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“Populus Means the People, Ladies and Gentlemen.” A Visual Archive of Peasant Protests during the Post-Socialist Transition

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The article is devoted to peasant protests organized in the period of the post-socialist transition in Poland. The mainstream public sphere is reluctant to bring up the memory of these protests, suppressed as it is by the story of the transition as a period of reveling in capitalism and building a civil society. The author views the radical protest movement as the first mass and serious opposition against the new neoliberal politics of the state. Using Charles Tilly's category of "repertoires of contention," she analyzes the tools used by farmers: road blockades, occupations of government buildings, performances of food wasting and examples of peasant visual activism. The article is accompanied by Michał Januszaniec's visual essay, which uses a diverse range of visual materials from the period.

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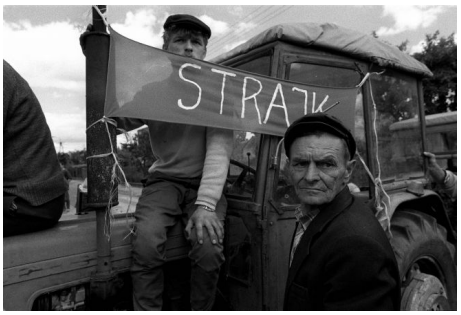
"Populus Means the People, Ladies and Gentlemen." A Visual Archive of Peasant Protests during the Post-Socialist Transition

> *It is hard to imagine a country in which the clash between the entrenched privileges of real socialism and aggressive neoliberalism does not eventually lead to the "discovery" of leftist economic positions*[1]
>
> Edmund Mokrzycki, 1991

On June 12, 1990, individual dairy producers began blockading the road network around the city of Mława, including State Road No. 7, the main link between Warsaw and Gdańsk. Doing their best to halt traffic, over 500 protesters demanded payment for milk deliveries made in May and an increase to wholesale purchase prices. They pleaded with Tadeusz Mazowiecki and Lech Wałęsa, whom they "had voted for and supported,"[2] to assist in negotiations with the Regional Dairy Cooperative. Three days later, however, the government dismissed their demands and ordered the national Chief of Police to disperse the protesters, authorizing the use of force if necessary. Some alleged that "helicopters with special troops" and "armored personnel carriers"[3] were being deployed to Mława. Others claimed that only the efforts of the local police chief prevented the standoff from descending into violence.[4] Just before the government's ultimatum expired, the farmers suspended the protest, following mediation from none other than the head of "Solidarność," Lech Wałęsa.[5] "Banks of



Road blockade in Mława, June 15, 1990, photo: Sławomir Sierzputowski / Agencja Wyborcza.pl

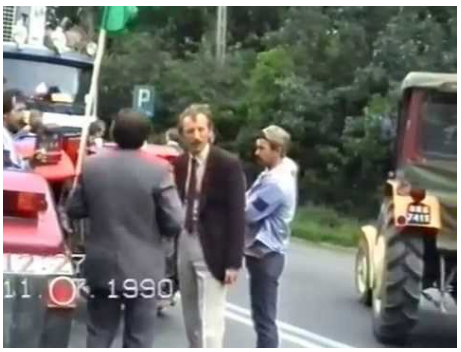
loudspeakers arranged outside broadcast the negotiations live to over a thousand milk producers pressing against the gates."[6]

On June 27, 1990, the Ministry of Agriculture was breached by several hundred farmers demanding to start talks with the government – especially Deputy Prime Minister Leszek Balcerowicz – about setting minimum wholesale purchase prices, regulating interest rates on agricultural loans, and other agricultural policy issues. The farmers soon chained the ministry gates and settled in to occupy the building and surrounding areas. "We're peaceful protesters, no threat to anyone here, and while Deputy Prime Minister Balcerowicz might claim that our occupation of state property is against the law, he does not get to decide that. Blockading roads is illegal, sit-ins, too, so where's that leave us? Are we just supposed to sit in our homes and cry 'Woe is me'?" ranted one of the protesters to a Polish Film Chronicle reporter.[7] Officials maintained that the farmers would first have to leave the ministry for any negotiations to commence. But government patience once again ran out surprisingly fast – on the third day of the sit-in, police stormed the building on Wspólna Street and forcibly cleared it. *Chłopska Droga* reported:

> Removed from the premises, the farmers formed a procession which then marched through downtown Warsaw and headed for the Witos Monument, where they aired their grievances, further aggravated by their being a target of state violence in Mława and on Wspólna.[8]

On July 11, 1990, "over 29,000 tractors, horse-drawn carts, agricultural vehicles, combines, and other machines" spilled out onto roads across Poland to obstruct traffic.[9] *Gazeta Wyborcza* wrote that, "according to yet-incomplete information, the farmers managed to block traffic at 500 locations nationwide, including all the international freight routes running through Poland."[10] The blockades were lifted two hours later.

As Prime Minister Mazowiecki "expressed regrets over the situation," newspapers reported "unexpectedly high levels of support for the protests" among farmers.[11]



Footage captured that day in Łagiewniki in the Lower Silesian voivodeship by a protester illustrates the extent of rural population involvement in the protests.[12] The shaky, blurry image, typical of handheld VHS camcorders, shows children playing around the tractors forming the picket line, alongside youths milling around somewhat aimlessly and groups of men and women of various ages, eating apples and other snacks, cracking jokes, striking poses for the camera ("Smile for the picture, Piotr, so that mom can see that you were here, too"), talking, and – in what must be the most passionate scene of the whole amateur video – heatedly debating with a representative of a different social class, namely a middle-aged man "with urgent matters to attend to," wearing dark glasses and a chic red sweater, holding a satchel under his arm. Standing by his car, its passage blocked by the tractors, the man lectures the farm workers around him about the senselessness of their chosen form of protest. "Ladies and gentlemen, this is why we have laws. Laws are there to be obeyed," he bellows. Throughout the six-minute conversation, a procession of debaters emerges from the group, each one stepping out only to deliver their argument and withdraw, surrendering the field to fellow protesters, the whole process resembling a strange dance. The conversations, unfolding in a town 365 kilometers from Warsaw, carry fundamental significance for the post-1989 transition, as they explicitly invoke class interests and identities. "You were so eager to tell us to screw the fields – why don't you take your own advice and screw

your business for two hours?" one of the protesters asks. "You're supposed to be doing business, and instead you're out here making a ruckus," retorts the (aspiring?) member of the middle class, as he seeks to underscore his own rural roots ("Both my parents were peasants!"). As another suit-wearing protester (likely an organizer with one of the agricultural unions) tries to pull him away from the argument, seeing it grow dangerously heated, the man objects, hollering "I'm talking with peasants here," at which he is accosted by a man in overalls who testily snaps back: "And you're what, not a peasant? You definitely look like one. You're a parody, that's what you are. A peasant like the rest of us, you just think you're better than us!" Finally, mocking his antagonist, the man in the red sweater shouts: "My father may have been a peasant, but I'm a lord!" The footage cuts there; the camera leaves the scuffle to move to the edge of the picket line, where two truck drivers are sitting on the road, wearing blue jeans, white T-shirts, and loafers with white socks, their backs against the huge vehicle. Once they notice that they're being filmed, they flip off the camera operator.

***

The history of the post-socialist transition can be told in many ways. The dominant media narrative centers on "reclaiming freedom," building a civil society, learning the (hard) lessons of capitalism, and enjoying unbridled consumption, with some passing mention given to the dark underbelly of the period: the rise of organized crime and the covert takeovers and acquisitions of state assets that allowed the former *nomenklatura* to recast themselves as new businessmen. Although this framing of the 1990s has frequently been critiqued of late, memories of the popular unrest that swept the country – the intensity of which was, at the time, unparalleled in Europe[13] – continue to play only minor roles in most mainstream narratives.[14] They have not been

purged from our collective memory, just relegated to the background.

This omission is by no means accidental. In the 1990s, both the new liberal media (*Gazeta Wyborcza*) and the public information sources rooted in the socialist system (Polish Film Chronicle) tended to report on strikes, demonstrations, occupations, and blockades in either a fragmentary or explicitly scathing manner, indicating that the neoliberal thrust of the so-called Balcerowicz reforms was all but inevitable. "Roadblocks increasingly effectively sideline legitimate farmers' grievances, something that only these aspiring Witos copycats remain oblivious to," quips the voiceover in a newsreel from spring 1991. Writing in *Gazeta Wyborcza*, Ernest Skalski likened concessions the government had made to farmers to "roadblocks hampering the transition from the communist administrative-command system to a market economy." In the wake of the collapse of state socialism, "the peasant inevitably became an entrepreneur [...] with all the risk the position usually entails."[15] Dismissing the arguments of the protesters by using the inevitability of the transnition effectively drowned them out at the discursive level, situating the rebellious classes on the losing side of history. Paradoxically, liberal media outlets simultaneously touted the possibility of unfettered protest as a positive for the democratic public sphere, while also lambasting protesters for having the temerity to make demands of the new authorities. An example of these rhetorical contortions can be found in an 1992 op-ed penned for *Gazeta Wyborcza* by Teresa Bogucka, in which she painted farmers' protests as "a desperate attempt at preserving their right to passivity, the safe helplessness inculcated throughout the years, [...] a survival reflex seeking to protect them from being assimilated by a world ruled by competition, effort, and the uncertain fate of the individual."[16] Through such a lens, the farmers' attempt to self-organize – often pursued under pressing economic circumstances and in the face of an

unfriendly media landscape – becomes an expression of their passivity, rather than the newfound political agency of a heretofore-subordinate class. Seven years later, Joanna Solska would describe the farmers' protests as being "'driven by self-interest,' seeking to cushion it for the semi-literate," and advised the activists and organizers to try and "reform agricultural policy using their heads, not their flails."[17] Thus, farmers' protests are a subject rarely written about, and their accounts are plagued further still by stereotypical – or outright classist – notions about the inhabitants of the countryside. Such writings also tend to lack any sort of analytical thrust: they remain uninterested in the social movement – its infrastructure, organizing efforts, the drafting of its demands and courses of actions – and center instead on outbursts of its activity in non-rural settings. Filled with biting remarks, these accounts are inevitably focused on the figure of the city-dweller (primarily from the capital) inconvenienced by the protests. "They Just Won't Let Go," "Peasants Take the Roads," "I Scream, Therefore I Am," "By Scythe, By Flail, By Howl," "The Wretched Farmers" – these are just some of the headlines that graced the papers at the time.

That is why – in order to uncover the history of peasant dissent – available sources ought to be reshuffled, with the intention of drawing out those lesser known, forgotten, or never fully revealed to the public, or rearranging the more mainstream sources and viewing them from a different angle – not in order to paint a picture of entitlement and powerlessness, but to see explicitly formulated class resistance against the logic of neoliberal precarization. Hence, once in a while, it might be a good idea to abandon the critique of liberal sarcasm and classist symbolic violence, the latter already interrogated in *View* by Marcin Stachowicz in a text discussing Andrzej Lepper, the transition era leader of the peasant movement.[18] Instead, in Michał Januszaniec's visual essay and my accompanying text, we

focus on templates for class resistance: the peasant class's struggle for political visibility and agency, along with political creativity, avenues of articulating class interests, and languages of self-reflection. To that end, we turn to archival visual material from photographic agencies, film studios, television archives, libraries, as well as pictures and footage uploaded to social media by individuals. After Ariella Azoulay, we recognize that:

> Archive documents are not items of a completed past, but rather active elements in a present and must be properly and carefully handled, precisely because they are the means by which destruction might continue to be wrought, just as they might enable some restitution of that which continues to exist as present, in the present.[19]

Accordingly, we seek the "unraveling and re-composing"[20] of the archive of transition-era farmers' protests. We rely on images produced for the purpose of dissemination through dominant media outlets, but reproduce them stripped of their (usually classist) commentary. We want to look at these resources anew, to see them as manifestations of class struggle – representations of the tactics of protesters and the images and artifacts of resistance they produce. We also seek to draw to the surface that which dominant archives less frequently incorporate, including rarely seen images: poor-quality grassroots protest accounts; never-before-published photographs; and commentary, cartoons, and photomontages sourced from rural press titles, which usually sat on the other side of the conflict than their mainstream, liberal counterparts.

***

Populism... Populus meant people, ladies and gentlemen. It's a name for the people. And we are of the people and will always be telling the truth. And telling it straight[21]
Andrzej Lepper at a meeting with residents of Praszka, 1993

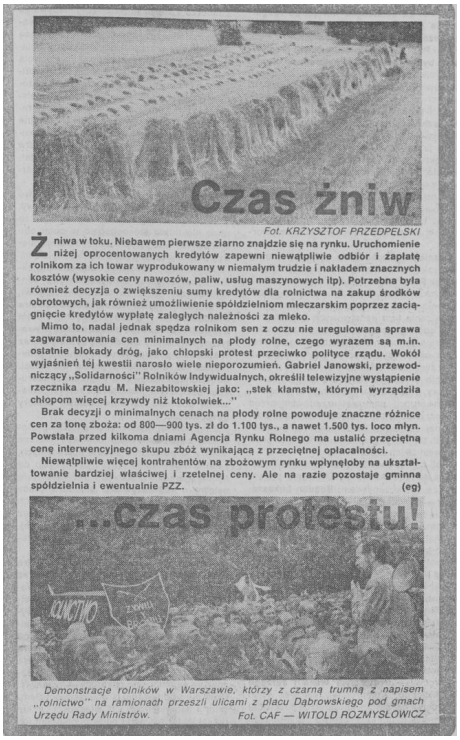
Whenever the farmers' protests are viewed as the earliest instances of large-scale, serious opposition against neoliberal economic policy, particular attention ought to be paid to their complexity and volatility. In the first decade of the post-socialist transition, much of the organization behind the protests was the work of three separate agricultural labor unions: the National Union of Farmers, Societies, and Farming Organizations (established in the Polish People's Republic in 1956); the Solidarity Individual Farmers' Independent Self-Governing Labor Union (registered in May 1989 but outlawed under martial law, legalized once again in April 1989); and the Self-Defense Agricultural Labor Union (registered in January 1992, which I will refer to in the text by its common name, "Samoobrona").[22] Although each had its own distinct operational logic and political affiliation, the three unions often collaborated on organizing and coordinating protests.

Sociologists have identified two separate waves of peasant resistance: the first swept the country early in the transition (1989–1993); the second struck toward the end of the decade (1998–1999).[23] The two waves are closely linked to the state's agricultural policy and the neoliberal turn in its economic framework. Flashpoints were engendered by government decisions (or the lack thereof) which then gave rise to specific demands from protesters. While the government remained in dialogue with farmer organizations, the conversation was irregular and overly emotional. Ultimately, the shift in demands voiced by the farmers indirectly attests to the success of their protests – after some of the problems they raised were addressed and parts of the agricultural policy reworked by the

SLD-PSL government, the outcry tapered off for a couple of years.

The initial wave of protests was driven primarily by unexpected and rapid precarization, triggered by a sharp rise in percentage rates for agricultural loans, which pushed many farmers into a spiral of debt, alongside a drop in crop prices and the widespread closure and privatization of State Agricultural Farms (SAF). Krzysztof Gorlach wrote that,

> to the affected farmers, the concept of 'shock therapy,' often used to denote the sudden and radical nature of undertaken reforms, was not just an empty phrase, or a talking point used by observers and political commentators. It was part and parcel of their everyday experience.[24]



Czas żniw

Fot. KRZYSZTOF PRZEDPEŁSKI

Żniwa w toku. Niebawem pierwsze ziarno znajdzie się na rynku. Uruchomienie niżej oprocentowanych kredytów zapewni niewątpliwie odbiór i zapłatę rolnikom za ich towar wyprodukowany w niemałym trudzie i nakładem znacznych kosztów (wysokie ceny nawozów, paliw, usług maszynowych itp). Potrzebna była również decyzja o zwiększeniu sumy kredytów dla rolnictwa na zakup środków obrotowych, jak również umożliwienie spółdzielniom mleczarskim poprzez zaciągnięcie kredytów wypłatę zaległych należności za mleko.

Mimo to, nadal jednak spędza rolnikom sen z oczu nie uregulowana sprawa zagwarantowania cen minimalnych na płody rolne, czego wyrazem są m.in. ostatnie blokady dróg, jako chłopski protest przeciwko polityce rządu. Wokół wyjaśnień tej kwestii narosło wiele nieporozumień. Gabriel Janowski, przewodniczący „Solidarności" Rolników Indywidualnych, określił telewizyjne wystąpienie rzecznika rządu M. Niezabitowskiej jako: „stek kłamstw, którymi wyrządziła chłopom więcej krzywdy niż ktokolwiek..."

Brak decyzji o minimalnych cenach na płody rolne powoduje znaczne różnice cen za tonę zboża: od 800—900 tys. zł do 1.100 tys., a nawet 1.500 tys. loco młyn. Powstała przed kilkoma dniami Agencja Rynku Rolnego ma ustalić przeciętną cenę interwencyjnego skupu zbóż wynikającą z przeciętnej opłacalności.

Niewątpliwie więcej kontrahentów na zbożowym rynku wpłynęłoby na ukształtowanie bardziej właściwej i rzetelnej ceny. Ale na razie pozostaje gminna spółdzielnia i ewentualnie PZZ. (eg)

...czas protestu!

Demonstracje rolników w Warszawie, którzy z czarną trumną z napisem „rolnictwo" na ramionach przeszli ulicami z placu Dąbrowskiego pod gmach Urzędu Rady Ministrów. Fot. CAF — WITOLD ROZMYSŁOWICZ

"Time of harvest - time of protest", "Chłopska Droga", July 22, 1990

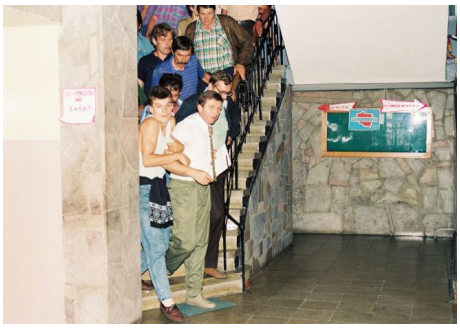
In the early 1990s, the median per capita income in farmer households dropped off sharply, severely limiting their purchasing power.[25] Their fight, therefore, was for debt relief and writing off, access to low-percentage loans, the possibility for worker cooperatives to buy out SAF properties, unemployment benefits for farm workers, and – likely shocking neoliberal ideologues to their core – minimum prices for wholesale crop and livestock purchases. This "privilege of real socialism," to quote Edmund Mokrzycki, which the farmers were struggling to recapture for themselves, was the measure of certainty that came from the belief that everyone playing the

market game was doing so by the same rules. As Grzegorz Foryś emphasized,

> for the farmers, the objective decline of their situation was closely linked to their subjective sense of deprivation. It could be argued that the farmers only decided to stage protests when they had genuine economic reasons for it.[26]

And while the second wave of demonstrations was likewise prompted by a noticeable decline in living standards in the countryside, it was focused on demands put forward by individual producers of crops and livestock, such as grains, pork, and sugar beet.

The farmers, therefore, were fighting to secure their own class interests, the core of which found itself under attack from neoliberal economics, particularly its insistence on the state renouncing its role as the regulator of crop and livestock prices, and the privatization of State Agricultural Farms, alongside other enterprises. A parallel avenue of protest, although explored and undertaken solely by Samoobrona,[27] involved attempts to extend the critique to the more broadly conceived mechanisms and culture of the pot-socialist transition, and to build an alliance with other factions of working-class organizers. Several months after Samoobrona was officially registered as a union, Andrzej Lepper held a meeting with representatives of social organizations and labor unions, at which he sought to establish a "platform for joint action toward protecting working class and state interests."[28] The goal of the movement Lepper envisioned was, he said, to "act on behalf not only of farmers and workers, but every underprivileged group at risk of poverty and privation."[29] Samoobrona union reps were a familiar sight at protests and strikes, and in towns struck by mass layoffs.[30]



Protest in Praszka, August 1993, photo: Tadeusz Olejnik, courtesy of the author

In August 1993, Samoobrona activists lent their support to the striking people of Praszka, a city in the Opole voivodeship, where downsizing at the Polmo automotive plant had resulted in the dismissal of a large portion of its workforce.[31] At one point, protesters breached the town hall offices and captured the mayor of Praszka, affiliated with the Democratic Union party (and an erstwhile employee of the restructured facility, which made him a former co-worker of the protesters), parading him out of the premises in a wheelbarrow covered in Samoobrona stickers. The stunt drew considerable outrage from politicians and reporters. The protest in Praszka continued for twenty more days, during the course of which the mayor was forced to resign, the city was plastered with banners and flags, and various city offices were blockaded and occupied, with the protesters demanding that no cuts be made to unemployment benefits and the city be included in the official list of towns at particular risk of rampant unemployment and thus eligible for additional state-funding.

Responding to the events in Praszka, Donald Tusk called them "an assault on democracy and a stain on the republic," and added: "From now on, that town will serve as the proverbial boogeyman in meetings all over the country."[32] Andrzej Lepper, meanwhile, offered the people of Praszka a different narrative of events. Addressing the residents assembled at the local community centre, Lepper said:

> These wheelbarrows of yours were a good thing. How can a prime minister claim that what happened in Praszka was a case of harming the mayor, violating his good name and his dignity? That's what they called it on TV. But, ladies and

> gentlemen, what they failed to explain is how wheeling out one man in a wheelbarrow can be worse than two thousand people with no unemployment benefit and no way to put bread on the table. This is what violated dignity looks like.[33]

This rhetorical device, typical for Lepper, inverts the direction of the moralizing judgment, turning it back against state institutions and government officials, and is symptomatic of attempts to extend the area of political engagement from just farmers to a much broader group who believed themselves adversely affected by the post-1989 transition.[34] While some scholars interpret this turn as a departure from a "strong class understanding of peasant interests,"[35] it might also be seen as an attempt at building class solidarity between farmers and the working class.

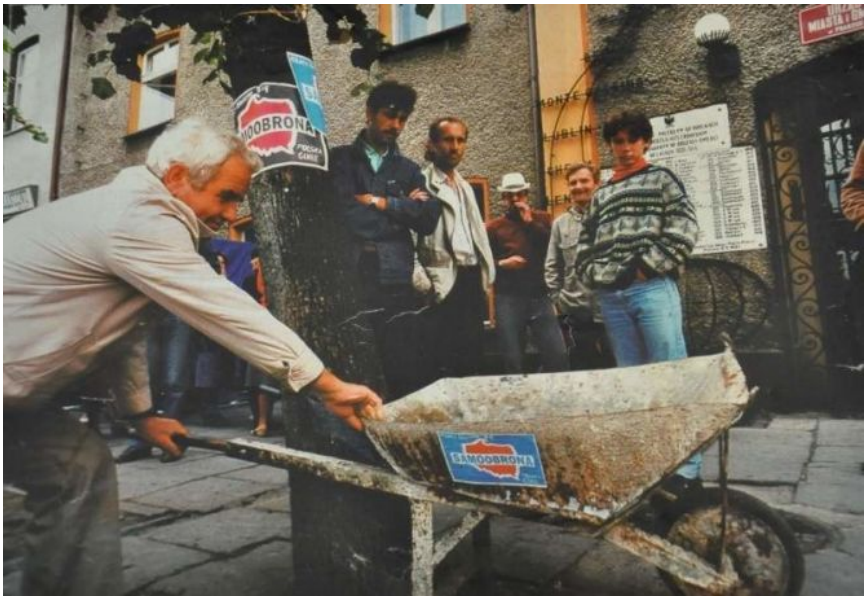


Photo from an article titled "Wheelbarrows again", *Miliarder*, August 26, 1993

The wheelbarrows – the one from Praszka, "waiting, chained to the tree in front of the City Hall,"[36] and those Lepper prepared for people to use in publicly shaming "the whole of government, and even the Belweder [presidential residence – trans. note], if need be"[37] – bring to mind the concept of the "repertoire of contention," attributed to Charles Tilly, a scholar of social movements who defined it as "a whole set of means [a group]

has for making claims of different kinds on different individuals or groups."[38] The repertoire includes a broad range of measures available to members of social movements, such as protest letters, demonstrations, strikes, and sit-ins, but also more violent, direct actions, such as vandalizing monuments, kidnapping government officials, or intimidating tax collectors. The theater metaphor proposed by the scholar seeks to interrogate the tension between the repetition and striking similarity of the adopted protest techniques and the potential irreproducibility of each performance. Tilly writes:

> On one side, people who make contentious claims in a given time and place draw on a very limited repertoire of performances. Most of the performances are sufficiently familiar that participants know more or less how to behave and what to expect. [...] Those performances only change slowly and incrementally. But they do change continuously. [...] On the other side, no two contentious performances mirror each other perfectly. Participants improvise constantly in two different ways: figuring out how to shape the available routines to communicate the claims they are currently pursuing, and responding to other people's reactions as they make the claims. [...] In the process, they introduce minor innovations into established forms.[39]

While the repertoires of contention that fed transition-era farmers' protests obviously drew on historical symbols of resistance, in light of the radical social changes that precipitated them they also sought new, effective forms of action and expression. It quickly became apparent that the strike, which Joshua Clover defined as the "struggle over the price of labor power and over employment itself, conducted by workers as workers in the sphere of production,"[40] would never be an effective instrument of resistance for farmers. Although striking enjoyed considerable popularity among rural farm workers in

1989, a fact that Krzysztof Gorlach believes had been driven by "a strong desire to emulate workers' patterns of resistance," it was ultimately recognized as "ineffective in the long term."[41] For groups that owned their means of production but were dependent on the rhythm of nature, ceasing labor could never stand as a viable method of forcing the authorities to keep their promises. While the refusal to supply crops and livestock to wholesale purchasers would definitely have impacted food availability in the cities, it would also force farmers to waste perfectly good foodstuffs and interrupt their own production cycles. Consequently, this element of the repertoire had to be replaced with performances better tailored to the specific nature of farm labor, agricultural production, and farmers' political participation.[42]

Blockade – stopping the circulation

Road blockade in Ołtarzewo near Błonie, July 6, 1992, photo: Kuba Atys / Agencja Wyborcza.pl

Perhaps the most spectacular of all protest tactics employed throughout the transition-era farmers' protests was the coordinated road blockade, like the ones that brought the country to a standstill on July 11, 1990, and halted traffic at the Świecko border crossing on the night of January 21–22, 1999. At its heart, a blockade is an attack on the core capitalist value of the free movement of goods. In 1999, Andrzej Lepper regularly called on farmers to "block border crossings to prevent the import of cheap foodstuffs and crops into Poland."[43] The resulting traffic jams slowed the notorious 1990s lorry traffic to a near-standstill. Transition-era Poland, however, relied on its road network for more than just the transport of goods – in the '90s, Poles began choosing cars over public transport for their daily commutes, weekend trips

and vacations, and even family holidays; car ownership rates rose in tandem. While farmers' blockades drew consistently strong public reactions from their earliest days, it seems that media accounts and reports from the roadblocks – focused on the most riveting, titillating confrontations between members of different social classes and the blockading farmers – skewed the public's perception of events. Public opinion polls conducted in 1991 and 1999 reveal beyond doubt how high and widespread public support for the farmers' protests was; likewise, survey responses indicate similar levels of support for protesters blocking roads and border crossings.[44] State authorities, however, reacted to the blockades with surprising hostility. Farmers jamming roads were violently dispersed, with law enforcement resorting to violence, arrests, and legal sanctions.[45] In January 1999, "protesters at the Nowy Dwór Gdański roadblock fought a regular battle with the police. [...] The belligerents used clubs, batons, chains, gas cylinders, and gasoline-filled bottles."[46] The blockades are examples of direct resistance, taking a stand against both practical efforts and the very structure of the system.

Some of the roadblocks were cleared in a matter of hours, while others stayed in place for days, sometimes even weeks. Held either across individual voivodeships or countrywide, they were usually accompanied by appropriate props. "Holding scythes and hatchets [...] the farmers blocked the Włocławek-Toruń section of State Road No. 1" in June of 1992.[47] In Świecko, "farm workers armed with scythes with their blades fixed like bayonets overran the cargo terminal, blocking border traffic using harrows, potato diggers, barbed wire, and tires."[48] The farm machinery used in the roadblocks was covered in slogans addressed to drivers awaiting passage: "Workers, do not stand against those who feed the nation." Each blockade had its own rules: some had a schedule for letting cars through, others granted passage only to emergency vehicles, cars carrying

children, or people driving to medical appointments. Many became places for meetings and conversations. In February 1999, a *Gazeta Wyborcza* reporter wrote:

> The blockade in Gończyce remained in place around the clock. Around a hundred farmers were always on site, hanging around braziers, bonfires, and a military tent set up nearby. As some stepped away to return home and come back in a few hours, others arrived to take their places. Toward evening, the intersection grew crowded – with work done for the day, many streamed in to show up at the protest, meet friends, and gossip. Gathered in small groups, the farmers talked and joked around. The blockade, naturally, was the main conversation topic. At times, the mood around the roadblock became more radical.[49]

Curiously enough, as pointed out by journalists writing for agricultural magazines, this particular component of the rituals of contention was shared in the 1990s by Polish and Western European farmers. "If you look at the desperation of our farm workers, we're well on the way to catching up to Europe," wrote a reporter for *Nowa Wieś*, adding that similar protests were being held on the same day by French farmers.[50] Nowadays, blocking the free movement of goods and people is often chosen as the preferred tactic by many progressive, leftist, and farmers' rights movements.[51]

A different form of blockade was brought to bear by the so-called "mobile anti-repossession squads," which were groups of farm workers organized by Samoobrona and sent wherever a fellow farmer was facing the threat of repossession – once on site, the squads would observe and record the process on film. "The sight of anywhere between twenty and thirty silent 'observers' effectively paralyzed many court bailiffs and prevented them from carrying out their duties,"[52] said a column in *Nowa Wieś*, while Andrzej Lepper bragged at a June 1992

rally that: "Our mobile squads put a stop to as many as 300 repossession auctions."[53] Although official Samoobrona guidelines advised only passive resistance, some farmers engaged in outright hostility toward court officers.[54]

Occupation – invading the field of view

A protest organized by NSZZ "Solidarność" RI, January 11,1990, "Nowa Wieś" 1990, no. 4

The transition-era farm worker movement quickly identified the structural and ideological limitations of the Polish media landscape that it believed operated against it. As banners at a protest held in March 1990 stated, "Farmers want to speak in their own voices on TV" and "Media to the countryside."[55] "We demand access to media outlets and prime-time appearances"[56] chanted potato growers at one demonstration. The protesters were well aware of how the media framed their outcry and worked to change the narrative: they held press conferences, eagerly spoke with reporters to correct interpretations they believed incorrect, but also granted select journalists unfettered access to protests.[57] The farmers wanted a voice of their own that could counterbalance the negative opinions pushed by the media, and correct the many oversimplifications that the media narrative about complex agrarian policy was rife with.

In the end, however, invading the field of visibility proved the most effective method of making their proposals heard. To that end, protesters repeatedly seized government buildings, including the Ministry of Agriculture, voivodeship offices, and city halls. Recordings of the occupations usually look very similar, repeating the same images: dozens or even hundreds of protesters infiltrate the premises, escort the staff out, and then

commandeer the vacant offices, refashioning them into mixed-use areas – primarily for political purposes, but also functioning as makeshift dormitories and entertainment spaces. Banners are put up, bedding rolled out, and kitchen areas set up alongside spaces for those undertaking hunger strikes.

By seizing government buildings and properties, the farmers wanted to use spaces they didn't belong in, forcing government officials into action and recasting themselves from mere petitioners into equals dictating the conversation within relevant venues. Proposals, complaints, and grievances were thus aired in spaces where decisions were usually made. "We'll be here as long as necessary," they declared after each seizure, although the occupations were usually cleared by police before a settlement could be reached. The occupations combined political and media interpretations of representation. Occupying spaces reserved for government enabled farmers to become visible – in the media, as their images were circulated in the public sphere, and in the literal sense, framing them as a single organized group that was impossible to ignore. Briefly sat in seats reserved for the representatives of the people, they demonstrated beyond doubt the ineffectiveness of the officials they usually belonged to.

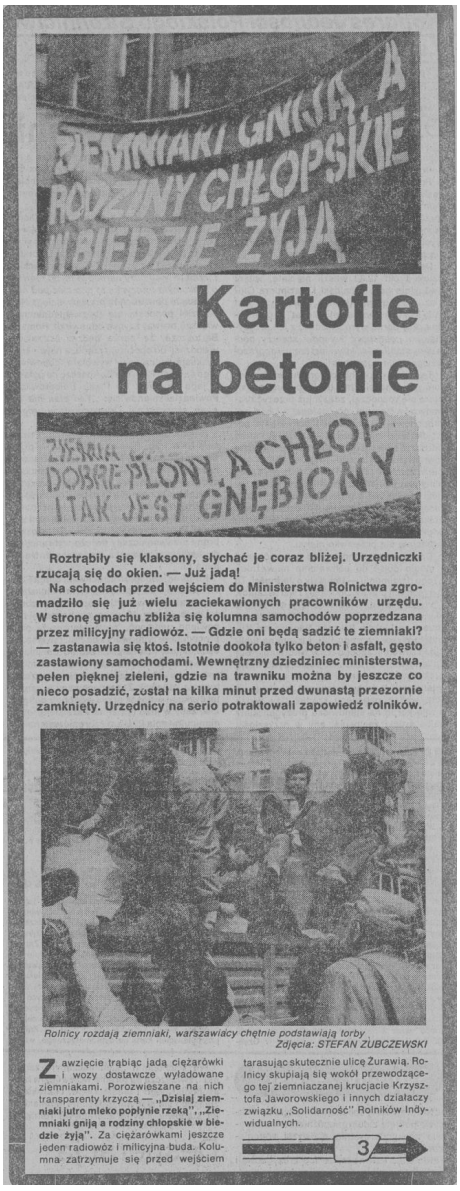
The seizures tended to follow a similar course, toward a similar conclusion – a few days into events, the seized premises were cleared by police, the protesters forcibly removed, and "order" restored. In some cases, the demonstrations continued without pause, as in Zamość, where the group of protesters removed from the local Voivodeship Office set up a "makeshift tent on the lawn outside the building and installed an outhouse, clearly marked 'WC,' next to the street."[58]

Deliberate spoilage and food sharing

Locals collecting potatoes discarded by farmers, Warsaw, April 26, 1990, photo: Janusz Mazur, PAP

"They fed and defended," said a banner, or rather a large placard fastened to a coffin carried by protesters at a June 1990 protest in Warsaw. The introduction of the past tense into the famous slogan used by the peasant movement since the Kościuszko Uprising (and by the agricultural arm of Solidarność in the 1980s),[59] was a clear signal that the farmers would abandon the peasant ethos of being "providers for the people" in light of the steep decline in their living and working conditions. The traditionally conceived duty of the peasantry, to supply the cities with food, was called into question. Conflicts between the cities and the countryside focused on food supply naturally predated the post-1989 transition, but it was only then that farmers decided to engage in efforts designed to show city dwellers – government officials above all – just how unprofitable agriculture was becoming. To that end, they pursued gestures deemed shocking – particularly within the context of the peasantry's (either projected or real) veneration of the earth and its crops – and practices intended to win the urban populace over to their cause.

"Foreign" crops were targeted for deliberate spoilage – one example being the mass dumping of imported grain in Muszyna in 1999. Local products, however, were not spared and were often trashed. In May 1990, farmers again arrived *en masse* in Warsaw, driving carts and trucks heavy with potatoes: "Because the government has to date failed to respond to our long-standing proposals, we're launching a protest to put officials on a warning – we will be planting potatoes outside the Ministry of Agriculture – a special variety, developed for thick skulls and party concrete!" they announced.[60] Their carts were plastered with banners and placards: "Potatoes today, rivers of milk tomorrow," "As the spuds rot, farmers toil in poverty," "We bring in harvest after harvest, but get scraps in return." Following a meeting outside the ministry building with Minister of Agriculture Czesław Janicki, the farmers simulated the end of the protest and then, "after dumping their police escort and most of the journalists," proceeded to march to the Ministry of Finance:


ZIEMNIAKI GNIJĄ, A RODZINY CHŁOPSKIE W BIEDZIE ŻYJĄ

Kartofle na betonie

ZIEMIA DOBRE PLONY, A CHŁOP I TAK JEST GNĘBIONY

Roztrąbiły się klaksony, słychać je coraz bliżej. Urzędniczki rzucają się do okien. — Już jadą!
Na schodach przed wejściem do Ministerstwa Rolnictwa zgromadziło się już wielu zaciekawionych pracowników urzędu. W stronę gmachu zbliża się kolumna samochodów poprzedzana przez milicyjny radiowóz. — Gdzie oni będą sadzić te ziemniaki? — zastanawia się ktoś. Istotnie dookoła tylko beton i asfalt, gęsto zastawiony samochodami. Wewnętrzny dziedziniec ministerstwa, pełen pięknej zieleni, gdzie na trawniku można by jeszcze co nieco posadzić, został na kilka minut przed dwunastą przezornie zamknięty. Urzędnicy na serio potraktowali zapowiedź rolników.

Rolnicy rozdają ziemniaki, warszawiacy chętnie podstawiają torby
Zdjęcia: STEFAN ZUBCZEWSKI

Z awzięcie trąbiąc jadą ciężarówki i wozy dostawcze wyładowane ziemniakami. Porozwieszane na nich transparenty krzyczą — „Dzisiaj ziemniaki jutro mleko popłynie rzeką", „Ziemniaki gniją a rodziny chłopskie w biedzie żyją". Za ciężarówkami jeszcze jeden radiowóz i milicyjna buda. Kolumna zatrzymuje się przed wejściem tarasując skutecznie ulicę Żurawią. Rolnicy skupiają się wokół przewodzącego tej ziemniaczanej krucjacie Krzysztofa Jaworowskiego i innych działaczy związku „Solidarność" Rolników Indywidualnych.

3

"Potatoes on concrete," *Chłopska Droga*, May 13, 1990

> The large truck reverses rights up to the stairs leading to the main entrance. "That's for Balcerowicz," tease the young farmers. [...] The bed of the truck lifts and tips over three tons of tubers outside the doors. [...] After putting up a banner and

> sticking a milk bottle in the mound, the protest winds down and goes on its way. The crowd heads for Woronicza Street, the state television offices, to visit the broadcaster's chief executive, Mr. Drawicz, and offer him potatoes as well. The gate to the premises, however, is sealed shut, so the farmers leave another heap of spuds outside.[61]

Deliberate, conspicuous spoilage was, however, also accompanied by efforts to share food with non-farmers. The same protesters dumping spuds outside the Ministry of Finance gave them to Warsaw residents and visited parliament to "hand out butter and milk to MPs and senators."[62] The farmers also often distributed food for free – either at local blockades, as in Mława, where milk was delivered daily to childcare facilities and other public institutions, or at big-city protests, where locals could pick up potatoes, apples, cheese, cream, and other products for free. Samoobrona also held multiple charity efforts, which supplied agricultural products to specific groups (such as the unemployed) or the inhabitants of poorer villages, often in gratitude for supporting farmers' protests.

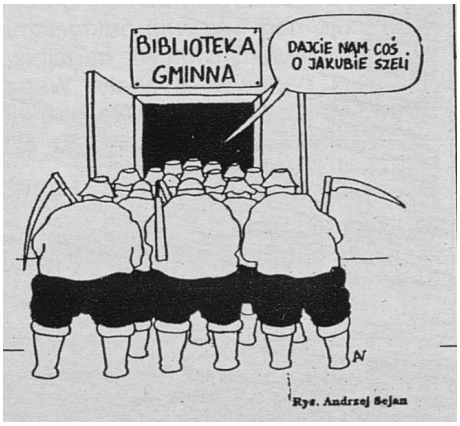
Farmer protest in Warsaw, December 3, 1998, photo: Sławomir Kamiński / Agencja Wyborcza.pl

Paradoxically, both spoilage and the free distribution of food were intended to illustrate the crux of the problems afflicting the Polish countryside: the staggering unprofitability of almost all agricultural production in the early 1990s and specific crops later in the decade. One popular complaint among farmers was that the cost of production significantly outweighed the profit expected from future sales. Sometimes, crops were spoiled while still in the fields: "Many farmers take a cost-benefit approach and, seeing the outcome, simply raze their crops, whether with machines or fire. The cost calculations

being what they are, farmers are often better off ploughing over eight hectares of oats than harvesting them."[63] Dumping potatoes outside government buildings and sharing them with passers-by essentially confirm that in certain circumstances they can have little to no economic value. As such, the public spoilage and free sharing of crops undermines capitalism's underlying definition of value.

Peasant visual activism

Alongside the three main elements discussed above, the farmers' repertoire of contention also included a set of practices which can be described as examples of what Nicholas Mirzoeff calls "visual activism." The American scholar defines this as the production of images by the oppressed and the subordinate, driven by the belief that "they do not represent us," and therefore "we must find ways to represent ourselves."[64] Mirzoeff offers a two-pronged interpretation of representation. On the one hand, he conceives it as depiction, as the presence in mediatized conceptualizations operating within a given culture; on the other hand, he frames it in political terms, as participation in power and government. The actions of the farmers' protest movement throughout the 1990s seem to imply that these two aspects of representation are fundamentally inseparable. The images and artifacts produced mainly for use at demonstrations in Warsaw (or, less frequently, in other large cities nationwide) not only communicated the demands of the protesters, but also generated a very specific affective atmosphere, incorporating a broad yet ultimately ambiguous range of emotions and tones: anger and obstinacy,



"Do you have something on Jakub Szela?", *Nowa wieś* 1992, no. 8

desperation and self-confidence, fear and courage, irony and vulgarity.[65] Alongside the slogans adorning banners and placards, recapitulating the farmers' demands and the hardships of their lives, the photographic and filmic record of the protests enables us to identify several recurring visual tropes and devices, including references to historical symbols of peasant resistance, performative uses of agricultural products and waste, the exploitation of folk culture artifacts, and satire.

Blockade of the border in Świecko, January 1999, photo: Sławomir Sajkowski / Agencja Wyborcza.pl

In a cartoon published in *Nowa Wieś* under an article about the first national Samoobrona convention, a group of farmers, painted in homogenous, stereotypical strokes – with broad backs, pant legs stuffed into their *valenki* [winter boots], flat caps, and scythes with blades fixed like bayonets – gather outside a pair of doors labeled "Municipal Library." "Anything about Jakub Szela in there?" the speech bubble reads. Drawing on historical memories of the leader of violent mid-nineteenth century peasant revolt, the cartoon functions as an illustration of the "revolutionary moods" percolating through the newly constituted peasant movement described in the article. It seems, however, that given its publication in *Nowa Wieś*, a magazine that was highly critical of the government (although less combative than *Chłopska Droga*), the cartoon may also have functioned as a comic mobilization of contestatory political moods, a prompt encouraging the recollection of events that underpinned the countryside's narrative about its resistance against authority. It was also a veiled threat – the continued decline in living standards could ultimately lead the peasantry to redefine itself as a revolutionary subject (and thus achieve what Marx believed the peasant class incapable of).[66] This was also

the reason behind the presence of scythes at protests, where they were sometimes placed in the hands of effigies and wrapped in white-and-red ribbons.[67] They acted as a mobilizing object, emphasizing the gravity of the situation and implying that farmers were converting their tools into weapons, ready to use, waiting to be put into action like the aforementioned wheelbarrows. Another prop frequently used at protests, the stocks, held slightly different connotations: historically used as a means of punishing the peasantry, the memory of which was still very much alive in the countryside, it was seized instead by those who were once the target of state and lordly violence, and deployed against anyone who might think to threaten the peasant class.[68] In a photo of a 2003 protest, we see the effigy of Leszek Miller caught in the stocks, over which an inscription says: "Cheat the farmer, get the stocks." This symbolic humiliation, however, would ultimately prove insufficient – the effigy would later be set on fire.

Peasant demonstration in Warsaw, December 3, 1998, photo: Sławomir Kamiński / Agencja Wyborcza.pl

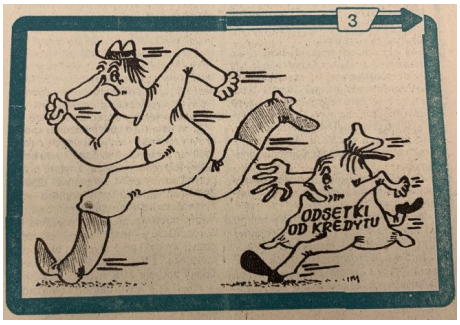
Produced in large quantities by the protesters and routinely subjected to violence, the effigies differed in terms of make and material – ranging from the most realistic-looking, boasting carefully painted *papier mâché* heads and dressed in a suit, tie, and dress shoes, to sacks covered in fabric with faces drawn in black felt-tip pen, or human shapes cut out of styrofoam. They were either made to resemble specific individuals – Leszek Balcerowicz being the most frequent choice – or left vague enough to represent broadly defined government authorities or "elites." The props were subjected to ritual humiliation – kicked, torn apart, and set on fire – simulating actual violence being meted out to the individuals they represented. The symbolic act provided an outlet for pent-up

class rage. Although routinely insulted and verbally abused, government officials were never physically attacked when they stepped out of their offices to speak with protesters. Spectacles involving the effigies drew interested observers, protesters and bystanders alike, thus re-enacting the rural – sometimes controversial[69] – traditions of public effigy burning.

Other "vernacular sculptures" often appearing at demonstrations involved animal remains – heads, ribs, and other bits of carcass. Pig heads were dressed as politicians – first anthropomorphized, then stuck on pikes and painted red. Ribs became banners, carried high over protesters' heads, or a menacing prop demonstrating class affiliation. The presence of butchered meat at a protest – although less shocking in the 1990s than today, mostly due to the fact that, at the time, meat was routinely sold off folding tables on the streets – became part of the vernacular of excess, eagerly used by protesting farmers.

Protest in front of the Parliament building, April 2, 1993, photo: Sławomir Kamiński / Agencja Wyborcza.pl

One extreme example of using biohazardous waste in public spaces involved the makeshift plastic slurry bag, sometimes emptied outside government buildings. Manure was eventually used as a weapon in the literal sense, during the protests in Lubecko in the winter of 1999, when farmers responded to law enforcement use of water cannon by spraying their opponents with jets of animal dung.

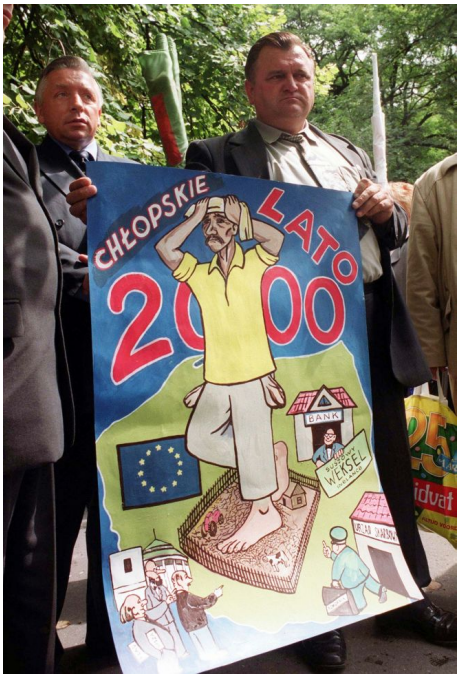


Interest chasing a farmer, drawing from *Chłopska Droga*

Farmers' protests were widely commented on and analyzed in the rural press, where columnists often argued with the mainstream narrative. Magazines sent their own photojournalists to protests, and it soon turned out that the visual content they produced was in no way inferior to the pictures published by "city newspapers." Additional commentary on the protests and the state's economic and agricultural policy came from the political cartoons routinely published in rural weeklies (usually 3–4 per issue). The cartoonists operated with satire and self-stereotype – the peasant identity is communicated in the drawings using simple visual tropes: loose clothing and flat caps, large oblong noses, and *valenki*. Rural spaces, meanwhile, are reduced to fields or the porches of ramshackle cottages. The sharp edge of their satire, however, was most definitely turned against mainstream culture: the bank loans suffocating farmers (a sack labeled "Interest" chasing a terrified man; a suitcase full of money which turns out to be "a loan taken out to pay a loan"); shock economic reforms (the Balcerowicz plan allegorized as a noose around the neck), the landed gentry reprivatizing their formerly nationalized estates (a memorial erected to the lord of the manor); and specific politicians, with speech bubbles slapped onto the pictures. "Ah, poverty soup, that's the stuff," says Jacek Kuroń, while Lech Wałęsa pleads "Just don't get that milk in my eyes," as Leszek Balcerowicz wonders "How to fall in love with the countryside?" The humor, often dark in tone, did not blur the political dimension of insightful analyses of rural realities published in the magazines' columns and reports. It was, in essence, another way of talking about the everyday experience

of the aftershocks of the transition, of global and local economic processes, and the decisions made by politicians.

Compiling a visual archive of transition-era farmers' protests and interrogating the repertoire of contention used allows us to see the peasant resistance movement contesting the neoliberal logic of systemic transition in various ways. It should be pointed out, however, that the movement was both complex and dynamically evolving; that it drew on a variety of languages to formulate its demands, react to attacks, and persuade allies; and that it also brought together a variety of actors, hailing from different parts of the political spectrum and representing different ideologies. Within the movement, the explicit anti-capitalism of Samoobrona, which held press conferences against the backdrop of a passage from Pope John Paul II: "It is unacceptable to say that the defeat of so-called 'Real Socialism' leaves capitalism as the only model of economic organization,"[70] and distributed pamphlets that predicted the impending arrival of a "post-capitalist era,"[71] stood alongside the defense of entrepreneurship and the struggle to provide local farmers with a market position that would allow them to remain competitive against Western food producers.



"Peasant summer 2000", demonstration in front of the Prime Minister's office, Warsaw, July 27, 2000, photo: Przemek Wierzchowski, PAP

At the protests, visual accounts of which we are presenting herein, explicitly formulated demands aimed at the government substantially outweighed any visions for potential co-existence and alternative economic systems. However, in the first decade of the post-socialist transition, the economic precepts of

neoliberalism were questioned in the peasant counter-public sphere just as fiercely as they were defended by representatives of the liberal political class. Perhaps, given our contemporary pursuit of "new forms of human relations and new environmental morality,"[72] it might be a good idea to animate these images anew.

1 Edmund Mokrzycki, "Dziedzictwo realnego socjalizmu. Interesy grupowe i poszukiwanie nowej utopii," in: *Przełom i wyzwanie. Pamiętnik VIII Ogólnopolskiego Zjazdu Socjologicznego*, eds. Antoni Sułek and Włodzimierz Wincławski (Warsaw–Toruń: Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, 1991), 58–59.

2 Lsj, "Blokada Mławy," *Gazeta Wyborcza*, June 14, 1990.

3 Paweł Ławiński, "Szosa wolna," *Gazeta Wyborcza*, June 17, 1990.

4 Just a few days after the events in Mława, parliament "requested the cabinet explain its rationale for deploying the police to Mława." According to *Gazeta Wyborcza*, Jacek Kuroń argued that the "Council of Ministers passed the decision unanimously," because "the government could no longer tolerate the use of force against public interests. [It was] a necessary evil." Tb, "Kuroń w Sejmie o Mławie. Jestem w rządzie, a nie w orkiestrze," *Gazeta Wyborcza*, June 22, 1990. A special Sejm committee was later established to investigate the Mława case; the general consensus is that the situation was resolved without the use of violence only because law enforcement on site refused to follow orders from above, which had instructed them to clear the road within an hour. Czap., "A prawdy nie widać. W sprawie Mławy," *Chłopska Droga*, September 30, 1990, 2.

5 In this essay, I use the terms "peasant" and "farmer" interchangeably to describe the protesters who are its subject. This decision was motivated primarily by the fact that both were used as self-descriptions by the protesters themselves and by the media speaking on their behalf. The question of who comprised the rural populations in the 1990s and whether they constituted a separate class is both incredibly important and, from certain angles, impossible to answer. The discussion about the class nature of the peasantry, sometimes labeled the "awkward class" by Marxist historians, has a long history, including in Poland. From the perspective of the processes that are of interest to me, much attention ought to be focused on the modernization of the countryside that took place throughout the state socialism period, which, as some sociologists believe, paved the way for the transformation of peasants into farmers (and thus the

transformation of a class into a professional group), and the temporary collapse of this process in the transition period. Sources indicate, however, that the "peasant" category was used by rural Poles as a term of self-description long after 1989. Its use was often tactical in character. On the class identity of the peasantry in the discussions of Polish sociologists, see: Krzysztof Gorlach, *Socjologia polska wobec kwestii chłopskiej* (Kraków: Universitas, 1990). See also: Krzysztof Gorlach, *Chłopi, rolnicy, przedsiębiorcy. "Kłopotliwa klasa" w Polsce postkomunistycznej* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 1995), and Maria Halamska, "Chłop? Rolnik? Producent rolny? O autoidentyfikacji chłopów polskich w latach osiemdziesiątych," *Wieś Współczesna* no. 9 (1989).

6 Ławiński, "Szosa wolna."

7 *Polish Film Chronicle*, 29/1990, https://www.cda.pl/video/2406803b/vfilm (accessed November 15, 2021).

8 Anna Turska, "Chłopski bunt," *Chłopska Droga*, August 15, 1990, 3. Wincenty Witos was a popular peasant-born politician, leader of the peasant movement in the early 20th century, in thre 1920s serving as prime minister three times.

9 Krzysztof Gorlach, "Nowe oblicze chłopstwa. Protesty rolników w latach 90.," in: *Jak żyją Polacy?*, eds. Henryk Domański, Antonina Ostrowska, and Andrzej Rychard (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo IFiS PAN, 2000), 281.

10 Ernest Skalski, "Blokada," *Gazeta Wyborcza*, July 11, 1991. *The Warsaw Voice*, which Gorlach cited, reported as many as 972 blockades nationwide.

11 Skalski, "Blokada."

12 *Protest rolników 11 lipca 1990 roku w Łagiewnikach*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5qByEPkpozc (accessed November 15, 2021). See also: footage from the 1999 blockades, *Protest rolników 27 stycznia 1999 roku w*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vpApV6C5Xoo (accessed November 15, 2021).

13 Paulina Sekuła, "Aktywność protestacyjna Polaków w latach 1989–1999," *Polityka i Społeczeństwo* vol. 3, no. 11 (2013).

14 There are obviously exceptions – see: Bazyli Stoykov, "Wizualne reprezentacje strajków robotniczych doby transformacji," MA dissertation (Instytut Kultury Polskiej UW, 2019), https://depot.ceon.pl/bitstream/handle/123456789/18324/3002-MGR-KU-WOK-95122606670.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y (accessed November 15, 2021). See also: the short summary in: Jarosław Urbański, "Transformacja walk społecznych w Polsce," in: idem, *Prekariat i nowa walka klas* (Warsaw: Instytut Wydawniczy Książka i Prasa,

2014), 167–193. Existing studies investigating the subject of farmers' and peasants' protests are cited later in the essay.

15 Skalski, "Blokada."

16 Teresa Bogucka, "Wykorzenienie ze znajomego świata," *Gazeta Wyborcza*, September 26, 1992.

17 Joanna Solska, "Kosą, cepem, krzykiem," *Polityka*, March 27, 1999.

18 Marcin Stachowicz, "Burak, mulat, kameleon. Andrzej Lepper jako wizualna figura klasowa," *Widok. Teorie i praktyki kultury wizualnej* no. 21 (2018), https://doi.org/10.36854/widok/2018.21.503.

19 Ariella Azoulay, "Archive," *Politicalconcepts.org*, http://www.politicalconcepts.org/archive-ariella-azoulay/ (accessed November 15, 2021).

20 Ibid.

21 *Polish Film Chronicle*, 34/1993, https://35mm.online/vod/kroniki/polska-kronika-filmowa-93-34/ (accessed November 15, 2021).

22 On the history of Samoobrona, see: Mateusz Piskorski, *Samoobrona RP w polskim systemie partyjnym*, https://repozytorium.amu.edu.pl/bitstream/10593/766/1/DR.pdf (accessed November 15, 2021).

23 See: Gorlach, "Nowe oblicze chłopstwa"; Grzegorz Foryś, *Dynamika sporu. Protesty rolników w III Rzeczpospolitej* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Scholar, 2008).

24 Gorlach, "Nowe oblicze chłopstwa," 282.

25 "Per capita income in farmer households fell by 25% year on year in 1990, and then by a further 18% two years later." Gorlach, "Nowe oblicze chłopstwa," 282. Detailed data on the economic drivers of the protests can be found in: Grzegorz Foryś, "Ekonomiczne przyczyny rolniczych działań kontestacyjnych," in: idem, *Dynamika sporu*, 169–174.

26 Foryś, *Dynamika sporu*, 173.

27 The two other unions explicitly stated their intention to limit themselves to representing farmers only, with the Solidarity Individual Farmers' Independent Self-Governing Labor Union, also called Rural Solidarity, declaring that it would focus only on individuals who owned their farmsteads, which meant that former State Agricultural Farm employees, for example, would not be involved.

28 "Powstaje ruch Samoobrona RP," *Chłopska Droga*, April 5, 1992, 2.

29 Ibid.

30 See a report on the protests: *Polish Film Chronicle*, 37/1992, https://35mm.online/vod/kroniki/polska-kronika-filmowa-92-37/ (accessed November 15, 2021).

31 In December 1992, the unemployment rate in Praszka was 26.5%. A *Gazeta Wyborcza* journalist wrote that: "Of 7,000 residents, 1,860 are out of a job. Praszka, however, failed to make the government's list of towns at particular risk of rampant unemployment, because it didn't meet all of the required criteria. Presence on the list brought numerous advantages, including financial assistance from the state. Praszka had to manage without." Jolanta Koral, "Miasto żyło z kamazów," *Gazeta Wyborcza*, December 4, 1992.

32 As cited in: Tomasz Kucharski, "Władze w proszku," *Gazeta Wyborcza*, August 6, 1993.

33 *Polish Film Chronicle*, 34/1993, https://35mm.online/vod/kroniki/polska-kronika-filmowa-93-34/ (accessed November 15, 2021).

34 "Samoobrona stands against anarchy, but – according to Lepper – the government itself was fueling it, by not respecting the social compacts." Czap., "Protest i rozwaga," *Chłopska Droga*, July 5, 1992, 2. "Against our peaceful, lawful demonstration, the authorities dispatched 10,000 policemen armed to the teeth, alongside heavy equipment, including armored vehicles. It was the police, not us, that blocked the roads, using it as a pretext to launch a brutal attack in which dozens of farmers were hurt." As cited in: "Pancerki na chłopów. Andrzej Lepper dla 'Chłopskiej Drogi'," *Chłopska Droga*, July 19, 1992, 2.

35 Gorlach, "Nowe oblicze chłopstwa," 300.

36 Grażyna Musiałek, "Taczka Samoobronna," *Gazeta Wyborcza*, August 14, 1993.

37 "Burmistrz na taczce," *Gazeta Wyborcza*, August 5, 1993.

38 Charles Tilly, *The Contentious French: Four Centuries of Popular Struggle*

(London–Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1986), 4.

39 Charles Tilly, *Contentious Performances* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 11–12.

40 Joshua Clover, *Riot. Strike. Riot: The New Era of Uprisings* (London: Verso Books, 2019), 78.

41 Gorlach, "Nowe oblicze chłopstwa," 296.

42 While this essay does not analyze contemporary materials, it ought to be pointed out that many of the repertoires of contention described below are still in use today by the foremost active farmers' protest movement, the Agrounia.

43 Sławomir Sikorski, "Chłopska 'insurekcja' na drogach," *Chłopska Droga*, February 7, 1999, 2.

44 A survey conducted by the Center for Public Opinion Research on April 8 and 9, 1991, indicated that the farmers' protests enjoyed relatively high public support – 60% of respondents believed the farmers were justified in their dispute with the government, and over half "concluded that the demonstrators had no recourse but to protest." Only 36% of those surveyed, however, supported road blockades, while 57% were critical of the idea. "Nearly three quarters of the farmers support the blockades, but the majority of office workers are against them." See: "Czy chłopi mają rację," *Gazeta Wyborcza*, April 29, 1991. A February 1999 poll showed that 96% of those surveyed supported the protests, with 52% expressing their support for road and border crossing blockades. As many as 67% of respondents believed that "the police should not try to restore order on the roads." Support for the protests was significantly smaller, however, among people living in cities with populations over 500,000 (with only 26% voicing their support) and those with college degrees, which perfectly illustrates the class bias of attitudes toward farmers' resistance. See: "O.K. Lepper," *Gazeta Wyborcza*, February 20, 1999.

45 According to Grzegorz Foryś, both parties became more radical in their actions in the second wave of protests. Between 1997 and 2001, the "immediate relationship between state institutions and protesters grew aggravated, and both the protesters and government officials began seeing violent action as a path toward resolution. The shift was evinced by the sheer number of protests that the state decided to disperse, often using violence to achieve its objectives. [...] The number of arrests also grew, as did the number of indictments pursued against protesters. [...] Negotiations and mediations were no longer considered effective avenues for reaching a solution." See: Foryś, *Dynamika sporu*, 219.

46 Sikorski, "Chłopska 'insurekcja' na drogach." Violence against protesters was used at other demonstrations as well, including the 1999 protests in Bartoszyce and Lubecko.

47 Krystyna Naszkowska, "Blokada Samoobrony," *Gazeta Wyborcza*, June 20, 1992.

48 Jan Krauze, "Brony na szosach – kosy na sztorc," *Chłopska Droga*, January 31, 1999, 2.

49 Marcin Musiał, "Jak było na blokadzie," *Gazeta Wyborcza Lublin*, February 6, 1999.

50 Kazimierz Pytko, "W przód i w tył," *Nowa Wieś* no. 16–17 (1992), 4.

51 Joshua Clover termed these novel, progressive public protests "circulation struggles." See: Joshua Clover, "The Year in Struggles," *Commune Mag*, March 4, 2020, https://communemag.com/the-year-in-struggles/ (accessed November 15, 2021). In this context, we should also mention the Indian Barat Bandh movement, which coordinated the 2020 wave of mass farmers' protests against proposed legislation aimed at deregulating agricultural production. The movement mostly relied on blockades of motorways, roads, and railways, especially those leading to large urban centers. The protesters also created a grassroots support system – building temporary "protest towns," in which they harvested food, cooked meals, mended and washed clothes, and offered lessons to the children of the protesters. See Anjana Pasricha, "*Sikh Tradition of Communkty Kitchens Sustains India's Farmers' Protest*," *Voa News*, December 14, 2020, https://www.voanews.com/a/south-central-asia_sikh-tradition-community-kitchens-sustains-indias-farmers-protest/6199553.html, (accessed November 15, 2021). On November 19 2021, India's right-wing Prime Minister Narendra Modi signaled that he is considering abandoning the controversial legislation, see Ashique Alit, "*The Indian Farmers' Movement has Shattered Narendra Modi's Strongman Image*," "Jacobin", November 28, 2021, https://jacobinmag.com/2021/11/indian-farmers-movement-neoliberal-farm-bills-modi-bjp, (accessed November 30, 2021).

52 Henryk Piekut, "Kto się boi Andrzeja Leppera," *Nowa Wieś* no. 8 (1992), 5.

53 "Powinniśmy brać sprawy w swoje ręce. Rozmowa z Andrzejem Lepperem – rolnikiem, przewodniczącym Związku Zawodowego Rolnictwa 'Samoobrona'," *Chłopska Droga*, June 14, 1992, 3.

54 Another form of passive defense against repossession orders involved hiding farm machinery and livestock or moving them temporarily onto neighboring premises. See: Cezariusz Papiernik, "Jedzie komornik – chowajmy maszyny!," *Chłopska Droga*, October 6, 1991.

55 See: *Polish Film Chronicle*, 11/1990. See also: "Biedna wieś – głodne miasto," *Chłopska Droga*, March 25, 1990, 3.

56 Anna Turska, "Kartofle na betonie," *Chłopska Droga,* May 13, 1990, 1, 3.

57 "Very few reporters actually made it inside. The occupiers announced that the next day, press admittance would be dictated by the contents of journalists' prior reports," wrote Krystyna Naszkowska in a dispatch from the occupation of the Ministry of Agriculture in 1990. Krystyna Naszkowska, "Żądają decyzji, nie rozmów," *Gazeta Wyborcza*, June 28, 1990. Another reporter described the farmers' mistrust of the paper he represented: "' *Gazeta*, eh? Alright, write your story, but tell the truth,' Mr. Krzysztof, a farmer with a 20-hectare farmstead, says by way of a welcome. [...] Grzegorz Szeląg, the head of the Siedlce chapter of Samoobrona, appears soon afterward. He checks my ID, my press credentials, and then asks me to jot down some of his fellow farmers' demands." Musiał, "Jak było na blokadzie."

58 Andrzej Albigowski, "Desperacja rolników," *Chłopska Droga*, September 15, 1991.

59 The slogan "Żywią i bronią" [They Feed and Defend] was appropriated by Rural Solidarity for the name of its magazine, published unofficially through underground channels in the 1980s.

60 Turska, "Kartofle na betonie."

61 Ibid.

62 Ibid.

63 The unprofitability of agricultural production is discussed by farmers themselves in the Polish Film Chronicle report on the farmers' strike in Zamość: *Polish Film Chronicle*, 39/1991, https://35mm.online/vod/kroniki/polska-kronika-filmowa-91-39/ (accessed November 15, 2021).

64 Nicholas Mirzoeff, *How to See the World* (New York: Basic Books, 2016), 287.

65 While comparison is beyond the scope of this essay, suffice it to say that the tone is radically different than engendered by the images produced by Rural Solidarity in the 1980s.

66 I am referring here to Marx's remarks on peasant smallholders in France, who, he believed, could not become "a class for itself," which meant that they could never be a discrete, organized political subject. See: Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York: International Publishers, 1977).

67 Patriotic symbolism was a staple of transition-era farmers' and workers' protests. It can be interpreted as a sort of continuation of the aesthetics espoused by Solidarność in the 1980s, a way to emphasize deep ties to the national community, and – most importantly, in the case of farmers' protests – an avenue for expressing forceful disapproval of the wholesale purchase of the land and assets of the State Agricultural Farms by private foreign buyers and corporations. The fear of foreign capital – portrayed in the rural press by the stereotypical "moneyed German looking to buy whatever he can" – significantly structured the imaginations of rural communities in the early years of the transition.

68 On the subject of violence as the organizing principle of social order under the manorial system, see: Kacper Pobłocki, *Chamstwo* (Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2021).

69 On rural Easter rituals involving an effigy of Judas, see: Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, "'Wieszanie Judasza,' czyli tematy żydowskie dzisiaj," in: idem, *Rzeczy mgliste* (Sejny: Pogranicze, 2004), 81–85. In the visual materials analyzed herein – comprising a portion, albeit a large one, of the overall pool of visual resources documenting the peasant protest movement – we located only two examples of anti-Semitic rhetoric. At a 2000 protest, a stereotypical depiction of an Orthodox Jew was printed on an A4 sheet and signed with the slogan "Thieves," while a banner from a 2005 demonstration read: "The Jewish government and the drought are crushing the farmers." The few identified instances of anti-Semitic rhetoric all appeared toward the end of the second wave of protests.

70 The quote from Pope John Paul II features in multiple press conference photographs. A plaque with the quote also hung on the wall at party headquarters, becoming the backdrop for photo portraits of multiple Samoobrona officials, including Renata Berger, Danuta Hojarska, and Bolesław Borysiuk.

71 Pamphlets distributed by the Olsztyn Region chapter of the Self-Defense Agricultural Labor Union said: "Capitalism is by no means an immutable constant. It must eventually make way for new forms of human relations and a new environmental morality. The new post-capitalist era is already emerging." As cited in: Piskorski, *Samoobrona RP w polskim systemie partyjnym*, 262. Interviews with Andrzej Lepper are likewise filled with anti-capitalist rhetoric, which Lepper himself consistently drew on throughout the

decade of protests. On the ideological character of the Samoobrona party platform, see also: Jarosław Tomasiewicz, "Narodziny, wzlot i upadek Anteusza. W piątą rocznicę śmierci Andrzeja Leppera," *Nowy Obywatel* vol. 22, no. 73 (2016), https://nowyobywatel.pl/2017/01/17/narodziny-wzlot-i-upadek-anteusza-w-piata-rocznice-smierci-andrzeja-leppera/ (accessed November 15, 2021).

72 Pamphlet of the Olsztyn Region chapter of the Self-Defense Agricultural Labor Union.