one) (Peteri 2004), but which in fact was a global, two-polar world system (Wallerstein 2004). Although formally one of the geopolitical poles was socialist, in reality the entire system consisted of two forms of capitalism – state and liberal. My research suggests that the food politics in Poland was marked by an inability to imagine alternative patterns of food production and consumption – not only because the decision makers were not capable enough. It also seems to have been because Fukuyama's (1989) notorious concept of the end of history – perceived as a benchmark of the 1990s and making Western capitalist economies the only viable path to the future – was implicitly there at least two decades earlier, even if it had not been explicitly formulated.

To recap: increasing meat production in Poland in the 1970s was an explicitly political decision. It was not economically viable (setting aside, for a moment, ethical and environmental considerations). It made Poland hugely dependent on grain supplies from the West, and was thus a vital component of the political process leading to the collapse of the system over the following two decades. Some of the events to come were “black swans” (the Solidarity movement, the breakup of the Soviet Union). However, the main hazards of intensifying meat production (at the cost of a highly underdeveloped grain sector) were already common knowledge at the time. What is more, Polish decision makers in the 1950s and 1960s did not overstimulate animal production, precisely because they were aware that doing so would throw the food sector out of balance. It seems a paradox, then, that Gierek and his government decided to push meat production to the limits.

There is obviously no one answer to explain this process, and I am not in a position to seek one. The hypothesis I would like to put forward, however, is that what may have played a leading role in this meat paradox is a particular understanding of progress ubiquitous in the discourse of that time. Progress in late Soviet-style economies was seen as a synonym of catching up technologically, industrially and in consumption styles with developed (Western) countries. In other words, Western liberal capitalism was perceived as a template of modernity, its only viable incarnation, to which one needs to aspire in order to reach the status of a developed country, even if theoretically this country followed

the socialist path of modernization. The rise in individual consumption (and, specifically, meat consumption) was one of the pivotal constituents of this imaginary, making it the gauge of the modernizing process. The belief that the country was lagging behind the West gave rise to the idea that it was necessary to catch up quickly – by the same methods and by means of the same capitalist logic. Socialist modernization ceased to be (if it ever was) an emancipatory process of imagining a better world. It ended up as cultural emulation.

The last conclusion to result from this inquiry has a more general, future-oriented dimension and considers the question of making political decisions in the conditions of economy of scarcity. Both the Western, liberal capitalist mode of consumption and its East European incarnations failed dismally – the latter in 1989, and the former currently shaken with mortal convulsions. Their overproduction, overinvestment and (still, mostly liberal capitalist) overconsumption caused disastrous ecological degradation and have led humanity to the brink of extinction. The idea of goods that are physically boundless, access to which can only be enabled or restricted on the basis of purely political decisions, was also a failure. This humble case study of Polish agricultural production under (formally) socialist rule seems to appear utterly remote to the economic challenges we (as Poles, as white Europeans, but also as humans) face today. It is, however, my conviction that it can provide a valid contribution to the discussions of how problems related to politics, social consumption patterns and interspecies welfare consolidate in the context of limited resources and – probably soon enough – food austerity. Reimagining food politics and reshaping social expectations concerning meat consumption are indeed crucial for our species to survive – but this is, obviously, beyond the scope of this analysis.

References

- Anderson, Joseph Leslie. 2019. *Capitalist Pigs: Pigs, Pork, and Power in America*. West Virginia University Press.
- Babiak, Jerzy. *Gospodarka żywnościowa. Kształtowanie się nowoczesnego modelu produkcji żywności w Polsce*, Książka i Wiedza, Warsaw 1978.
- Bajan, Konrad. 1984. *Polityka rolna w PRL*. Warszawa.
- Bałtowski, Maciej. *Gospodarka socjalistyczna w Polsce*, Warsaw 2009.
- Berger, John. 1980. “Why look at animals?” *Literature & the Environment; LeMenager, S., Shewry, T. (Eds)*.

- Blanchette, Alex. 2020. *Porkopolis: American Animality, Standardized Life, and the Factory Farm*. Duke University Press.
- Bremmer, Ian. 2009. "State capitalism comes of age: The end of the free market?" *Foreign Aff.* 88.
- Budziński, Michał. 2018. „Utworzenie Wielkich Organizacji Gospodarczych—założenia reformy przemysłu PRL lat 70.” *Kwartalnik Kolegium Ekonomiczno-Społecznego Studia i Prace/Szkoła Główna Handlowa*. 3.
- Buell, Lawrence. 2009. *The future of environmental criticism: Environmental crisis and literary imagination*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Bulliet, Richard W. 2005. *Hunters, Herders, and Hamburgers: The Past and Future of Human-Animal Relationships*. Columbia University Press.
- Cena, Mieczysław. 1972. „Hodowla zwierząt a ochrona środowiska”, *Przegląd Hodowlany*, 23/24.
- Dahms, Harry F. 2011. "The Early Frankfurt School Critique of Capitalism: Critical Theory between Pollock's "State Capitalism" and the Critique of Instrumental Reason." *The Vitality of Critical Theory* 28.
- Dzun, Włodzimierz. 1991. „PGR w rolnictwie polskim w latach 1944–1990”. Warszawa.
- Fallenbuchl, Zbigniew M. 1983. *East-West Technology Transfer: Study of Poland, 1971-1980*. Paris, Washington, DC.
- Fekete, F. 1974. "Development in livestock production and tendencies in supply and demand in the European socialist countries" *Acta Oeconomica*.
- Fisher, M. 2009. *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* Zero Books.
- Fitzgerald, Deborah Kay. 2008. *Every farm a factory: The industrial ideal in American agriculture*. Yale University Press.
- Fleischman, Thomas. *Communist Pigs: an Animal History of East Germany's Rise and Fall*. University of Washington Press, 2020.
- Foer, Jonathan Safran. 2010. *Eating animals*. Penguin UK.
- Foster, John Bellamy, and Brett Clark. 2020. *The Robbery of Nature. Capitalism and the Ecological Rift*. Monthly Review Press, New York.
- Franklin, Alex. 1999. "Animals and modern cultures: A sociology of human-animal relations in modernity." SAGE.
- Fukuyama, Francis. 1989. "The End of History?" *The National Interest*. 16.
- Gangl, Manfred. 2016. "The controversy over Friedrich Pollock's state capitalism" *History of the Human Sciences* 29.2.
- Genoways, Ted. 2014. *The Chain. Farm, factory and the fate of our food*. Harper.
- Giddens, Anthony. "Modernity and self-identity: Self and society in the

- late modern age." *The new social theory reader*. Routledge, 2020.
- Goldman, Emma. 1960 [1935]. *There is no communism in Russia*. Chardwyck-Healey Incorporated.
- Goody, Jack. *Capitalism and modernity: The great debate*. John Wiley & Sons, 2013.
- Gorzela, Eugeniusz. 2010. „Polskie rolnictwo w XX wieku. Produkcja i ludność”. Warszawa.
- Grochowski Zdzisław (ed.). 1976. *Rolnictwo polskie w latach 1971-1975 i aktualne problemy jego rozwoju*. Warszawa.
- Hammond, Marit. 2022. “Imagination and critique in environmental politics” *Trajectories in Environmental Politics*. Routledge.
- Hale-Dorrell, Aaron. 2015. “The Soviet Union, the United States, and Industrial Agriculture.” *Journal of World History*.
- Harrison, Mark. 1996. “Soviet Agriculture and Industrialization.” *The Nature of Industrialization*. 4.
- Herbert, Joe. 2021. “The Socio-ecological Imagination: Young Environmental Activists Constructing Transformation in an Era of Crisis.” *Area* 53.2.
- Howard, Michael C., and John Eduard King. 2001. “State capitalism in the Soviet Union” *History of economics review*. 34.1.
- Hribar, Carrie. 2010. *Understanding concentrated animal feeding operations and their impact on communities*.
- Jarosz, Dariusz. 2019. „Mięso” *Polska 1944/45-1989*. 17.
- Jarzębowska, Gabriela. 2023a. „Dobrostan zwierząt gospodarskich w PRL.” *ZOOPHILOLOGICA. Polish Journal of Animal Studies* 1.11. 1-22.
- Jarzębowska, Gabriela. 2023b. „Historia jednego buhaja.” *Czas Kultury* 39.02: 34-43.
- Jasikowska, Katarzyna, and Michał Pałasz. 2022. *Kryzys klimatyczno-ekologiczny i akademia: emocje, polityczność, wyobrażenia*.
- Kaliński, Janusz. 1995. *Gospodarka Polski w latach 1944-1989. Przemiany strukturalne*. Warszawa.
- Kaliński, Janusz. „Kryzys gospodarczy w latach 1979-1982 zwiastunem upadku PRL”. *Optimum. Economic Studies* 1.
- Kierul, Zenon and Edward Majewski. 1991. „Postęp techniczny w gospodarstwie rolniczym”. Warszawa.
- Karolczuk, Edward. 2017. „O ideowo-politycznej odpowiedzialności Wojciecha Jaruzelskiego.” *Nowa Krytyka: czasopismo filozoficzne*. 38.
- Kochanowski, Jerzy. 2005. „Prolegomena do społeczno-modernizacyjnych kulis „problemu mięsnego” w PRL.” *Przegląd Historyczny*, tom XCVI, zeszyt 4.

- Koryś, Piotr. 2018. *Poland from partitions to EU accession: A modern economic history, 1772–2004*. Springer.
- Koryś, Piotr and Maciej Tymiński. 2021. „Zmarnowana dekada? Ekspansja inwestycyjna lat siedemdziesiątych XX wieku na tle polityki gospodarczej w okresie PRL”. *Dzieje Najnowsze* 3.
- Kosowska, Barbara and Irena Zwolińska-Bartczak. 1999. „Zarys historii zootechniki”. Wrocław.
- Lavin, Chad. 2009. “Factory farms in a consumer society” *American Studies*. 50.1/2.
- Lenin, Vladimir. 1922. *Five Years of the Russian Revolution and the Prospects of the World Revolution, Lenin Collected Works*, Progress Publishers, Moscow.
- Leder, Drew. 2012. “Old McDonald’s had a farm: The metaphysics of factory farming” *Journal of Animal Ethics*. 2.1.
- Lee, Paula Young (ed.). 2008. *Meat, Modernity, and the Rise of the Slaughterhouse*. UPNE.
- Leszczyński, Adam. 2013. *Skok w nowoczesność. Polityka wzrostu w krajach peryferyjnych 1943-1980*. Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, Warsaw.
- Lewandowski, Edward. 1983. „Przyszłość ferm tuczu trzody chlewnej”, *Przegląd Hodowlany*. 6.
- Michalska, Grażyna, et al. 2013. „Spożycie artykułów żywnościowych z udziałem mięsa i jego przetworów” *Przegląd Hodowlany*. 81.6.
- Moore, Jason W. 2015. *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital*. Verso Books.
- Nibert, David. 2012. “The fire next time: the coming cost of capitalism, animal oppression and environmental ruin.” *Journal of Human rights and the environment* 3.1 (2012): 141-158.
- Noske, Barbara. 1997. “Speciesism, anthropocentrism, and non-western cultures.” *Anthrozoös* 10.4.
- Nowakowski, Krzysztof. 2014. „Kapitalizm państwowy jako dylemat praktyczny i teoretyczny” *Ruch Prawniczy, Ekonomiczny i Socjologiczny* 76.
- Oakley, Kate, Jonathan Ward, and Ian Christie. 2018. “Engaging the imagination: ‘new nature writing’, collective politics and the environmental crisis”. *Environmental Values*. 27.6.
- Péteri, György. 2004. “Nylon Curtain—Transnational and Transsystemic Tendencies in the Cultural Life of State-Socialist Russia and East-Central Europe” *Slavonica* 10.2.
- Ratajczak, Klemens. 1984. *Rolnictwo w Polsce Ludowej*.
- Resnick, Stephen A., and Richard D. Wolff. 2013. *Class theory and history: Capitalism and communism in the USSR*. Routledge.

- Rothbard, Murray N. (1973) *A future of peace and capitalism*. James H. Weaver (ed).
- Pollock, Frederick. 1941. "State capitalism: its possibilities and limitations" *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* 9.2: 200-225.
- Seremak-Bulge, Jadwiga. 1985. *Przyczyny i skutki uprzemysłowienia produkcji zwierzęcej w Polsce*. Warszawa.
- Serpell, James. 1996. *In the Company of Animals: A Study of Human-Animal Relationships*. Cambridge University Press.
- Smith, Jenny Leigh. 2014. "Agricultural Involution in the Postwar Soviet Union" *International Labor and Working-Class History*. 85.
- Stanescu, James. 2013. "Beyond biopolitics: Animal studies, factory farms, and the advent of deading life" *PhaenEx* 8.2.
- Statistical Yearbook of Agriculture. 2022.
- Stracuk, Justyna. 2022. „Kwestia Smaku. o Klasowym wymiarze upodobań kulinarnych, alternatywnych systemach wartości i legitymizacji nierówności społecznych.” *Studia Socjologiczne* 245.2.
- Szelegieniec, Paweł. 2014. „Między kapitalizmem a socjalizmem. Marksistowska teoria okresu przejściowego.” *Praktyka Teoretyczna* 11.
- Twine, Richard. 2013. "Addressing the animal-industrial complex" .*The politics of species: Reshaping our relationships with other animals*.
- Urban, Roman. 1981. „Problem mięsny w strategii rozwojowej gospodarki żywnościowej”. *Przegląd Hodowlany* 20.
- Vogt-Kostecka, Maja. 2016. „Żywe nam nie przepuści. Przyczynki do hodowlanej historii Polski”. *Czas Kultury* 32(3).
- Wallerstein, Immanuel. 2020. *World-systems Analysis: An Introduction*. Duke University Press.
- Winiński, Jan. 1987. "Soviet-type economies' strategy for catching-up through technology imports—an anatomy of failure". *Technovation* 6.2.
- Woś, Augustyn. 1987. *Rozwój i postęp w rolnictwie polskim*. Warszawa.
- Yusoff, Kathryn, and Jennifer Gabrys. 2011. "Climate change and the imagination" *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change* 2.4.
- Zaremba, Marcin. 2003. „Bigosowy socjalizm: dekada Gierka.” *Polacy wobec PRL. Strategie przystosowawcze, 183-200*.

GABRIELA JARZĘBOWSKA is an assistant professor at the Faculty of Artes Liberales, University of Warsaw. She was a Fulbright Fellow at the Wesleyan University, the Seedbox network at the Linköping University grantee and a short time visiting scholar at the University of California (Santa Cruz). Her book *Species Cleansing. The Cultural Practice of Rat Control* will be published by Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht Verlag (Imprint of BRILL Deutschland) in 2024.

ORCID: 0000-0001-9678-2163

Address:

Faculty of Artes Liberales

University of Warsaw

email: gabriela.jarzebowska@al.uw.edu.pl

Citation:

Jarzębowska, Gabriela. 2024. „State Capitalism as a Crisis of Imagination. Factory Farms in the Polish People’s Republic in the 1970s”. *Praktyka Teoretyczna* 1(51): 51–72.

DOI: 10.19195/prt.2024.1.3

Autorka: Gabriela Jarzębowska

Tytuł: Kapitalizm państwowy jako kryzys wyobraźni. Fermy przemysłowe w PRL-u w latach 70. XX wieku

Abstrakt: W artykule, w kontekście przemiany społecznych wyobrażeń na temat mięsa, omówione zostaną pierwsze – nieudane – próby wprowadzenia w Polsce hodowli przemysłowej w latach 70. XX wieku. Artykuł dowodzi, że rozpowszechnienie w Polsce konsumpcji mięsa na szeroką skalę było konsekwencją naśladowania zachodnich, kapitalistycznych wzorców produkcji żywności i przyswojenia dyskursu, który ustanawiał taki model. Logika kapitalizmu, która zdominowała produkcję żywności w latach 70., całkowicie zmieniła relacje międzygatunkowe i wypromowała wizerunek mięsa jako nieograniczonego, dostępnego na co dzień towaru.

Słowa kluczowe: fermy przemysłowe, Polska, kapitalizm państwowy, mięso, zwierzęta