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Farmer Distress Through Ordinary Ethics: «Abolish the Social Support and Give Us Fairer Prices!»

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Abstract

Agriculture in Slovenia has been dramatically changed since proclaiming independence from socialist Yugoslavia in 1991 and joining the European Union in 2004. Since then, the farmer-entrepreneur has become a role-model of various agricultural developmental orientations. Yet the newly defined «moral economy» expected farmers to follow contrasting imperatives of pursuing constant economic growth, environmental and social sustainability propagated through the normative person, who should be simultaneously a productive, innovative and competitive but also a just, healthy and satisfied farmer-entrepreneur.
This article discusses some results of the ongoing anthropological project «Changes in Agriculture through the Farmers' Eyes and Bodies». The author argues that farmers have been squeezed between contrasting sets of values and imperatives of constantly changing agricultural developmental orientations since 1991 on the one hand, and their moral worlds of farming practices on the other. These developments, however, have not brought only opportunities to advance farms that was not possible under socialism, but equally so farmers' lived experience of uncertainties. The article focuses on ethnographically observed anxieties among the farmers through examining their ordinary moral reflections and sentiments about current circumstances for farming what Lambek (2010) refers to as «ordinary ethics». Farmers revolve around the issues of social welfare and normal prices through communicative acts to assert guilt and responsibility for their lived distress in the context of labour intensification and the changing rural communities. This communicative labour also highlights the ethical breach between farmers and the State, and between «real farmers» and «fake farmers», bringing the ethical dimension to the forefront when considering farmer distress.

Keywords: agricultural change, farmer distress, ordinary ethics, guilt, post-socialist Slovenia.

Riassunto

L'agricoltura in Slovenia è cambiata radicalmente dopo la proclamazione dell'indipendenza dalla Jugoslavia socialista nel 1991 e l'adesione all'Unione Europea nel 2004. Da allora, l'agricoltore-imprenditore è diventato un modello di diversi orientamenti di sviluppo agricolo. Tuttavia, l'«economia morale» emersa da questo processo prevede che gli agricoltori seguano imperativi contrastanti: perseguire allo stesso tempo una crescita economica costante e sostenibilità ambientale e sociale, imperativi propagandati attraverso una «persona normativa», che dovrebbe essere contemporaneamente un agricoltore-imprenditore produttivo, innovativo e competitivo, ma anche giusto, sano e soddisfatto.
Questo articolo discute alcuni risultati del progetto antropologico in corso «NAME». L'autrice sostiene che gli agricoltori sono stati schiacciati tra le serie contrastanti di valori e imperativi degli orientamenti di sviluppo agricolo in costante cambiamento dal 1991, da un lato, e i loro mondi morali delle pratiche agricole, dall'altro. Questi sviluppi, tuttavia, non hanno portato solo opportunità per far progredire le aziende agricole che non erano possibili sotto il socialismo ma anche l'esperienza vissuta degli agricoltori di fronte alle incertezze. L'articolo si concentra sulle ansie, osservate etnograficamente, dagli agricoltori, esaminando le loro riflessioni e i loro sentimenti morali ordinari sull'attuale situazione dell'agricoltura, campo che Lambek (2010) definisce «etica dell'ordinario». Gli agricoltori si concentrano sulle questioni del benessere sociale e dei prezzi normali attraverso atti comunicativi per affermare la colpa e la responsabilità per il loro disagio vissuto nel contesto dell'intensificazione del lavoro e del cambiamento delle comunità rurali. Questo lavoro comunicativo evidenzia anche lo iato etico tra gli agricoltori e lo Stato, e tra i «veri agricoltori» e i «falsi agricoltori», portando la dimensione etica in primo piano quando si considera il disagio degli agricoltori.

Parole chiave: cambiamento agricolo, stress degli agricoltori, etica dell'ordinario, colpa, Slovenia post-socialista.

Introduction

From July 2021 to April 2022, I conducted anthropological fieldwork in Pomurje, the most intensive agricultural region in north-east Slovenia. A fieldwork is a part of the basic research project «Changes in Agriculture through the Farmers' Eyes and Bodies» (2020-2024), which aims to better explain the impact of radically changed post-1991 Slovenian agricultural developments on farmers' health-related suffering than it is conveyed by occupational health evidence.

Contrary to the still prevailing positivist and «psy» approaches in the field of farming stress problematic, which a priori define risk factors, test the correlations among them and marginalize ethical, political and emotional dynamics that shape farmers' experience of distress (Price & Ev-

ans 2005; Bryant & Garnham 2014; 2018) or focus on «individuals and what they lacked – resiliency, skills, information» (Ramírez-Ferrero 2005: 3), I have examined wider circumstances recognized as endangering their conditions of being well by farmers themselves. The starting point of the study is that farmers are caught between contrasting values and moral imperatives of constantly changing agricultural regulations and development imperatives since 1991, on the one hand, and their «local moral worlds» (Kleinman 2006) of farming practices on the other which may affect their conditions of distress, including illnesses.

In this essay, however, I focus on the farmers' reasoning about their constant worries, fears, and anxieties through examining their ordinary moral and immoral reflections and sentiments about current circumstances in Slovenian agriculture. I encountered these moral considerations in our «discursive interactions» (Lempert 2013: 371) through both participant observation approach and semi-structured interviews with research participants to locate their evaluative judgements in their accounts which refer to both their good local farming practices and ill experience of uncertainties.

Although the research participants with whom I discussed the issue were farmers, who differ in terms of how they farm, and agricultural advisors, they firstly expanded their narrative on the broader circumstances which they associate with farmer distress to what they term «the social [welfare state]». The «social» theme, interwoven as well as with other emergent themes in our «communicative labor» (*Ibidem*), evoked evaluative judgments and sentiments about ongoing tensions in agriculture as experienced by research participants in their daily lives, including blaming those they hold responsible for these conditions, and what they believe should be done to resolve their distress in terms of what is most important to them in order to farm and live a decent life.

In the following sections, I first outline assumptions that I share with some authors who theorize social suffering, moral economy and ordinary ethics in order to discuss the ethnographically observed farmer distress and research participants' reasoning about their anxieties in the context of radical change in Slovenian agriculture after 1991. I then briefly inform the reader about the post-1991 trends in agriculture in the country that shape farmers' experiences of distress. After a short description of the methodology used, I present the results of the thematic analysis of farmers' moral reasoning about their distress in current agricultural circumstances, discuss them and draw a conclusion.

Theoretical umbrella

I have tackled farmer distress through a non-medical approach, combining assumptions of social suffering with some theorisations of moral economy and ordinary ethics in the field of farming stress problematic. In order to explain farmer distress as farmers' response to the introduced structural changes in agriculture and changed developmental orientations in Slovenian post 1991 agriculture, I draw on the intellectual tradition of critical medical anthropologists and sociologists (Scheper-Hughes & Lock 1987; Kleinman *et al.* 1997; Ådhal 2007; Farmer 2009; Fassin 2007; Holmes 2013; Wilkinson 2005; Wilkinson & Kleinman 2016), who in their studies consider social suffering as a response to a drastically changed situation in one's life. I share their basic assumption that social forces are embodied in experience of pain, disease and trauma, and that individual suffering should be discussed also as a manifestation of socio-structural inequalities, in this research, within the agri-food chain. Implicitly, this was demonstrated by several authors who showed in their post-socialist ethnographies how the traces of the past enter the present not as legacies but as new adaptations, and how an object of value was transformed in different ways for different groups of people in post-socialist countryside (e.g. farmers and various other social groups), and evoked their critical reactions and moral sentiments (e.g. Pine 1994; Lampland 1995; Verdery 2003; Buchowski 2004; 2009; Kligman & Verdery 2011; Fox 2011; Krzyworzeka 2013; Naumović 2013). These ethnographies do reflect the experience of uncertainty and insecurity caused by radical social change in the observed social groups of rural South-Eastern, Eastern and Central Europe, but not in relation to their embodied ill-being.

Theorisations of moral economy provides a framework for examining the ways in which the observed farming economy intersects with farmers' notions of a good farmer (Burton 2004; Burton *et al.* 2021) that farmers themselves believe affect their being well. I relied at the beginning of my fieldwork on some elements of Sayer's work (2000; 2007; 2015) which, compared to the seminal works of Thompson (1963; 1991) and Scott (1976) about the moral economy, pose the intersections between moral economy, political economy and well-being, and regard all economies as moral economies in some respects. Investigating the continuing (though changing) relevance of moral economy for positive/analytical and normative/critical work in radical political economy, Sayer (2000; 2005) argued

that moral economy embodies norms and sentiments regarding the responsibilities and rights of individuals and institutions toward others, and that these norms and sentiments go beyond questions of justice and equality to include notions of the good. To humanize economics, Sayer advocated the moral economy approach (2000; 2015), which goes «beyond the narrowly utilitarian stance of existing normative economics to consider ethical issues of what people need for their well-being» (Sayer 2000: 82). According to him, economic action seems to be solely a matter of power and self-interest if researchers fail to acknowledge that economic action is at least partially morally guided. Moreover, he held that their critique cannot be separated from questions of ethics or morality and that «ethics should not be seen as separate from social practice and well-being and hence reducible to an external normative theory» (Sayer 2007: 262).

Similarly, Lambek (2010) voiced his critique of anthropological theory that disregards the ethical in social action in favour of structural, power, and interest analyses. Inspired by Wittgenstein's and Austin's arguments regarding ordinary language, he argued that ethics is inherent in speech and action, referring also to Aristotle's argument about ethics as indicative of human telos since «humans strive for excellence and well-being, asking everywhere "How ought I to live"» (Lambek 2010: 2). According to him, the ordinary refers to ethics that are «relatively tacit, grounded in agreement rather than rule, in practice rather than knowledge or belief, and happening without calling undue attention to itself» (*Ibidem*).

In the course of my fieldwork, I found considerations of ordinary ethics or virtue ethics also appropriate for interpreting my collected material. I also relate «the moral/ethical» to everyday life and practices and farmers' experience of ill-being without, in Sayer's words, «reducing it [morality] to a matter of individual subjectivity or social convention» (Sayer 2007: 261). In this approach, ethics is not separate from farmers' social practice and experienced well-being, and is not reducible to external normatively suggested multifunctional sustainable agriculture as imagined by decision-makers. I focus rather on farmers' conceptions of good and bad circumstances for farming today through examining «the moral texture of economic practices important for [their] well-being» (Sayer 2007: 265). In this line, the observed moral reflection of farming conditions is not treated just as forms of affect but evaluative judgements of how farmers themselves are being treated with regards to what they value, that is, things they consider to affecting their well-being. From this perspective, morality

is not seen as exterior to individuals but rather as «an inner state nourished by virtue and nourishing action» (Fassin 2012: 7) in their «local moral worlds» (Kleinman 2006), or, rather as «a modality of social action or of being in the world» than as «a modular component of society or mind» (Lambek 2010: 10).

Farmers' reasoning about their being well is conveyed and observed through the communicative labour that, in Zigon's words, «shake one out of the everydayness of being moral», the moments that Zigon calls «moral breakdown» (2007: 133). It could be said that in such communicative labour farmers find themselves in an ethical dilemma that forces them to «step-away» from unreflective everydayness of the moral and «figure out» or «deal with the situation-at-hand» (Zigon 2007: 133). Indeed, when confronted with irritating and sometimes still taboo questions about their ill-being in the post-1991 agricultural context in Slovenia in order to consider the possibility of introducing psychological support for farmers, farmers reflected on, made sense of, and sought solutions between «what *is* and what *ought* to be» (Lambek 2015: 4; emphases original) – a realm of the ethical or value when farmers imagine something better for them. In doing so, they implicitly question another dilemma – whether they themselves are responsible for their lived anxieties or is the State responsible for conditions (structures) outside their bodies and minds, beyond their personal control.

Post-1991 trends in agriculture in Slovenia

Agriculture and farming in Slovenia has been dramatically changed and restructured since the proclamation of independence from socialist Yugoslavia in 1991. If in socialism agricultural development was designed within the morale of the planned economy after 1991, the model of multifunctional agriculture was followed in harmony with the morale of the market economy. In 2004, when Slovenia joined the European Union and in 2007 the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), the farmer-entrepreneur (Fox 2011) became a role-model of multifunctional developmental orientation and gradually, after the 2008 global food crisis, the developmental vision was defined towards sustainable agriculture. Yet the newly defined moral economy (ReSURSKŽ 2011) expected from farmers to follow contrasting imperatives of pursuing both constant economic growth and practicing environmental and social sustainability propagated through the

normative person who should be simultaneously a productive, efficient, innovative and competitive but also a collaborative, just, healthy and satisfied farmer-entrepreneur.

However, the radically transformed agricultural context in the last three decades, entails not only the opportunities to advance farms compared to socialist times, but also unfavourable trends: on average, about 1,000 farms have stopped farming per year since 1991 (from 156,549 farm holdings in 1991 to 68,331 in 2020), and the most rapid decline of medium-size farms – «too small to be economically efficient, but too large to be profitable» (Bojnec & Latruffe 2013: 216) – has been registered since 2004.

It is not a surprise that this radical transformation brought about the health statistics in Slovenia which mirror the global ones. Agriculture has become the second most hazardous sector in terms of reported work-related accidents and health difficulties behind only the processing industry. In terms of suicides by occupation, farmers belong to the group «Skilled Agricultural, Forestry and Fishery Workers», which occupies the first position among the other occupational groups with a crude suicide rate (57.9 per 100,000 employed persons) four times as high as the total crude rate of all occupational groups (13.8 per 100,000 employed persons) in 2016 (Roy & Knežević Hočevar 2019).

The increasing suicide rates among farmers in Slovenia is not a focus of the project but rather a motive for studying farmer distress. Therefore, the initial research questions were: whether and how agricultural restructuring since 1991 has come to be translated into personal suffering, and how farmers respond to (interpret, make sense of, and engage with) these distress-related conjunctures in agriculture.

Methodology

I conducted anthropological fieldwork in rural Pomurje (north-eastern Slovenia) between July 2021 and April 2022. This period coincided with COVID-19, but fortunately I managed to volunteer on three family farms (three weeks on each) and occasionally (a few days) on the others. The field visits included about 40 research participants from 24 family farms; I had already visited six of these farms in 2009, three in 2013 and 2015, and 15 as recently as 2021-22. These farms vary in type and size, so they can be described as large, small, conventional, organic, with or without livestock, etc.

Participant observation was supplemented by semi-structured interviews with adult family members – men and women, younger and older, socialised in agriculture before and after 1991. In addition to farmers, I spoke with seven local health care workers and seven agricultural advisors about issues related to agricultural change and observed so-called stress-related illnesses.

In taking a non-medical approach, I followed authors, who moved the research agenda on farmer stress problematic from a mental health perspective into the spaces of the morally, economically and politically distressing agricultural reality as experienced by farmers themselves (Price & Evans 2009; Bryant & Garnham 2014), focussing instead on their lived, ethnographically observed and discursively conveyed distress. In line with ethical research considerations[1], all selected research participants were informed verbally and through a written informed consent form about the purpose of the study and its likely consequences, the identity of the funders, the anticipated use of the data, the potential benefits of the study, and the discomfort that might affect them during the planned discussions. The safety, confidentiality and anonymity of participants was ensured both during the fieldwork by informing them that they could withdraw from participating in the study or discussing issues too sensitive for them at any time, and more recently by removing identifiers from the published study results. Because of these assurances and the strong trust that was built with both the study participants – those I had already met in previous studies and the new participants I would meet on their farms in 2021 and 2022 – additional psychological support for the farmers was not planned.

In this paper, however, I confine myself to the farmers' and agricultural advisors' reflections on what they call «social [support]» and their thoughts on restoring «fair/normal prices» as the overly common and recurring themes that emerged as a result of thematic analysis (Krippendorf 2004) of farmers' moral reasoning about their sufferings. Irrespective of the age, gender and type of farming of the research participants, these two themes shaped their narratives about their constant fears, worries, and anxieties, which they believed might affect their distress in an ever-changing agricultural context. As will be shown below, these farmers' reasoning also proved

[1] In drafting the consent form, I have followed the 2018 EASA Statement on Data Governance in Ethnographic Projects and the 2017 Guidelines for Ethical Conduct in Research Involving People by the University of Ljubljana.

to be «a tactic performed in the moment of the breakdown of the ethical dilemma» (Zigon 2007: 137) in order to achieve both, seemingly barely compatible goals: their well-being and a progressive farm.

«There is too much social [support] in the country!»

The first time I encountered the farmers' reasoning about «the social [welfare state]» was at the very beginning of my fieldwork, when I visited Erni and his wife from farm C to arrange the beginning of my volunteer work on their farm. First, they read and signed the consent form to participate in the study, which stated the desired outcome: «A better understanding and new knowledge of farmer distress that will help develop appropriate psychological support». I summarized their initial response in my ethnographic diary.

> While I was still having coffee with his wife and remembering my last visit in 2015, Erni came into the kitchen. He read the informed consent, recognised me, smiled and winked at me, but immediately exploded, yelling that he used to be poor because he had nothing, while now he is poor too, even though he has a lot. Without pause, he went on to say that the Slovenian and Hungarian prime ministers would soon be married, and when I mistakenly assumed he was criticising the Hungarian prime minister, he began to praise his decision to quickly cut social support from Hungary. Erni explained that now early in the morning across the border [in Hungary] a bus picked up farm workers who were going to mow. Previously, farm workers were to stay home and break their equipment instead of preparing for the hard work. And why? Because they preferred to receive [social] support. Erni suggested that such a practise should be introduced in Slovenia as well, since farmers could not find agricultural workers despite the high percentage of unemployed in the Pomurje region. The unemployed preferred to receive €600 per month instead of working. What a country! Slovenia rewarded non-work and punished hard work (Ethnographic Diary: July 6, 2021 / Farm C, first visit in 2013 and later in 2015).

Despite the high unemployment rate in the Pomurje region, Erni could not understand why, despite the above-average income he offered his workers, nobody else was willing to work on his farm, which had become so advanced. All of the workers on Erni's farm (four family members and six hired laborers) are insured as farmers and are even paid better than farm workers in neighboring Austria. Erni regrets that at the age of 66 he is still doing various jobs to the same extent as when he was younger, rather than

now, at this age, being a valued coordinator who merely controls various phases of work. His body is still exhausted, and Erni attributes the lack of workers to the «too good State» that encourages laziness rather than work. His wife Olga (age 60) also greeted me and complained that compared to my last visit in 2015, everyone was working more now (2021), indeed that «the workload is not normal», they were working «too much». Olga agreed that no one in the region was willing to work on their farm, even though they offer their workers a «fair income» and «respectful care». They all sit at the same table day after day, eat first-class meals, get paid more for working on weekends and holidays, and can earn an additional variable part of their income as an incentive.

Surprisingly, almost all the farmers interviewed confirmed Erni's reasoning: in the Pomurje region it is impossible to get labour. There is no one who would be willing to work on a farm because the State guarantees permanent social support to the unemployed. Why should all these people work when they are paid for not working? Since they work on the black market, many of them could even earn more money than someone who is regularly employed.

Farmers also cannot bring anyone onto the farm if they are injured themselves, and if they are insured as farmers, they are entitled to several months of work assistance. They are usually laughed at by regional employment service officials when they ask if anyone is available or when they place an ad for on-farm work assistance. They dismissed my comment that unemployed people are probably not properly qualified to work on farms as nonsense, and emphasised that they would be willing to mentor for free if a potential mentee would at least show a «willingness to work» on their farm. The majority feel that non-farmers «despise» working on a farm, and some referred to their unemployed neighbours in the village who «deliberately walk their dogs along their fields with hands in their pockets and make fun of us farmers who work hard», as farmer Franc (age 73) explained. One farmer even told the local agricultural advisor the story of his neighbour who lives with three unemployed sons who receive «social [support]». One day their father approached the farmer, «You guys get up at five in the morning and slave away, while we get up at eleven and start preparing a barbecue». The farmer confided to the advisor that at that moment, if he had had a gun, he would have killed them all and then himself.

Other agricultural advisors confirmed the farmers' complaints and stressed that with such social support, which is only slightly lower than the

minimum wage in the country, it is understandable that the unemployed do not do dangerous and hard work on the farm for the same wage. However, in explaining the labour shortage in rural Pomurje, they also mentioned other possible reasons. One of them was that an average farm in Pomurje cannot financially afford 1 PMWU (Productive Man-Work Unit), or the fact that the number of «pure farmers» in the countryside is rapidly decreasing. As a result, farmers are becoming a minority in a village and can no longer rely on the former neighbourhood help that was always «on hand». Another reason is the increasingly attentive workers who demand higher wages during the peak season, when they have to work 16 hours a day.

Not so rare was the explanation by research participants that unemployed people from Pomurje «out of pride or shame» prefer to work in neighbouring Austria under worse working conditions than on «our farms». Coming from the farms themselves, before 1991 they were employed in more respectful socialist firms throughout Pomurje. However, since 2009, many of these firms have gone bankrupt, while today's farmers are economically better off, receiving several agricultural subsidies to advance their businesses. The economically better position of farmers in society might arouse the «envy» of the now unemployed former workers, who prefer to work on Austrian farms for less money rather than on Slovenian farms.

Regardless of the complaints repeated by the farmers that «we work more than before», that «it is not normal how much work is still necessary», although they constantly improve their mechanisation and production technology, the hard work remains discursively the most important value for them. To work they subordinate their body, mind and well-being, and not the other way round. They only worry about their health when they find that work is not done «on time», not done «right», or not done «at all». In line with this reasoning, they again criticise «social [support]» – the main culprit for their inability to continuously perform the work on their farms. Moreover, they believe that this institution actually supports non-work, which the empirical reality in their local contexts confirms day after day. Almost every research participant described a neighbour, an acquaintance, or a peer who receives social support and yet works illegally at home or abroad. Farmers believe that the State rewards non-work and punishes «hard» and «honest» work like they do every day. Not surprisingly, the local agricultural advisor, who has worked with farmers for 35 years, believes that farmers are too proud to ask for social support when they need it.

> Above all, if a farm was once a well-functioning farm and is no longer, a farmer will not ask for social support. He will not. That is beneath him. If you ask for social assistance, you are a loser. You are a failure. That's not a value. That's a minus. And how can you explain that this pride and the fact that you are capable, that you do not need social support, has always been there in this environment. Social support has always been a shame for a farm.

Farmers (especially men), in turn, attribute the reasons for their ill-being to the increasingly unpredictable nature (weather) that may surprise them and prevent them from performing the «planned work» or completing it «on time» and «properly». Under such circumstances, the entire yield necessary to repay investment debts (loans), without which a farm cannot «move forward», may be at risk. At the same time, farmers are aware that in such circumstances every single family member or farm worker is indispensable, especially in the context of labour shortage and «too much of the social» in the region. That «body and nerves shut down» due to work overload, especially those research participants (mostly farmers' wives employed outside the farm) who took over the work of an injured family member on the farm in case of work accidents emphasised. In doing so, they again regretted the lack of labour in the neighbourhood because of «too much of the social». There are many other reasons for the constant worries and tensions experienced by the study participants during their respective careers, which are more and more related to both trends – the lack of skilled labour in the rural region and the intensification of labour on farms. They do not deny that this suffering can lead to illnesses associated with chronic stress; however, most of them believe that psychological support would only «put out the fire».

«Just prices and the elimination of subsidies are necessary for our well-being!»

As already mentioned, at the very beginning of our meetings, when the research participants were informed about the research project and its objectives, they were asked to reflect on the possibility of introducing psychological support for people in agriculture. At first, they were surprised by the idea and the «external concern» for their own welfare; until now, they said, it had only been about animal welfare. The women immediately welcomed the idea as necessary, but soon after expressed their doubts that «it would not succeed with men», that «farmers would not feel comfortable

with such support» because men, unlike women, «keep their difficulties to themselves». Albina (age 54), the wife of an injured farmer who had broken his spine five years ago, complained that he would not even «open up» to her because of his «pride or male upbringing in the village», while Cvetka (age 68) was quite open:

> We women, we are more trustworthy. We can talk more easily, while men do not trust even their close family. A man doesn't talk about a financial crisis, or that a certain machine is broken, or that he is in pain or sick. For men, these are unspoken things. In my opinion, they think they are a head, that they can't be sick, that they can't take risks, but they worry about how we are all going to survive. They are worried about who's going to work and then what's going to work [when they are sick], who's going to take care of all of you, how you are all going to live, you know what I mean?

When discussing stress-related illnesses among farmers, men in particular referred to a «not only our guilt» for this condition and pointed to the embeddedness of farmers in a broader social environment. Ivan (66 years old) is convinced that it is not only the fault of the farmer who finds himself in a «dead end» when he can no longer help himself.

> I don't think only these farmers are guilty. It is a system. What I am trying to tell you? I am saying that it happens that someone else cheats another, for example, a bank, if you believe in a bank. Both a bank and a doctor can let you down. And you go to hell. And in those cases, you can't handle the stress and you really need help. I don't know if only the farmers are guilty. Because if they were guilty, their farms would not be so advanced. Someone else put the brakes on that progress, and the question is whether that's an economic mistake or a political mistake. Of course, a farmer can also contribute to such a mistake.

Similarly, Simon (age 49) emphasized that the real cause of farmers' distress is outside their bodies, although he admitted that farming is a strenuous way of life after all.

> S: When one is young, the body can handle all the stresses well. When one is older, these stresses accumulate in the body [...] Four years ago, I suffered from sore throat several times in a row. Each time I took antibiotics, but shortly after I stopped taking the tablets, the sore throat recurred. This condition lasted for half a year, and I took antibiotics for three months [...] My family doctor prescribed numerous medical examinations, the last of which was a gastroscopy.

> It was found that my stomach was secreting too much acid. I was given tablets, which I take regularly, and the sore throat disappeared.
> D: Would farmers accept psychological support if it were introduced for them?
> S: Well, I cannot deny that it would not be necessary. But I am afraid such support would only mean putting out the fire. You have to start with the extension service, which is completely stuck somewhere, and then move on to the redemption prices, which are bringing many farmers to their knees.

Farmers believe that the State should abolish agricultural subsidies and introduce «normal prices» between them, food processors and traders. Geza (age 39), a livestock farmer, commented on an article published in *Kmečki glas* (*Voice of the Farmers*, December 2021) about the division of the proceeds of a slaughtered bull between a farmer, a butcher (processing industry), and a trader.

> You see, a farmer gets only 45% of the price, the rest is divided between processing and trade. What kind of a cycle is that? You, as a farmer, invest two years of labour and various means to feed and care for the bull so that it reaches the appropriate weight. And what about the butcher? He slaughters the bull and cuts it up in just five to six hours. And a trader? He spends even fewer man-hours putting the meat on the shelves. This division is simply unfair, and you can't compensate farmers' work with subsidies.

Geza is also convinced that subsidies generally put farmers to sleep, as they still account for 70% of the income of an average Pomurje farmer; these farmers, in his opinion, will not survive in the market if subsidies are abolished.

Research participants were generally very upset when talking about unfair prices in the agri-food chain, and often referred to their feelings of being powerless and without negotiable leverage as «price takers». Mihael (age 45), a pig farmer, did not lower his voice until he finished his comment.

> M: When you sell your pigs to the slaughterhouse, someone else sets the price for you, and when you buy pigs, again someone else sets the price. The price is fixed. Take it or go somewhere else. You do not have any power. You only have the choice to buy or not to buy. Now, if I want to sell 20 pigs and I call a butcher, he will tell me €1.5 per 1 kg. If I object and suggest €1.6 per 1 kg, he will refuse and insist on €1.5 or nothing. And I am powerless.
> D: And you are forced to sell them now at a certain age? You cannot sell them later, after a year?

> M: With pigs, I cannot afford to do that. A pig now weighs 130 kg, in a year it will weigh 180 kg, and every day a pig eats 4 kg of feed, it's an expense. [...] Everyone wants to earn their money. You cannot change that, because the traders and buyers, e.g. the butchers, are free in pricing. [...] I always make fun of it when I say that a farmer does not need to calculate. There is no need for mathematics. The prices are already set. Take them or go somewhere else!

His mother Cvetka (age 68), a retired farmer, joined the conversation, summarising that the biggest problem is «the too many employees in agriculture who live at the expense of a farmer».

> You see, we feed a pig, and our pig must have all the necessary documents to meet the criteria of traceability. But when our pig arrives at the slaughterhouse, the traceability is no longer there. Even if you have attended only three elementary school classes, you cannot be so stupid to realise that it is impossible to have Slovenian pork in any grocery store, while the self-sufficiency level of pork in our country is only 30%. The meat is imported from who knows where, repackaged and offered in a grocery store as Slovenian meat. This is nonsense. But a lorry driver who transports the pork must be paid. The one who kills and cuts up a pig must be paid. The one who repackages the pig has to be paid. How many of them did I count? And then there are the shopkeepers and many others who are employed in extension service, in the ministry and in other institutions. All these employees earn their income from our pig.

Older farmers, in particular, emphasised that production is no longer a difficulty today, in post-1991 agriculture. They see the sale as problematic. Irrespective of their expressed criticisms of farming under socialism, they agreed that production and sales were assured in the country at that time, showing a kind of nostalgia for «subsistence security» (Scott 1976). Whatever a farmer produced, he could easily sell through the system of socialist cooperatives before they became «politically corrupted». Either way, however, redemption prices were assured, and farmers could plan their farming activities without difficulty. Today, farmers attribute their sleepless nights to the control of inspectors who verify the implementation of subsidies on the ground, making them «incompetent farmers» or producers. Instead, farmers insist, the State should organise a «buy at a good price», as the older generation of farmers experienced under socialism. Now farmers are forced to sell their produce in neighbouring Austria to keep their income above cost, but they remain frustrated that they cannot fulfil their historic role as «breadwinners of their own nation».

Finally, the discussion of fair prices and subsidies has raised another question: Who is actually a «real farmer»? The research participants pointed out that today only «real farmers» suffer the most as «price takers», as the retired Ivan (age 71) knew very well.

> The real farmer is a farmer who lives only by farming. And he lives in a village. First of all, you have to get along well with everybody, […] honesty, neighbourliness and so on. And you have to have a lot of friends and fellow farmers. Otherwise you can't do much on your own. You always need someone, and you have to follow politics. You have to be healthy and have a good family. Then you can somehow make ends meet. But I always say that a farmer will never make a good deal if someone else is always setting the prices for him. And taxes as much as he can!

However, the advancement of a successful farm requires a rapid response to innovations in various fields, a constant adaptation of cultivation techniques, mechanisation or the effects of climate change, and national rural and agricultural development policies. All these reactions and adaptations require special virtues that only the true farmer possesses. The «bad farmer», on the other hand, does not possess these virtues. He manages his farm poorly, or as Vlado (age 47), an organic farmer, puts it, «He works and works, but the work yields nothing. Such a farmer has messy animals, bad harvests, and poorly managed land». Goran (age 43), a cattle farmer, also pointed out that single male farmers, who are predominant in the countryside today, would not participate in psychoeducation if it were introduced. In his view, their status as single or unmarried men is a sign of their inability to start and maintain a family – a true farmer virtue.

> Usually, such farmers drink a lot and live on their parents' farm. They excuse themselves by saying that they do not have enough time or that they would miss something if they did not work. If they were normal, they would find a wife and talk about their [psychological] difficulties.

Research participants believe that true farmers are a minority in the countryside today, while the majority is made up of «fake farmers», whom they often refer to as «bad farmers» because they are rewarded for «not working» or «giving up farming». The latter often include young farmers who allegedly misuse subsidies from the Young Farmer Settlement Scheme. Such fake farmers, they believe, give up farming immediately after the fifth year of compulsory farming. Each of the research participants

knows at least one such farmer in the area. Also, all «hobby farmers» or «afternoon farmers» are not real farmers, as is the case with agricultural extension workers who farm after work in the afternoon. In addition, agricultural advisors are viewed by most farmers as «unfair competitors» to real farmers. Instead of providing on-the-ground advice to real farmers as they did before 1991, they become bureaucrats themselves after 1991 and apply for subsidies in the same tenders as farmers. The fake farmers abuse the subsidy system because they want to «get the unearned capital quickly» and apply for all kinds of subsidies whether they need them or not. Many farmers can be good farmers, but they are not real farmers because they are not necessarily «honest people» or are only interested in their own success. Mira (age 48), an organic farmer, was very clear about this.

> In our village there is a very famous farmer whose farm is completely modernized. You know, there are robots everywhere, even for manure cleaning [...]. But he is not an honest person. He is involved in politics, and he is a representative of the same kind of farmer. But he fights only for his own interests. Only for his own. He doesn't care much about the other farmers [...]. And every time he gets subsidies for everything you can imagine, whether he needs them or not.

Let us return to Erni and his statement that he is poor today, although he has much. Erni is convinced that real farmers are not respected in Slovenia and that quality produced food is not properly appreciated. True farmers are not respected in the country because of «these subsidies, this support that we work hard for». Erni is hurt because «the land that bears fruit is not valued and what comes out of the land is worthless». The proof is «unjust prices».

Discussion: Beyond the psychological, the ethical dimension of farmer distress

In the above analysis, in contrast to the underlying assumptions of psychological support, that typically emphasises omnipotent agency in terms of individual responsibility for the development and recovery from psychological ill-being, I have sought to see agency in terms of ethical notions of blame and responsibility (Laidlaw 2010) in order to relate farmers' distress to their local moral world. Using thematic analysis of «fragmented moments of narrated experience and understanding by a particular group

of people during a particular point in time» (Bryant & Garnham 2018: 66), I identified two interrelated themes that study participants repeatedly reflected on in our conversations about their not being well in the current context of farming in Slovenia, and that elicited their ethical judgements.

The theme of «the social [support]» invokes ethics in the communicative actions of research participants – both farmers and agricultural advisors – who create a moral community of hardworking farmers and the blameworthy State that rewards locals with social support for not working. Using terms such as «the too-good State», «fair income», «respectful care», «laziness», «hard and honest work», «the envy», «willingness to work», «despise», «pride», «a shame», «a failure», «a loser», etc. the study participants express their moral judgments and feelings about their everyday observations in relation to those who do not possess their discursively established highest value – honest and hard work – that distinguishes «us – the farmers» from «them – the others». Such a work ethic contributes to the formation of the farmers' «class ethos» (Buchowski 2004: 175), which emphasises hard work as a measure of a person's worth and which the farmers share in contrast to other social groups (classes), as was also observed in the Polish post-socialist countryside (Buchowski 2004; 2009). As could also be observed in post-socialist Poland, agrarian proletarians (former labourers on state farms) were reluctant to serve farmers, while farmers preferred mutual help among themselves over hiring rural proletarians because they did not consider them to be valuable people. Moreover, it was emotionally difficult for rural proletarians to sell their labour to farmers, as if they were selling a part of their soul and not just their labour to real people in their community and not to an abstract state (Buchowski 2004; 2009). In their reflections, the research participants in Pomurje made similar observations: In fact, farmers in Pomurje saw potential workers either as non-hardworking, lazy exploiters of social benefits or as people who, despite having been socialised in hardworking farming in their youth, now do not want to work for them. Under socialism, their fellow villagers left the land and worked in ideologically favoured state firms, whereas now, after 1991, when these firms went bankrupt and they – the farmers as their potential employers – became wealthier, they preferred to work in Austria for lower wages out of (former) pride and (now) shame. But the farmers also feel entrapped. When reflecting on their constant worries, fears and sleepless nights, they located «the social [support]» in their lived experience of hardship and possible stress-related illnesses which they per-

sistently linked to the lack of skilled labour in rural communities and the intensification of work on farms.

Directly confronted with the possibility of introducing psychological support for farmers in Slovenia, the study participants reflected not only on the dilemma of whether such support is necessary for them or not, but also on who or what is actually responsible for their lived anxieties, which turned out to be another theme that provoked ethical judgements among them. The women welcomed the intervention as necessary, but immediately expressed their doubts about the possible reaction of the men. At first glance, this response confirms the discourses of stoicism and resilience that originate in rural masculinity cultures and seek to explain why male farmers generally avoid psychological support. However, as Bryant and Garnham (2014; 2015) and Ramirez-Ferrero (2005) in particular argue in their respective studies, emotions such as pride and shame can be seen as evaluative judgements or culturally mediated «embodied thoughts» (Rosaldo 1984; in Ramirez-Ferrero 2005: 5) that are related to farmers' subjective self-esteem and gender identity and are important for understanding their distress. The authors argue that the discourses on male suicide portray the farmer as a fallen hero who has fallen from a position of prestige to one of dishonour, and as a hero who has lost the battle against adversity (e.g., Garnham & Bryant 2013; Bryant & Garnham 2015). It was also observed that older farmers in particular, who typically valued traditional and hegemonic notions of rural masculinity, experienced the devastating consequences of extreme climate variability and national and global rural and agricultural restructuring as a personal failure, leading to a deterioration in their health, while women, on the other hand, promoted views of traditional masculinity by supporting their husbands and monitoring their health while ignoring their own health needs (Alston 2012). These studies have shown that the farmer's subject position is linked to moral values that, when the viability of the farm is threatened, also threatens his social position and subjective sense of worth.

The above analysis further show that male farmers extended a way of introducing psychological support by attributing moral responsibility for their and farmer distress in general to external factors: «a system», «a bank», «a doctor», «the extension service», «the redemption prices». Guilt for their poor mental condition or even their «dead end», they believe, is shared; it cannot be only theirs. In this way, research participants pointed to the alleged causes of farmer distress, which they also attributed to their

weakened social position in society, caused first by «unjust redemption prices» throughout the food chain and second by the unfair distribution of agricultural subsidies to «fake farmers» in a community.

Farmers described numerous examples of their «unfair» social position in the agri-food system and emphasized that it was the State's responsibility to establish more equitable relationships between farmers, food processors, and stores by restoring «normal prices» and eliminating subsidies that demotivate «real, hard-working farmers» and motivate only «fake farmers». Against a backdrop of «take it or leave it» pricing, farmers feel powerless and trapped in a system that leaves them with limited options for their agency and are even exploited by everyone else who lives at their expense. Older farmers long for a «concerned State» and point to the system of socialist cooperatives that offered guaranteed purchase and redemption prices; however, they do not miss the immoral agricultural practices under socialism. In their moral judgements, farmers also point out that they have fallen into a vicious circle of labour intensification in order to maintain their competitive and progressive farms in a way that was not possible under socialism. In doing so, they implicitly echo the observation of other studies that, in addition to the new opportunities brought about by post-socialist conditions in agriculture, farmers are also confronted with the unexpected consequences of the unpredictability of the free market economy (e.g. Buchowski 2009; Krzyworzeka 2013).

Finally, research participants drew clear «moral boundaries» (Sayer 2005; Buchowski 2009) between real and fake or bad farmers. While they mostly attributed immoral characteristics such as «dishonesty», «unfair competition» or «selfishness» to fake farmers, bad farmers were not necessarily viewed in this way. Bad farmers were judged by the appearance of their land, animals, and family, which, in the case of real farmers, must be consistent with their ideas of what is good and right in their community (Burton 2004; Burton *et al.* 2021).

Today, farmers work harder and harder, and the exhaustion of their own bodies and minds remains intertwined with their moral evaluation and performance as «good farmers». Discursively, however, they did not see reducing the amount of work as a possible solution that would hypothetically reduce their hard work or the need for additional work, or improve their distress. On the contrary, farmers insisted that a farm would not develop properly, and they worked not only to earn a living, but also to live well and decently and to position themselves as good farmers in

society. Or to conclude this discussion with the words of Milan, an agricultural advisor: «The well-being of farmers would be the feeling that they are fairly paid for the work they do».

Conclusion

In this article, I seek to broaden understanding of the social and moral dimensions of farming that go beyond the psychological nature of so-called farming stress and may underlie farmer distress. Farmers' reasoning about their being well was conveyed and observed through the communicative work, which required them to detach themselves from the unreflective ordinariness of the moral when they were initially confronted with a question to reflect on the possibility of introducing psychological support for farmers in Slovenia. This question elicited their moral judgements, which went beyond the immediately conveyed reasons as to whether such support was necessary or not, to their reflections on the causes of their own or other farmers' not being well, beyond their control. Farmers did not say that they were exposed to the unexpected consequences of the opening of Slovenia to world markets after 1991 and suffered from the fact that their diligent labour input did not automatically turn into profit or their moral capital into economic capital. Rather, they discussed the state's overly generous social support for the lazy, non-hardworking covillagers or unemployed people in the region and sought the solution in the State's act of restoring fair prices in the agricultural and food chain. However, both themes revolved around the work ethic as the main *differentia specifica* through which farmers make ethical judgements and distinctions among themselves and towards others in the observed rural region and society as a whole. In their explanations, they relate the threatened work ethic in today's agricultural reality to their ill-being.

Investigating farmer distress by the ordinary ethics approach shifts the focus from an individual farmer as a carrier of disease, injury or stress-related illness to their moral community as the locus of analysis in relation to farmer ill-being. The article points out that farmer distress can arise from ethical ruptures in the social, political and economic relationships between farmers and the State, which farmers believe rewards and justifies dishonest work or non-work in the region and punishes honest and hard work by farmers through social support systems, the unfair provision of agricultural subsidies and inaction in setting fair prices in the agri-food system. In do-

ing so, farmers discursively construct and make morally culpable the local abusers of the welfare state, the fake farmers and the inactive State, i.e. the circumstances that potentially make their distress a possibility. Such an approach foregrounds the ethical and emotional dimensions of farming and invites problematising the social and political responses to farmers' avoidance of distress through psychological support alone.

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