

Farms, animals and meat culture in Poland 1945–1989

The era of socialism in Poland is commonly perceived as times of scarcity. In a popular imaginary shortages of meat supply stand for a symbol for the authorities' reluctance to meet society's demands. It is then surprising to realize that it wasn't until 2006 that Poland reached the level of meat consumption from 1980.

It is not to say that there were no restrictions in meat consumption whatsoever – meat coupons introduced occasionally may be a case in point. However, the practices of meat consumption in socialist times were more complicated than it is commonly thought. In fact, it was precisely back then (specifically, in the era of 1970s prosperity) that meat came to be perceived as something to which ordinary people are entitled – and demand for meat has come to be perceived as people's struggle for their basic rights. My hypothesis is that, beginning in the 1970s, the concept of objective, metabolic restrictions of the food system seems to have gradually vanished from the social and individual imaginary in Poland. This mentality outlived political transformations in 1989 – unrestricted access to meat is still commonly taken for granted, despite rising environmental, ethical and social considerations.

In my project I analyze changes in social perception of meat consumption culture in socialist Poland in 1945–1989, during the massive agricultural transformation from small-scale peasant farming to industrial-scale production. My main research problem is to analyze to what extent transformations in consumption patterns (specifically the sharp rise in animal protein intake which occurred during that time) were both triggered and followed by rapid changes in breeding practices and interspecies relationships in rural Poland. I am specifically interested in concepts of progress and backwardness, which seem to have played a decisive role in imagining the “proper” form of farm animal exploitation under the conditions of “catching up” with developed countries. My hypotheses are that intensification of meat production in the 1970s is responsible for the dissemination of new patterns of meat consumption in Poland and that 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.