

*Frances Pine*

**A welcome addition to "transition" literature**

*The Revitalization of Rural Areas in Europe, Vol. IV,  
Rural and Agricultural Transformation in Central Europe*  
[ed.] A. Kaleta, N. Swain, B. Weber, G. Zabłocki.  
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This collection of papers contains a lot of important data on the changing structure of agriculture, and on rural life generally, in Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and the Czech Republic. While much of the material discussed is drawn from standard questionnaires, there is also an emphasis on qualitative research, and together the two form a nice balance. The papers focus on both general trends across the four countries in question, and particular regional responses and strategies.

Swain's paper gives a commendably clear account of the different restitution practices and processes of agricultural restructuring in the four countries. Drawing on specific case studies and more general qualitative and quantitative data, it goes on to produce a typology of new and emerging structures in agriculture, showing what conditions give rise to the possibility of specialist farming and/or large farm businesses, and what constraints serve to limit growth, in each of the regions. This is one of the best, if not the best, papers I have read on the restructuring of agriculture and its consequences.

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\* This book consists of the following texts: Andrzej Kaleta, Nigel Swain and Grzegorz Zabłocki *Introduction*, Nigel Swain *Central European Agricultural Structures in Transition*, Andrzej Kaleta *The Polish Countryside during the System Transformation*, Zbigniew Brodziński, Eugeniusz K. Chyłek, Wojciech Gotkiewicz *The Attitude of Polish Farmers towards the Market Economy*, Grzegorz Zabłocki *Rural Labour Markets and Unemployment*, Piotr Raźniewski *Rural Spirit of Enterprise*, Anna Pluskota *The Quality of Life of Rural Inhabitants*, Monika Kwiecińska *Local Communities*, Barbara Weber *Conclusion*.

Zabłocki looks at rural labour markets, working from a wide definition of "the sum of acts of work exchange for the effects of work from people from different households or acts creating a means of livelihood". This is a valuable approach because it escapes some of the formalist assumptions which can restrict our understanding of economic processes in situations, like the "transitional" economies of post-socialism, where a large part of labour is often directed towards self-sufficiency rather than profit. The paper considers patterns of participation of the economically active and economically inactive, particularly in the light of high unemployment. It shows clearly the problems facing day labourers — limited resources, limited saving, resulting in constraints on job flexibility and mobility — and resulting patterns of exclusion. This is another original and extremely interesting paper.

Brodziński et al. look at the Polish case specifically, and at the adaptive strategies used by farmers and the constraints they face in terms of high costs, restricted markets, increasing competition from imports etc. The most common patterns identified by the authors are restriction of production in the face of rising costs, specialization, intensification or expansion (limited to a small number of younger, educated farmers), and branching out from agriculture (mainly on the part of smaller farms and because of declining employment opportunity in factories etc., sometimes in setting up small businesses). The paper considers both the factors leading to retraction and stagnation, and those which may give rise to new rural elites (often, interestingly, at odds with the dominant values of the community). Again, there is a nice mixture of qualitative detail and quantitative analysis here.

Kaleta also looks at the Polish countryside specifically, arguing that as about 40% of the population lives in the countryside, the process of transformation is unusually complex, and agriculture is becoming a growing "social problem". He suggests that traditional criteria for appraising agriculture, such as size, are outdated. Like Brodziński et al., Kaleta shows that strategies are mixed, and that "constructive" strategies such as specialization are only pursued by a minority — the majority resorting to a "wait and see" approach or withdrawing. The paper gives some excellent and informative detail on the depletion of, and shifts in, consumer resources in the countryside, and on the lack of civil institutions and political participation generally.

Raźniewski's paper centres on rural entrepreneurship in the four countries. It looks at new businessmen in terms of various factors: higher than average education, attitudes of local authorities, local reputations etc. The paper identifies a worrying trend of a predominance of commerce over other activities — an emphasis on consumption rather than development of production, and points to the large numbers of family members employed in new firms. This paper raises a range of extremely important and difficult questions — it would be nice to have more qualitative detail here.

Pluskota's paper looks at attitudes to "quality of life" in the four countries. The paper looks at correlations between education and personal satisfaction — interestingly, university educated people were exceptionally cautious in their evaluation of satisfaction, while there was a higher percentage of satisfaction among the unemployed. The paper looks at the significance of interpersonal relations, particularly in relation to the (former) unifying role of the collective farm. It suggests that there is now a relatively low level of political, economic and social activity in rural areas. Again, there are interesting and important points raised here, and again more qualitative material would help to make sense of some of the more general findings.

Kwiecińska looks at local communities in the four countries. This paper has some very nice insights into the role of territory, kinship and social ties in creating "solidarity". It focuses on shared activities, memories, etc., in the maintenance of cohesion in communities, and on the role of conflict. Conflict is seen in terms of reaction to outside forces (strangers), and internal ones, and gives some brief but very revealing cases of internal conflict (local authorities, teachers) and external ones (tourists, holiday homes, etc.). It ends with some tantalizing comments about authenticity, folk revivals, and orientalism. This paper addresses some of the same problems as the more economically focused ones, but from quite a different perspective. This parallel analysis is valuable, and adds a nice balance to the collection. It is a shame it not be longer or more detailed: it raises questions which beg for further analysis.

Barbara Weber's concluding comments provide a neat synthesis, and tie the collection together as a whole.

Some of the papers in this collection are stronger than others (as is nearly always the case). Overall, I feel that there is a great deal of fascinating and important material presented here, and some good, and at times outstanding, analysis. It raises more questions than it answers, but this is more a consequence of the situations and historical circumstances being discussed, I think, than of any shortcomings on the part of the contributors. Overall, it is a welcome addition to the 'transition' literature, and will I am sure be used by academics, regional specialists, and development and policy practitioners. It will also be an excellent teaching text.